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Strange Bedfellows: The Chaucerian Dream Vision and the Neoconservative Nightmare

Drew Beard

A dazed-looking young woman in a flowing white gown wanders down a suburban street, encountering a little girl in a frilly white dress; like the young woman, she is blond and we see that she has used chalk to sketch on the sidewalk the abandoned house standing before them. When asked if she lives there, the little girl giggles and says that 'no one lives here.' The young woman asks about 'Freddy' and is told: 'He's not home.' In an instant, the sky darkens and it begins to rain heavily, washing away the chalk drawing of the little girl, who has disappeared. Reluctantly drawn into the house, the young woman finds herself trapped inside, surrounded by the anguished cries of children, as a tricycle comes crashing down the staircase. Attempting to escape, the young woman opens the front door and finds herself not outside but once again in the front hallway of this house of horrors, a nightmarish re-imagining of a family home. As the door slams shut behind her, it becomes clear that there is no escape.(1) She is trapped inside the horrific dream vision that forms the narrative basis of the *A Nightmare on Elm Street* franchise, the postmodern counterpart of the dream visions dating from the 14th century.

Characterized by what Deanne Williams refers to as a 'dynamic relation between text and commentary, '(2) the medieval 'dream vision' is defined by its allegorical orientation, an emphasis on the surreal or absurd, and a subjective and flexible reality. In addition, the Chaucerian dream vision grants a considerable degree of importance and authority to the reader through the act of individual interpretation. As a literary framing device, the dream vision served to simultaneously destabilize cultural assumptions and contain dissent in the medieval period, providing the reader with a wider range of extractable meanings while at the same time placing limits upon the discourse emerging from the text. This seemingly contradictory process, which can be viewed as a power exchange in which the reader's authority is both acquired and limited, can be seen at work in Chaucer's House of Fame, Book of the Duchess, Parliament of Fowls, and The Legend of Good Women. I will briefly discuss how this dynamic played out in the Chaucerian dream vision, with its discursive negotiation between the dream world and the constructed reality of the world of the dreamer, before examining the dream vision found in the postmodern horror film, most visibly in the A Nightmare on Elm Street series (1984-2003).(3) This breakdown of boundaries, between dreaming and waking, has consequences for the contemporary viewer and his or her interpretive authority. While the postmodern dream vision and its equation of the surreal with the horrific may still allow for the interrogation of cultural anxieties, particularly those surrounding sexuality and the family, its very status as horror derives from its failure to contain and structure meaning in the same manner as the Chaucerian dream vision.

Although the dream vision reached the peak of its popularity during the 13th and 14th centuries, the literary genre's biblical origins (in the Book of Daniel) contributed to its appeal, through the dream vision's prophetic nature and the suggestion of direct access to the divine.(4) The dream vision made its first appearance in Anglo-Saxon England in the 8th century, followed by the Old English 'The Dream of the Rood,' with which J. Stephen Russell claims, 'the full complexity and ambivalence of the form

reappears'(5); however, it is not until the 12th century, with *The Romance of the Rose* (termed by J. Stephen Russell 'the single most important work in the history of the dream vision in the later middle ages'), that the genre fully assumes the form of the dream vision commonly associated with the medieval period.(6) Kathryn L. Lynch compares the 'high medieval dream vision' to the novel of the modern period, and of the 12th through 14th centuries, calls the dream vision the 'genre of the age.'(7)

While the dream vision has persisted in both literature (perhaps most notably in Lewis Carroll's Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and its sequel, Through the Looking Glass) and film (in everything from the 1939 version of The Wizard of Oz to the Elm Street films of the 1980s to David Lynch's Mulholland Drive), the medieval dream vision of Chaucer was written under culturally specific conditions and making use of historically specific conventions, both of which connect it to and distinguish it from more recent and well-known manifestations of the dream vision in other forms of media (indeed, by the 1980s, students of literature were much more likely to encounter Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* in their studies, rather than his dream visions). Defined by Steven F. Kruger, the dream vision as a genre 'includes any text in which the main narrative (or sometimes lyric) expression is formed by an account of falling asleep or dreaming.'(8) While this definition encompasses the more recent dream visions in literature and film mentioned above, the medieval dream vision stands apart in its hybrid status as both dream and debate. Kruger writes that this particular form 'constitutes one of the most widely used forms in Middle English literature, with a number of the great canonical poems of the fourteenth century . . . being both framed as dream visions and structured around a central dialogue or series of dialogues.'(9) This dialogue took the form of a debate, providing instruction to the reader, between allegorical figures within what Kruger terms a 'circular structure . . . with the falling asleep and awakening forming an 'envelope' for the dream proper,'(10) the framing device which has continued to prove useful to writers and filmmakers in the centuries since.

J. Stephen Russell sets forth a narrative structure for the medieval dream vision, consisting of the prologue (introducing the dreamer before they enter the dream world), the dream report (containing not only the debate itself but also the fantastical elements associated with the dream world), and then finally, the epilogue, in which the dreamer most often awakes and attempts to make meaning from the dream by putting it into verse form.(11) Alongside this basic structure, the medieval dreamer is almost always a male, finding himself in a beautiful setting and awakening before the full significance of the dream is known. For the dreamer, the ultimate goal is interpretation and understanding of the dream, demonstrating a prevailing narrative concern with interiority in the form of unconscious desires and drives). Many times, this goal is complicated by an adversary in the dream, opposing any fulfillment of the drive towards this knowledge. (12)

The horror film has also been advanced as being well-suited to the exploration of both individual and cultural interiority. Steven Schneider, in 'Monsters as (Uncanny) Metaphors: Freud, Lakoff, and the Representation of Monstrosity in Cinematic Horror,' writes that 'like comedy, [the horror film] provides a relatively safe (because relatively disguised/distorted) forum for the expression of socio-cultural fears.'(13) Through the genre's preoccupation with the surreal and the monstrous, whether framed as a

dream or not, it can be suggested that all horror films can be seen as evocative of the dream vision: the viewer witnesses the events, guided through the film not by the guide of the dream vision, but the apparatus of the cinema itself. Schneider quotes Andrew Tudor's assertion, in 'Why Horror? The Peculiar Pleasures of a Popular Genre,' that 'the [horror] genre itself invokes psychoanalytic considerations, at times borrowing its imagery from the symbolic apparatus of dream interpretation as well as allowing fictional characters to advance pseudo-Freudian accounts of their own and others' motivations.'(14) This psychoanalytic orientation is part of what Schneider is addressing when he advances the horror film as a particularly salient avenue for examining cultural anxiety. At the same time, this orientation links it to the Chaucerian dream vision despite significant differences in address, subject matter, and potential meaning.

Deanne Williams defines the dream vision as 'a poem that relates a curious dream as a pretext for an extended poetic and philosophical discussion of a more abstract subject.'(15) There were specific emotional and spiritual dimensions to the dream vision, as William A. Quinn states: 'Such a dream may be presented as a preternatural visitation or as an excursion into the dreamer's subconscious—or both. At worst, dreaming offers a robotic excuse for didactic exposition. At best, the dream vision provides an entertaining excuse for teaching a true fantasy.'(16) Although its greatest popularity was achieved in the medieval period, the term 'dream vision' was not used to describe the genre until 1906.(17) As a framing device, the dream vision allowed for the destabilization of cultural assumptions, making use of the surreal to render safe the act of dissent and providing discursive spaces outside frequently volatile hegemonic power structures.

Addressing this process of destabilization, specifically with regard to Chaucer's treatment of fame and literary canonization in the third book of House of Fame, Laurel Amtower writes: 'By destabilizing the force by which such cultural products retain their authority, Chaucer gives his readers a basis for reassessing the more problematic assumptions of their culture on their own.'(18) Granting this authority to the reader through the act of individual interpretation is one of the key characteristics of the dream vision, allowing it to contain dissent while at the same time expanding the range of potential meanings emanating from the text. 'An allegory of the processes of reading and writing,'(19) the dream vision generally personified human emotions, virtues, and vices either in the form of animals (as in Parliament of Fowls) or as emblematic figures with supernatural characteristics (for example, Lady Fame in House of Fame). Chaucer's The Legend of Good Women is set forth by Deanne Williams as 'the culmination of Chaucer's dream visions. It contains all of the conventional structures of reading, dreaming, and supernatural encounters.'(20) From the act of reading the dream as text, capable of producing coherent if varied meaning, the reader of the dream vision is provided authority through interpretation, occurring within a wide, but not infinite, range of potential meaning.

One of the most popular manifestations of the postmodern dream vision is found in the *A Nightmare on Elm Street* horror film series produced by New Line Cinema, beginning in 1984 and followed by seven sequels over the next two decades. With its emphasis on graphic violence, the series belonged to the genre of the 'slasher' film, which emerged in the late 1970s and is described by Tony Williams as 'highly dependent on spectacular special effects and gory bloodbaths of promiscuous (mostly female)

teenagers.'(21) Produced in the neoconservative atmosphere of the early 1980s, the slasher genre has generally been viewed as less socially relevant than horror films produced in the previous decade. Williams delineates numerous horror films produced in the 1970's as having 'questioned the very nature of the nuclear family and implicitly (though never coherently) argued for a new form of society.'(22) While all horror films, and film as a medium itself, can be seen as a form of the dream vision, *A Nightmare on Elm Street* is the only example of the sustained use of the postmodern dream vision, with the 'nightmare' of neoconservative popular culture bearing a striking resemblance to the dream vision of Chaucer while also departing from it in significant ways.

As Tony Williams writes, 'Appearing in an era pathologically affirming conservative family values, most 1980s horror films brutally chastised those questioning or disobeying ideological norms, (23) with particularly nasty demises being meted out to the sexually active (whether heterosexual or homosexual), substance abusers, and any other groups existing outside of established norms. In this sense, retaliation for dissent continued, with the dissident-directed violence of Chaucer's time merely transferred to the theater screen and played out sequel after sequel. Paul Budra, in 'Recurrent Monsters: Why Freddy, Michael, and Jason Keep Coming Back,' notes that 'the sequelization of horror movies is tied to the loss of closure.'(24) This lack of closure is a vital part of the postmodern horror film, as well as the dream vision appearing in the A Nightmare on Elm Street series. Budra points out that 'A Nightmare on Elm Street is the most self-consciously open-ended and highly sequelized of these films'(25) and differentiates the postmodern horror film from the classical horror film, in the form of Dracula (Tod Browning, 1931) and Frankenstein (James Whale, 1931), through its embodiment of threat. If Frankenstein's Monster and Count Dracula stood as what Budra calls 'lurkers on the threshold,' then their menace has been supplanted by another source of horror. Budra writes that the 'threat in postmodern horror, then, is not the lurker on the threshold, but the very absence of thresholds that the contemporary condition entails.'(26) This breakdown of boundaries, specifically between sleeping and waking, is central to the Elm Street series and its use of the dream vision to provide a safe space for questioning cultural assumptions and anxieties. A similar process was at work in Chaucer's time, undertaken by the heterodox 'Lollard' movement, associated with John Wyclif and the questioning and reinterpretation of the Bible, viewed as heretical in its dissent from the teachings and practices of orthodox religion.(27) Persecution and violent punishment, including death, was a present threat for anyone departing from the dominant ideologies set forth by social institutions such as the Church.(28) A politically savvy Chaucer was able to negotiate these threats by keeping his political and religious critique hidden within the protective fiction of the dream vision and the 'envelope' offered by the dream as framing device.

Of course, unlike in Chaucer's time, *Elm Street*'s retaliatory violence is highly dependent upon special effects. Tony Williams refers to this as an 'apocalyptic 'crisis' cinema'(29) and posits special effects themselves as yet another framing device, one crucial to creating the surreal landscape demanded by the postmodern dream vision.(30) *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (Wes Craven, 1984) revolves around the character of Freddy Krueger; the fedora-wearing, hideously disfigured child murderer hunted down and killed by a group of vigilante parents after he escaped prosecution. Burned alive, Krueger seeks revenge in the dreams of his killers' children, now teenagers, who come to realize that they are having the same

dream, one collective nightmare with only slight variations. Wearing a leather glove equipped with knife blades for fingers, Freddy chases his victims through nightmarish settings (first a hellish boiler room, and later an abandoned family home, settings that are far removed for the pastoral world of the Chaucerian dream vision) in which the dreamer is not only in danger from his or her assailant (a suggestible demonic re-envisioning of the guiding eagle in *House of Fame* or Chaucer's Black Knight in his *Book of the Duchess*), but also from the failure of logic that occurs in the dream setting (the absence of gravity, manipulation of surroundings and time, etc.). Often, the insecurities and phobias of the dreamers are turned against them, with their repressed anxieties leading to their demise: for in the *Elm Street* films, if Krueger claims his victim in his or her dream, they do not wake up at all. Film critic Richard Corliss describes the film series in relation to the postmodern tradition, and writes: 'All the *Nightmare* films are compact encyclopedias of classical and pop allusions. They quote Poe and Cocteau, *Hamlet* and Balinese dream theory; they crib ruthlessly from *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, *Jaws*, *Poltergeist* and themselves. They are cultural carnivores.'(31) This relationship to other texts serves to position the Nightmare films squarely within the postmodern, creating their own meaning and brand of the dream vision, relating to the Chaucerian dream vision through a shared intertextual orientation.

This intertextuality manifested in Chaucer's dream visions through prominent references to classical texts, drawing upon a body of knowledge as widely possessed in Chaucer's time as the popular culture cited in the Elm Street films. This allowed the poet to step outside the text, drawing parallels and suggesting relationships even as potential critique was safely contained within the dream vision. This intertextuality abounds in Chaucer's dream visions, beginning with Book of the Duchess (written between 1369 and 1372). Composed to commemorate the death of Blanche, Duchess of Lancaster and the wife of John of Gant, it features an extended dialogue between the dreamer and the Black Knight concerning the nature of love. Here, the dreamer falls asleep while mourning a lost love and reading the story of Ceyx and Alcyone, separated when Ceyx drowned at sea. Praying to the goddess Juno for a dream vision, the grieving Alcyone then experiences a vision of her dead lover, in which he asks her to provide him a proper burial and to accept his death. Only then is Alcyone is able to sleep, and the poet reading the tale wishes to be in possession of such a god to end his own bout of grief-induced sleeplessness. While reading, the poet falls asleep and enters the dream state, awakening in a chamber whose stained glass windows depict the story of Troy and whose walls retell the events related in *The Romance of the Rose*, consciously invoking an earlier dream vision (one chiefly concerned with the art of courtly love, while The Book of the Duchess was concerned with the loss of such love).

This "calling back" to a previous entry in the genre and the fall of Troy demonstrates Chaucer's utilization of other texts in crafting the rhetoric of his dream vision. In his second dream vision, *The House of Fame* (composed between 1379 and 1380), Chaucer draws upon the Italian influences of Boccaccio and Dante, while also alluding to and adapting Virgil, Ovid, the Bible, Boethius, and the French love poets, permitting an extended dialogue on the nature of fame and the fallibility of how fame has been recorded. Chaucer's second dream vision makes use of intertextuality to consider the role played by the poet in reporting the lives of the famous, pondering how much truth can really be told when famed exploits are set to paper. However, as the meaning of his dream visions are often left ambiguous, Chaucer's

intertextual references and his intentions behind them also remain ambiguous, yet serve a clear rhetorical purpose in allowing the poet to make subtle suggestions of connections and relationships between the dream vision and other texts, creating a larger dialogue and allowing for an effectively contained critique avoiding the retribution leveled at more overt forms of questioning such as the aforementioned Lollardy. While meaning is suggested, its interpretation by the reader remains relatively open, making the dream vision, much like the horror film, an efficacious mode for addressing otherwise taboo or even dangerous political or religious dissent, heavily dependent upon the individual act of interpretation.

Roman philosopher Macrobius, in his commentary on Cicero's *The Dream of Scipio*, classified dreams in five categories: the *somnium*(enigmatic, particularly suited to the act of interpretation), the *visio* (prophecy), the *oraculum* (the visionary appearance of a figure of authority), the *insomnium* (the nightmare), and the *visum* (apparitions occurring between the states of sleeping and waking).(32) The inclusive nature of Macrobius's classification of dreams indicated an early interest in dream interpretation and the privileging of the meaning such an act produced; it also led to 'an extraordinary diversity of medieval dream visions.'(33) This diversity can be suggested to have allowed for the wide interpretive range that the Chaucerian dream vision permitted the reader, for whom the form proved particularly interactive. As Quinn notes, 'Dreaming provides . . . a strong yet flexible paradigm for interpreting visionary narrative.'(34) In this, the Chaucerian dream vision can be seen as particularly suited to ambiguity and its explication.

By working through this ambiguity, the reader is able to question the constructed dream world as well as that in which they reside and from where they are interpreting the dream vision as text. Prompting these questions and calling for their resolution is what makes possible the dream vision's facilitation of critical discourse upon cultural assumptions regarding, most notably, social governance, gender relations, and literary merit, containing them not so much through their being resolved but through their framing as fantasy. Deanne Williams writes: 'Raising questions concerning inspiration and transmission, as well, as interpretation and authority, they destabilize tradition instead of affirming it.'(35) Williams goes on to identify Chaucer's *House of Fame* as being particularly indicative of this condition, as she states that the work 'has drawn attention to the different ways of processing a particular event, calling various forms of knowledge—literary, historical, experiential—into question.'(36) Placing the authority in the mind of the reader provides the author of the dream vision with a protected space from which to engage in a critique of social institutions and power structures. For Chaucer, the ambiguity of the dream vision and the transfer of interpretive authority to the reader serve as his own extratextual framing device, providing protection from possible authoritarian retaliation.

Dream interpretation, as practiced in the medieval period, was not merely an amusement; as Deanne Williams points out, 'a text is defined by interpretation . . . so, too, do people define themselves by the reading of a text.'(37) If the interpretation of dreams allowed the medieval reader an opportunity for self-definition, then it was a process undertaken at the reader's peril, in which one's well-being depended on the competency of the interpretation. Applying this concern to the Chaucerian dream vision, Williams writes: 'Dreams are subject to interpretation: they can be 'turned' for the better or for the worse. As a

literary genre, the dream vision requires the reader to work alongside the author to extract meaning from the dream, a process that can be done well, 'to goode,' or poorly.'(38) This notion of a "poor turn" for the dream vision suggests that, even within this broader range of meaning provided to the reader, there are limits upon interpretation. Authority may be granted to the reader through interpretation, but at the same time that meaning is being expanded, it is being limited by the fact that the dream vision is, by definition, a framing device and serves to contain the discourse surrounding meaning in the very same moment as rendering it 'safe' through the genre's ambiguity and association with the surreal.

The Chaucerian dream vision also, like the horror film, exhibits a concern with revelation. *The Book the Duchess* ends abruptly with the Black Knight's revelation that 'good, fair White,' the hard-won object of his love, is dead, while the entire narrative drive of Chaucer's *Parliament of Fowls* (written between 1381 and 1382) involves how a parliament of birds will pair off romantically. Both of these dream visions end abruptly, with the dreamer still seeking the knowledge and meaning, that 'certeyn thing' he yearned for as the poem began. While Chaucer's dream vision strives toward revelation (and very rarely reaches it), the dream visions of *Elm Street* also work towards the revelation of an unknowable thing, with the dreams of the terrorized teenagers of Elm Street all contributing to the major revelation of Freddy Krueger's murderous and pedophilic origins, repressed by their parents and accessible only through their dreams and their interpretation.

While similarities do exist between these two forms of dream vision, separated by centuries, the postmodern dream vision of the horror film can be primarily distinguished from the Chaucerian dream vision in that, narratively speaking, the dream and 'reality' are not as easily differentiated in the *Elm Street* films, suggesting the lack of containment offered by the dream vision to postmodern audiences. The Chaucerian dream vision features clear indications to the reader that the narrator has fallen asleep: there are no attempts to leave ambiguous the narrator's state of consciousness. In contrast, the postmodern dream vision typified *by Elm Street* often has the dream sequence begin without the dreamer, or the viewer (and it can be argued through the process of identification, that these two are often one and the same), being aware that they have entered the dream state. In later films, the figure of Freddy is no longer confined to the dream world: he can emerge from the subconscious and enter into the film's reality in pursuit of his victims. The very fact that injuries and death suffered in the dream vision are occurring simultaneously in reality demonstrates how very little separation there is between sleep and waking life in the postmodern dream vision of *A Nightmare on Elm Street*. Budra writes of this 'acknowledgment of postmodern relativism in these films, manifest in ideological and ontological incoherence,'(39) an incoherence that is embodied in the character of the 'dream master,' Freddy Krueger.

Writing in 'Seducing the Subject: Freddy Krueger, Popular Culture, and the *Nightmare on Elm Street* films,' Ian Conrich addresses this manifestation of incoherence and instability, stating that 'Freddy ruptures the boundaries between the imaginary and the real.'(40) Budra sees this rupturing of boundaries as the source of postmodern horror, as he writes: 'A specifically postmodern unease is generated not by encroaching threats, but by the perception that the world is increasingly one in which borders have collapsed, in which preconceptions, hierarchies, absolutes, and perhaps reason itself are being

abandoned.'(41) Nowhere is this rupturing of meaning more evident than in the cinematic dream vision of *A Nightmare on Elm Street*.

Besides standing as a site of tenuous boundaries in and of itself, the dream vision of Elm Street also can be seen as blurring distinctions between the intertextual and extratextual, bringing them together in a distinctly postmodern commoditization of dread. The financial success of the Elm Street films led to a proliferation of merchandise through licensing agreements, with the sinister Freddy Krueger being granted, among other things, his own 1-900-number, a board game, and a talking doll.(42) Conrich writes of this murky division between the reality of the viewer and that of film as dream vision, an uncontained system in which 'popular culture allows for the successful release of Freddy from the fictional world of the film into a consumer society reality.'(43) It can be suggested that in this breakdown of boundaries and the level of ambiguity at work in the construction of film as product first and art only in the incidental sense, postmodernism offers unique challenges to the individual seeking to comprehend the dream vision of the postmodern horror film. Although it may be argued that the 'reader' of the dream vision of Elm Street is granted less interpretive authority than that of the Chaucerian dream vision, there is still a palpable level of dissonance, the 'lack of closure' that Budra set forth in regards to the sequelization process, with the dream author/boogeyman continually reclaiming his authorial role and control over both the dreamer and the viewer. The viewer quests for meaning through narrative closure, the dreamer for survival; both are stymied, time and again.

If there is a figure serving as a 'dream author' in the postmodern dream vision of Elm Street, it would be the murderous Freddy Krueger. He is the only character to recur consistently throughout the series, and although the viewer is encouraged to identify with the protagonists/narrators, identification with child killer Freddy becomes almost inevitable through his repeated appearance at the center of the narrative. Conrich writes: '[The Nightmare films] attempt to establish a surface that will seduce the subject into the space of illusion, in which Freddy Krueger is the foregrounded image and principal attraction.'(44) Here, the concept of the horror film as a postmodern dream vision is revisited, with the filmgoer, through the act of seeing, being placed in the same illusion encountered by the protagonists, with Freddy serving as 'the dream master' in the same manner found in the Chaucerian dream vision.(45) Addressing this 'authority through repetition' encountered through the production of sequels and the tendency for new protagonists to be introduced in each successive film, Conrich advances: 'the other characters in the films possess weak identities . . . while Freddy is the 'fixed' element in the *Nightmare* series, his various victims are easily interchangeable. Freddy's identity is so strong that he can absorb the images of his victims.'(46) Any attempt made by a character to confront and do battle with Freddy, not only for the right of interpretation but for their life as well, results in nearly instantaneous death. Freddy's position of authority, afforded by his repeated presence in the ongoing narrative, serves to continually confound the dreamer/viewer.

Freddy also obtains authority through his ability to change form, to destabilize his own body in a way that the dreamer protagonists cannot. Henry Jenkins identifies these properties in the Freddy character, those that grant him authority over the dreamer protagonists, and writes:

We face the challenge of Freddy's shape-shifting as he moves between different cultural categories—male and female, adult and child, animate and inanimate, takes control over domestic technologies, assumes identities from mass culture, mutates and disintegrates before our eyes, only to be reconfigured and re-embodied again.'(47)

Freddy's fluid body, destabilizing meaning in the postmodern dream vision, identifies him as a guiding force, one whose power is used for violent rather than the instructive means of the Chaucerian dream vision. However, it can be suggested that through his creation of violent meaning and the generation of the surreal, discursive space is opened for the interrogation of controversial topics capable of being viewed as comparable to the contextual frameworks in which the Chaucerian dream visions were interpreted. Budra addresses this opportunity for discourse in the horror film, writing that 'the collective nightmare that horror films represent has been tied to phobias at large in the society for which the films have been designed.'(48) Emerging from the socially reactionary period of the 1980s, the dream visions of the *Nightmare on Elm Street* series revolve primarily around gender confusion in a period marked by a cultural backlash and a questioning of the nuclear family in a decade in which 'family values' were evangelized in the mass media and popular culture. Through their portrayal in the dream vision of the horror film, these questions and anxieties could be expressed in a manner that might not have been possible in other forms.

When examining the *Nightmare on Elm Street* series in relation to the dream visions of Chaucer, there may be similarities yet important differences also exist between the two. Chaucer's dream visions such as *The Legend of Good Women* or *House of Fame* were formed within a specific historical context, and even when left open to individual interpretation, they were still intended as a form of satire. Peter Brown, in 'Middle English Dream Visions,' writes of the dream visions as 'a response to those economic, social, political and religious conditions which were likely to produce a sense of fragmentation, of lost identity, of questionable authority.'(49) Although such a description of the cultural atmosphere in which Chaucer created his dream visions suggests parallels between the medieval period and the postmodern age, it is crucial to remember that the *Nightmare on Elm Street* films were conceived as horror films first and dream visions second.

Perhaps the most fundamental difference is that although Chaucer's work can also be seen as a product, the production of the *Elm Street* films was predicated upon the financial success of each ensuing film. Whatever forms these dream visions took, and to whatever end they were used, was based less on authorial agency than on whatever proved effective in previous films and the generation of box office returns. The prevalence of special effects, as Williams noted, served to contain the 'message' as a whole, with spectacle obscuring potential meaning in a manner not found in the Chaucerian dream vision. It can even be suggested that the explicit nature of the special effects limits meaning, providing the viewer with nowhere near the amount of the individual authority granted to the reader in Chaucer's dream vision: less is left open to interpretation. The provision of a back-story and the creation of a series mythos also serve to decrease the authority of the reader. Despite these fundamental differences in form and content, however, it can still be worthwhile to examine the postmodern dream vision of the horror film in relation to the Chaucerian dream vision, less in terms of individual interpretation than in the area of providing a space for dissent, a space sorely needed in the increasingly conservative climate of the 1980s.

Part of this dissent centered on gender, an issue frequently raised in horror, a genre which although frequently charged with misogyny, has also been found to offer a unique brand of gender-based identification. A genre historically targeted towards men, the horror film typically features a female lead, whom the film scholar Carol Clover has referred to as the 'final girl': it is she who survives where the

others fall victim, and she who does battle with the malevolent force, either destroying it or rendering it benign until the next installment in the series (the figure of the final girl can be seen as a counterpoint to Chaucer's dreamer, always a male; indeed, Chaucer's only extended treatment of women occurred in his *The Legend of Good Women*, recounting the exploits of famed women and yet remaining unfinished). While the final girl (in the first film, Heather Langenkamp's Nancy Thompson, who defeats Freddy through a series of well-placed booby traps and her ultimate decision to turn her back on him, denying his power) stands at the center of the dream visions and assumes a position of power and control undreamed of by Chaucer's male dreamer, she also exists as a frame for potentially conflictive considerations of gender. Tony Williams writes about the system of identification in place in the horror film, where male viewers are encouraged to participate in a form of emotional transvestism, identifying with the female protagonist rather than the masculine figure of violence and menace. Williams writes of this process and states:

'[Clover] believes these films are really theatrical contests involving gender. The female protagonist is both active and passive, frightened by the monster's assault and vigorously defending herself. She thus takes on a male aggressive stance, defending herself while the predominantly male audience often passively submits to thrill and shock effects . . . these films articulate the anxieties of a 1980s generation experiencing the effects of massive gender confusion.'(50)

Gender is often a volatile subject for discussion, but it would have been particularly loaded in a socially conservative period such as the early 1980s.

If issues of male/female identification make the horror film a fertile landscape for articulating anxieties surrounding gender and sexuality, then the postmodern dream vision of horror proves even more hospitable through its emphasis on the surreal and the psychoanalytic aspect of dream interpretation within the narrative, where the 'good' or 'bad' interpretation of dreams means the difference between life and death. Again, Freddy Krueger as a flexible body, one that 'opens up, absorbs bodies, and frequently changes sex,'(51) permitted through the use of special effects and his position within a dream world, also allows for this exploration of gender and sexuality, most notably in *A Nightmare on Elm Street 2: Freddy's Revenge* (Jack Sholder, 1985), a film whose homoerotic subtext is reflected in Freddy's repeated attempt to possess the body of a teenage boy named Jesse (a 'final boy,' as it were), a move that would allow him to make use of a corporeal body outside of the dream world. Hardly a progressive interrogation of sexuality, Jesse's repressed homosexuality is equated with the hideous visage of Krueger and his murderous impulses, which one online review describes as:

'the definitive metaphor for queer teen sexual horror: the emergence of a terrifying, powerful and destructive force which exacts fantasy punishment on that which it is attracted to (gay leather bars, hot jocks, scantily-clad pool party boys) and alienates the teen from his family and the affection of a well-meaning but sexually predatory girl.'(52)

Throughout the film, Jesse screams: 'A man is trying to get inside of me!' His dreams take him to a leather fetish bar and suggest an attraction to his male gym teacher, who is killed by Freddy, emerging from Jesse's body after his teacher makes a pass at him in the gym shower. Jesse continually flees from the advances of his would-be female love interest, Lisa, running instead to his jock best friend whenever he seeks protection. Ultimately, while sleeping in his best friend's bedroom, Jesse makes the final transformation into Freddy, who murders the half-naked young man who failed to believe Jesse's claims about the 'man trying to get inside him.' Through the association of homosexual desire with demonic possession (and Jesse's ultimate salvation when Lisa's heterosexual love for him conquers Freddy), A

Nightmare on Elm Street 2 surely reflects a form of discourse surrounding gender and sexuality in the cultural milieu of the 1980s, particularly in the wake of the emergence of AIDS.

The other specific source of anxiety expressed in these postmodern dream visions is that of the nuclear family. Even as 1980s situation comedies such as The Cosby Show (1984-1992, NBC) and Family Ties (1982-1989, NBC) enshrined the nuclear family as a nurturing and safe environment, some ambivalence remained. Tony Williams writes of this questioning of the nuclear family in the decade, and states that 'Eighties horror films serve as allegories to their adolescent audience stressing vulnerability to parents, the adult world, and monstrous punitive avatars . . . [such as] Freddy.'(53) As Richard Corliss notes, in the Elm Street films, parents of the jeopardized dreamers are either drunk or distant. Mothers, especially, tend to be neglectful and otherwise unsympathetic, with one mother imprisoning her jeopardized daughter inside the family home and another drugging her daughter with sedatives and delivering her straight into Freddy's dream world, all in the name of 'a good night's sleep.' (54) 'Mother, you have just murdered me,' the character of Kristen informs her mother in A Nightmare on Elm Street 4: The Dream Master (Renny Harlin, 1988), shortly before losing consciousness and meeting her demise. On several occasions, it is suggested that these children are all paying for their parents' sins, a generational accusation that would become even more resonant as 'Generation X,' to which the majority of Freddy's victims would most likely have belonged, came to assess the state of the world which they were inheriting from their elders. As Freddy states in A Nightmare on Elm Street 2, 'You are all my children now.' Within the narrative, the dream vision murders are attributed to the parents of Elm Street, whose vigilante murder of Krueger sets the entire series in motion, with Freddy's repeated killing sprees signifying the 'return of the repressed,' returning not to the repressor but to their children. In addition, Freddy's tendency to assume the form of the dreamer's mother or father in order to lure them to their death suggests that the Reagan-era idealization of the parent-child relationship was being called into question.

If the neoconservative-influenced postmodern dream visions found in the *Elm Street* films were to be classified using the schema set forth by Macrobius, one would have to examine them in relation to both the *oraculum* and the *insomnium*. By the very invocation of the nightmare, the dream vision can be seen as *insomnium*. Additionally, the appearance of the authority figure of Freddy Krueger qualifies it as *oraculum*, with Krueger appearing in dreams and assuming control of the subconscious of the afflicted dreamer, not for instructional purposes (as in the Chaucerian dream vision) but in order to exert authority through committing violent acts that are felt outside the dream world. He does deliver a message in that the dream visions signify the repressed, not only within the narrative but outside of it as well. For example, in *A Nightmare on Elm Street 3: Dream Warriors* (Chuck Russell, 1987), Freddy kills a dreaming young heroin addict by replacing the knife-blade fingers of his glove with drug-laden syringes. In this scene, he is not only violating the 'Just Say No' drug policy of the Reagan era, he is also showing that when it comes to the subconscious, 'just saying no' will prove quite ineffective, suggesting a critique of Reagan-era drug policy, without question a contentious criticism to make in 1987, and one that would have to be safely embedded within the postmodern dream vision of *A Nightmare on Elm Street*.

In addition to allowing for social critique, the Chaucerian and postmodern dream vision can both be seen as offering degrees of pleasure to the reader/viewer, a pleasure of interpretation that may be unique to the genre, whether in literary or cinematic form. Steven F. Kruger, commenting on the reflexive nature of the dream vision in *Dreaming in the Middle Ages*, posits: 'Dream vision is especially liable to become metafiction, thematizing issues of representation and interpretation.'(55) While Kruger is applying this to the Chaucerian dream vision, it can also be considered in discussion of the postmodern dream vision found in the *A Nightmare on Elm Street* series. Chaucer's *The Book of the Duchess* may be interpreted in relation to the Lancastrian court, yet it still opens itself to individual interpretation, questioning not only

its content but also its very form, as literary product. Kruger goes on to state: 'The view of the dream vision as self-reflexive receives support from the striking and pervasive medieval association between dreams and that premier instrument of self-examination, the mirror.'(56) Kruger's mention of the mirror is striking if considered with regard to the interpretation of film as dream vision, with the initial pleasure of consumption being derived from the perception of oneself in the act of gazing.(57) The entire act of film-going would seem to be predicated upon this 'pleasure in the self': being able to see, and by virtue of this, to question through the act of interpretation.

As far as identification, the mirror metaphor is particularly suited to the necessity of creating a relationship between object and viewer, and allowing for further discourse. Kruger writes: 'The goal of looking into a mirror is in part self-knowledge, and the dream poem does mirror itself, examining its own constructs and movement. Medieval mirrors, however, serve not only to reflect the self, but also to reveal information about the world beyond the self.'(58) Perhaps this is where the relationship between the Chaucerian and postmodern dream visions can be seen to be strongest, as both allow for 'utterance,' for the expression of anxieties, if not providing uniform or consistent interpretation (some viewers may be more likely than others to perceive the critique offered). Similarities between the postmodern and medieval are easy enough to establish, at least in broad terms. Peter Brown writes: 'society itself was in a state where boundaries were breaking down under the pressure of severe, recurrent, and frequent crisis. What the dream vision provided was a radical means of representing, and reflecting upon, both those experiences and the pervasive sense thereby produced of being in a state of transition.'(59) Although Brown is discussing the cultural climate in which Chaucer's dream visions were produced, he could just as easily have been describing the blurred boundaries and unstable meaning that characterizes the postmodern atmosphere in which the Elm Street films were produced. It's clear that the dream visions of both periods grew out of destabilized times, yet it seems likely that such a claim can be made between any two historical periods. Perhaps it would be most helpful to think of the Chaucerian and postmodern dream visions as being linked through the contradictory containment that they offer, as Brown writes that 'the middle ground which the dream vision thus opens up is by its nature constantly shifting, elusive, open to renegotiation.'(60) The creation of this space, something made possible by the 'slippage' allowed by the dream vision, is perhaps the key to its endurance and power as a literary and cinematic form.

In comparing the Chaucerian and postmodern dream visions of A Nightmare on Elm Street, it is vital to define both and establish distinctions between the two, most notably in terms of the authority granted to the reader in the process of interpretation and critique. While both forms may offer pleasure in the construction of meaning from the fluid and frequently intertextual narrative of the dream vision genre, it can be suggested that the Chaucerian dream vision, in its absence of distancing special effects, is positioned to offer greater engagement to the reader as they examine the text within a series of effectively destabilized historical and cultural contexts. Another distinction between the two forms is found in the process of identification, with the Chaucerian dream vision encouraging identification with the dreamer/narrator and the postmodern dream vision, through its creation within a series of financially-motivated sequels, shifting the point of identification from the dreamer to the monstrous dream author Freddy. Meaning and discourse are left uncontained through the 'blurred boundaries' (between sleeping and waking, intertextual and extratextual) characteristic of the postmodern, with special effects mediating the relationship between technical apparatus (the screen) and the viewer (standing in for both the reader and the dreamer), effectively limiting potential meaning and requiring less interpretation on the part of the average viewer, suggesting that the postmodern dream vision occurs within a narrower range of interpretation than that afforded to the Chaucerian dream vision. Yet both the Chaucerian dream vision and the postmodern dream vision of A Nightmare on Elm Street can be seen as

allegorical and providing discursive space for questioning the cultural assumptions and anxieties occurring in the neoconservative nightmare of the 1980s.

- 1. This scene is derived from A Nightmare on Elm Street 4: The Dream Master (1988).
- 2. Deanne Williams, 'The Dream Visions,' in *The Yale Companion to Chaucer*, ed. Seth Lerer (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 147.
- 3. The films in the series include A Nightmare on Elm Street (Wes Craven, 1984), A Nightmare on Elm Street 2: Freddy's Revenge (Jack Sholder, 1985), A Nightmare on Elm Street 3: Dream Warriors (Chuck Russell, 1987), A Nightmare on Elm Street 4: The Dream Master (Renny Harlin, 1988), A Nightmare on Elm Street 5: The Dream Child (Stephen Hopkins, 1989), Freddy's Dead: The Final Nightmare (Rachel Talalay, 1991), and Wes Craven's New Nightmare (Wes Craven, 1994). In addition, Freddy also had his own syndicated television series (Freddy's Nightmares, 1988-1990) and appeared in Freddy Vs. Jason (Ronny Yu, 2003), in which he battled Jason Voorhees, the murderous 'star' of the Friday the 13th franchise. In 2010, a remake of A Nightmare on Elm Street was released, with Samuel Bayer as director and starring former child star Jackie Earle Haley in the role of Freddy.
- 4. Chelsea Henson, Personal interview. 19 May 2010.
- 5. J. Stephen Russell. *The English Dream Vision: Anatomy of a Form* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1988), 12.
- 6. Ibid, 16.
- 7. Kathryn L. Lynch, *The High Medieval Dream Vision: Poetry, Philosophy, and Literary Form* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1988), 1.
- 8. Steven Kruger, "Dialogue, Debate, and Dream Vision," in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Literature 1100-1500*, ed. Larry Scanlon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 72. 9. Ibid, 71.
- 10. Ibid, 72.
- 11. Russell, 5.
- 12. Anne Laskaya, University of Oregon, Eugene, OR. 10 Apr. 2007. Lecture notes.
- 13. Steven Schneider, 'Monsters as (Uncanny) Metaphors: Freud, Lakoff, and the Representation of Monstrosity in Cinematic Horror,' in *Horror Film Reader*, eds. Alain Silver and James Ursini (New York: Limelight Editions, 2000), 168.
- 14. Schneider, 169.
- 15. Williams, 147.
- 16. William A. Quinn, 'Medieval Dream Visions: Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess*,' in *Readings in Medieval Texts*, eds. David Johnson and Elaine Treharne (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 323.
- 17. Ibid, 323.
- 18. Laurel Amtower, 'Authorizing the Reader in Chaucer's *House of Fame*,' *Philological Quarterly*, Vol. 79, No. 3 (Summer 2000), 274.
- 19. Williams, 149.
- 20. Ibid, 173.
- 21. Tony Williams, 'Trying to Survive on the Darker Side: 1980s Family Horror,' in *The Dread of Difference: Gender and the Horror Film*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996), 164.
- 22. Ibid, 164.
- 23. Ibid, 165.
- 24. Paul Budra, 'Recurrent Monsters: Why Freddy, Michael, and Jason Keep Coming Back,' in *Part Two: Reflections on the Sequel*, eds. Paul Budra and Betty A. Schallenberg (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998), 190.

- 25. Ibid, 193.
- 26. Ibid, 191.
- 27. Rita Copeland, 'Lollard Writings,' *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Literature* 1100-1500, ed. Larry Scanlon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 111.
- 28. Laskaya.
- 29. Williams, 165.
- 30. Ibid.
- 31. Richard Corliss, 'Did You Ever See a Dream Stalking?', *Time*, Vol. 132, No. 10 (5 September 1988), http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,968343,00.html, accessed 26 May 2007.
- 32. Quinn, 325.
- 33. Ibid, 324.
- 34. Ibid.
- 35. Williams, 149.
- 36. Ibid, 162.
- 37. Ibid, 176.
- 38. Ibid, 147.
- 39. Budra, 193.
- 40. Ian Conrich, 'Seducing the Subject: Freddy Krueger, Popular Culture and the *Nightmare on Elm Street* Films,' in *Horror Film Reader*, eds. Alain Silver and James Ursini (New York: Limelight Editions, 2000), 223.
- 41. Budra, 191.
- 42. Conrich, 224.
- 43. Ibid.
- 44. Ibid, 229.
- 45. Freddy's portrayer, actor Robert Englund, recurs throughout the series, while protagonists come and go.
- 46. Conrich, 224.
- 47. Jenkins, qtd. in Conrich, 224
- 48. Budra, 190.
- 49. Peter Brown, 'On the Borders of Middle English Dream Visions,' in *Reading Dreams: The Interpretation of Dreams from Chaucer to Shakespeare*, ed. Peter Brown (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 44.
- 50. Williams, 167.
- 51. Ibid. 172.
- 52. 'A Nightmare on Elm Street 2: Freddy's Revenge: The Gaypex of Horror Cinema,' CampBlood Reviews: Senseless Rants from a Picky Sissy, http://www.campblood.org/Reviews/Review%20-%20Freddy%27s%20Revenge.htm, accessed 26 May 2007.
- 53. Williams, 172.
- 54. When, in *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, we first see Marge Thompson, as played by Ronee Blakley, she seems the typical movie mother, concerned and softspoken, collecting our heroine, Heather Langenkamp's Nancy, from the police station. We soon learn that she is divorced from Nancy's father, Donald (played by John Saxon) and that the former spouses have a strained relationship. Once Nancy starts uncovering her parents' part in the vigilante murder of child killer Fred Krueger, however, Marge begins to drink heavily. At one point, Marge does try to obtain help for her daughter, first by taking her to a 'dream clinic' and then by turning the house into a virtual fortress and more or less keeping Nancy a prisoner inside behind the useless bars and padlocks. Marge seeks her own escape in alcohol and similarly, tries to protect Nancy from the return of the repressed, only to fail on both accounts. By facing the repressed in the form of

Freddy, Nancy survives and by refusing to face it, Marge signs her own death warrant (indeed, director Wes Craven has said that he felt the mother's inability to face the past required that she die as punishment). The children of Elm Street, in addition to being pursued by the avenging Freddy, are frequently just as much at risk from their parents, especially their mothers, who range from benignly neglectful/clueless to genuinely abusive. Ultimately, the horror of *Elm Street* is often derived from the failure of these parents to care for their children properly, a lack of care that becomes a matter of life and death for their offspring once Freddy enters the picture. Much of the horror of the *A Nightmare on Elm Street* series came from abusive and neglectful parents who, through delivering them to Freddy one way or another, 'killed' their children without ever realizing their crime.

- 55. Steven F. Kruger, *Dreaming in Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 134.
- 56. Ibid, 136.
- 57. See Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema"
- 58. Ibid, 137.
- 59. Brown, 45.
- 60. Ibid, 45.

Abstraction is ethical: The ecstatic and erotic in Patricia MacCormack's Cinesexuality

Tim Huntley

In In his editorial preface to Patricia MacCormack's *Cinesexuality* (2008), Michael O'Rourke aligns the book with Jean-François Lyotard's *Libidinal Economy*: like Lyotard's work, MacCormack's text has a "performative effect" upon the reader; it moves giddyingly "from one concept to another, making unnatural alliances between ideas and thinkers."(1) *Cinesexuality* offers a brilliantly argued thesis on affectivity and the physical pleasure of cinema and although *Cinesexuality* maintains a deep affinity for the horror film – with references that range from Murneau through to Fulci – the tropes of gothic, grotesque and guignol serve to reveal a trenchant critique of subjectivist theories of cinema. Indeed, MacCormack's dizzying dive into conceptual philosophical thought is central to the argumentative technique. MacCormack's book is a powerful and assured exploration of the erotic and subversive haptics of spectatorship. Throughout we are offered insightful theses regarding the cinephile viewer's love and the corporeal convolutions in which the viewer finds herself.

To perform my own unnatural alliance I will turn back to a phenomenological source in order to read the ethics of spectatorship offered in *Cinesexuality* against the philosophy of Emmanuel Lévinas. Whilst Lévinas is somewhat inexplicably absent from the argument, *Cinesexuality* can nonetheless be read as a response to Lévinas' 1948 essay 'Reality and its shadow'.

Where cinema studies – including philosophical theorising of the filmic spectator and subject – might encourage one to chart a course between a structuralist phenomenology on the one side and psychoanalytic readings on the other, *Cinesexuality* determines an innovative route. MacCormack is conversant with Anna Powell's critique of 'cinepsychoanalysis' as a theoretical approach that "ignores the ways in which film energises and mobilises an affect that is both psychical and material at once" whilst nonetheless asserting submission to film, as opposed to understanding terror as affect.(2) In its opening pages, the arguments of *Cinesexuality* teeter toward Gilles Deleuze's cinema books before performing a remarkable volte-face as MacCormack thrusts both hands wrist-deep into the corpus of 'Continental' philosophy. To ask why a work should torturously seek to occupy such a vertiginous and fractal terrain throws the reader up against MacCormack's chthonian thesis: the egress of an ethics of spectatorship. The ethical, the erotic and the abstract: this essay will address the mutually imbricated implications of these terms through our engagement with horror films and thereby endeavour to flesh out an account of philosophic desire.

A weird play of sound and light

In MacCormack's conception of cinema the spectator is not present before the screen as an isolable and determined marker. The cinematic images do not follow a process of returning to the viewer, carrying back in a vector from the screen. For MacCormack the spectator must become other than the subject of the cinematic image. Such would be the subject of content-orientated cinema studies, where to every image-event there is a spectator-relation, to be subsequently analysed and discussed on the psychological, subject-orientated or group level. Put otherwise, the spectator here stands for the subject within the place of cinema; a place MacCormack abandons without nostalgia. The imperative that the viewer must become other underlines the ethical terrain that *Cinesexuality* seeks to develop. For all that cinesexuality is concerned with nothing more or less than the seduction of the cinematic image, it is also a thesis about desire. And from the suggestions that MacCormack's book makes, suggestions concerning our

responsibility to become 'asignified and asemiotic', we can see the ethical accountability latent in the pleasurable touching of our fantasies.

MacCormack asserts the space of cinema to be a 'philosophical and actual territory'.(3) When describing what those desirous of cinema do behind this open and inviting door, one claim can repeatedly be marked out: Cinesexuality does not do dialectics – largely because, for MacCormack, dialectics just won't do. Though the book is unflinching in its approach to and engagement with messy dialectical fusion, it resolutely refuses to sanction a retrenchment of subject-hood + image-bearing screen. Central to MacCormack's analyses of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's various writings is a deployment of their term becomings. From this we can understand a movement of self, life, thought and material outside of reified positions. Modern European philosophy has frequently tackled the notion of subjectivity through critiques that displace Enlightenment ideals in an antihumanist melee, wherein objectivity is contested and causal relations are scoured. In taking up these themes, MacCormack's work seeks to articulate the expressive force(s) of desire in order to consider corporeality. As she puts it,

Cinesexuality describes subjectivity at most as a necessary impossible in reference to modes of activism and accountability, but because aberrant molecules which rupture reified paradigms are sought, subject positions and inclusions cannot be present.(4)

Necessarily her argument is abstract; not obtuse or obfuscating, but an articulate abstraction. Time and again *Cinesexuality* promotes a case for difficult thought and painful thinking that shares a relation both metaphorical and metonymical with difficult watching; painful viewing. Watching Argento's Susperia grates the optic nerves; no less perhaps should reading Guattari's *Chaosmosis*.(5) *Cinesexuality* comes at the touch of the image; an idea of bodies opening on a 'libidinal plateau' having shed an objectivised skin. Concomitantly, neither does the ethic pertaining to the situation within which the spectator unfolds itself remain party to containment by essentialist, politically conservative or reified demarcations: as MacCormack remarks, "Cinesexuality is an anomalous sexuality."(6) These issues will remain of relevance throughout the present paper: cinesexuality concerns the strangeness of sexed bodies as thought; it concerns the abstraction of cinema's matter which as the unique form of desire is to be understood as the turbulence of asemiosis.

Such an approach could sail wide of abstraction and steer toward obscurity. MacCormack could merely chart the knotting of sensory affectivities, the sonorities and saturations that invade the spectator, but such would surely be to remain in the domain of subject and screen where the image-machine overwhelms the subjected spectator. Not so this thesis, these theories: *Cinesexuality* does far more than detach the subject from a film theory dyad only to install that same subjectivity in the (hidden) heart of the spectator as the recipient of an affective tumult. In every way, MacCormack's tactual thinking probes deep in the tenebrous corners of Lyotard, Serres and Guttari and thereby augments the turns in her own thesis with measured pricking of their philosophical skin. As mentioned above, one name perpetually absent from the discourse is Emmanuel Lévinas: so much of what MacCormack has to say approaches the same outward lip, the same inner coil as Lévinas' own works on aesthetics, ethics and the openings in the subjective skin that he appears almost consciously avoided. It is to Lévinas' ethical charge against aesthetics that I will return below in order to offer a reading of MacCormack's benevolent, if painful, notion of abstraction.

'These intensities we desire horrify us'

Spectatorship, as MacCormack observes, is a process which "inflects with social reality" but that is not to say that it operates through a comfortable apparatus.(7) In his work *Nerve Scales* (*Pèse-nerfs*), Antonin Artaud wrote of

Finding oneself in a state of extreme shock, enlightened by unreality, with fragments of the real world in a corner of oneself.(8)

I will take it that Artaud's traumatic *mis-en-scène* serves as a provocative recapitulation of the cinesexual encounter which is presented in MacCormack's work. The spectator is eviscerated by the cinematic image, thrown into shocked by the weight of her affects. As boundaries shift, unreality bears reason and shattered reality is consigned to the margins. Cinesexuality presents a certain culmination of MacCormack's writings on sexuality, horror films and modern European philosophy. Central to her work has been a concern with the "emphatic presence of the spectacle of flesh and desire" (9), a presence recurring through images of extreme bodily corruption and in the possibilities for embodied development. Such concerns are exemplified in her earlier essay on Barbara Steele's face: here the same emphatic presence serves as "an intersection ... where our attraction and corporeal dispersion connect with the viewed."(10) This concern - and MacCormack's self-conscious choice of material through which to pursue it - exposes the reader and the viewer to uncomfortable and (frequently) unpleasant images. Horror on and in film brings significant questions and challenges to purveyors and spectators alike; the socio-political, if not starkly moral, choices attending an appetite for 'death images' are not shirked lightly. As MacCormack has said elsewhere "Perversion involves both risk and accountability."(11) And it is this question of *involvement* with horror cinema as a source of pain and (dis)pleasure which this paper is exploring.

MacCormack's cinematic terrain is marked by a double movement whereby there is both a division and an infection of the spectator. The former serves to expel theories of image-meaning from a position of privilege; the latter is better known through the term *affect*. Opening on to any account of cinematic affect, one must surely look to the sense of embodiment that is involved. To do so need neither overlook Deleuze & Guattari's differentiation between affect and affection nor disregard their definition of the body by treating it other than as "a set of nonsubjectified affects." (12) The necessity of this movement appears twofold: 'spectator' must not become a mere placeholder, a designator as empty as the image is meaningfully saturated. Secondly, a theoretically rich account of cinema, horror and affectivity would do well not to throw the phenomenological body out with the philosophical bathwater. In part thanks to (but by no means exclusively due to) the work of contemporary writers with phenomenological leanings, the relevance of Merleau-Ponty's work on embodiment (13) need not be ejected in a repudiation of Metzian analyses.(14)

That said, MacCormack is evidently more inclined to draw her arguments toward a field populated by Guattari and Blanchot than she is to augment her account of libidinal ecstasy with phenomenological analyses. Indeed, in her essay on Barbara Steele, MacCormack offers a vivid account of the embodied spectatorial event of witnessing Steele's cinematic phantasm reconstitute her corpse-form with creeping flesh before concluding that this is "Less a phenomenological experience than a redistribution of our corporeal intensities, the phylic libidinality of this experience is the cinema of *this* moment through *this* medium".(15) One sometimes wonders quite where the line of delineation between the libidinality of the phenomenologically strange and that of the corporeally intense falls.

Either way, what is significant to note is that the division in the spectator is not between the body parts of the subject of affect and the spectator's subsequent reorganising thoughts on the cinematic experience. It

is a division within the spectator through the connections – natural and unnatural – with their libidinal hither side. A corollary of this fact is that the cinesexual relation *cannot* be traced back to an account of desire where the object-body (however spliced into the imaginary or the Lacanian Real) is the repository for the libidinal aspirations of a normative body: such a blunt reading would fail to grasp the wider mechanics of cinesexual praxis.

'Vibrations suggesting nothing on this globe'

In 'Reality and its shadow' Lévinas challenges art as being but a 'dimension of evasions'. More than merely disengaged or uncommitted (in a sense opposing the commitment which Sartre developed in *What is Literature?*), art fails to achieve "the quality of the living instant which is open to the salvation of becoming".(16) This is perhaps not so very far from a Deleuzian notion of becoming, for it concerns a sense of the temporal, and existence within it, that is predicated upon identity's coupling with a motility or flux. Where the second order creation of criticism can always say more and say again, the primacy of art is tied to its completion: the artwork is fixed and 'indelibly' sealed. For Lévinas knowledge has its domain: it is all reaching, capable of migration anywhere through the rigour of thought. Knowledge involves a process whereby the *other* (the new; the as-yet-unknown) is returned to the *same* in cognition. In the Lévinasian depiction, where knowledge expands it does little more than extend the parameters of the already-known and thus involves a process of assumption: we can always assume new knowledge. Such is the claustrophobia of Western thought. In keeping with this account he writes contrastingly, in 'Reality and its shadows', of the fogging dissimulations that artistic images bring to bear,

Art does not know a particular type of reality; it contrasts with knowledge. It is the event of obscuring, a descent of the night, an invasion of shadow.(17)

Lévinas speaks of the basis of aesthetic production being the substitution for the object of its image. In a second term echoing Deleuze, but again with radically divergent meaning, Lévinas distances the image from the concept; the latter is "the object *grasped*, the intelligible object".(18) Unlike the concepts of Deleuze & Guattari's *What is Philosophy?*, that arise in the frission between irreconcilable ideas, Lévinas' concept is grasped and manipulated and is very much in the cognitive grip rather than touching the thinker's thought. Far from being assumed, as with the knowledge-concept unit, the image is troubling and troublesome: "An image marks a hold over us rather than our initiative, a fundamental passivity".(19) And it is from this contention that Lévinas develops an interesting account of the image as inherently rhythmic: rhythm is "the way the poetic order affects us".(20)

From the image as the complete element which the viewer substitutes for its object, precisely because she cannot grasp the image *qua* concept (the painterly image par excellence), there is an imperceptible slide to the rhythms of the poetic order which substitute their atypical reality for the real. As Lévinas puts it,

Our consenting [to images] is inverted into a participation. Their entry into us is one with our entry into them. Rhythm represents a unique situation where we cannot speak of consent, assumption, initiative or freedom because the subject is caught up and carried away by it.(21)

If the regimes of knowledge that Lévinas critiques – while never wholly disavowing – pertain to *power* [pouvoir], the structure of aesthetic experience pertains to participation. And it is this participation, this lurch into sterility or the infertile, that Lévinas excoriates, likening artistic enjoyment to "feasting during a plague."(22) To an ethically defensible project such as MacCormack's this might smack of a savage challenge. Yet I would argue that far from posing a dilemma, Lévinas' reason for condemning participatory aesthetic pleasure presents a position that can support *Cinesexuality*'s undertaking. For what

MacCormack is doing is to call for an impossible ethical turn: a becoming toward grace. It is important that I now clearly define how the contour of Lévinas' ethics is foreclosed against the image in order to explicate the account of aspectival folding that leads to grace in desire which is given in *Cinesexuality*.

Turn, and turn again

What Lévinas understands by the aesthetic participation is an exteriority to the self that is "not that of a body ... Here we have really an exteriority of the inward." (23) What might at first glance appear to be the depth of rhythmic reverie is in fact far deeper: participation is the vacuum howl of the bodiless. The sensual glut that is participation is said to elude introspection; sensibility is realised by imagination. Thus one must leave the body behind because there is no return to self in one's centre: the disincarnation invoked by the image invokes what Lévinas has elsewhere called *dénucléation* (coring out).(24)

In avoiding a reductive Platonism, Lévinas marks out the doubling of the image. Where the transparent sign gives way to the object it refers to, the image has opacity. Resemblance is thus a key term here, for insofar as the image is real (and not some looser phantasm) it is said that reality bears its own shadow. In opposition to some haeccetically stuffed presence of the self-assured, each person is in a relationship of resemblance to them-self. The frontal aspect (this image as a face) cannot contain the plenitude of being which escapes out and behind.(25) This comet-tail of richness makes each a Daedelus in descent. For Lévinas this doubling is not image making per se: the image represents that part of the (original) object which it resembles.(26)

Being (for Lévinas speaks of ontology) is at a lag behind itself. It is as though the original were 'at a distance' from itself, thereby introducing temporal registers (the before and the later). Indeed, plasticity has an intrinsic relation to duration. Hence for Lévinas there is the instructive example of pictures, the phenomenology of which can leads us to understand the "alteration of the very being of the object".(27) The assembled daubs of colour that in a still life make us see the bowl of fruit suffice to insist on the absence of the object: the opacity of the fruit cannot yet yield to the fruit now gone: each daub will "occupy its place fully to mark its removal".(28) As a consequence the daubs are the whole of the fruit. It is not that the splashes and marks of paint coerce the absent fruit back to being. Instead they can suffice for it, precisely because the object (the fruit) always, in Lévinas' account, bore this image in the fruit as its shadow, its image. Yet the problem Lévinas finds is that through this sufficiency the link between reality and its shadow is broken.

In a recent exhibition, the artist Lucy Willow exemplified Lévinas' concern in her works *Memento Mori*. Here, manipulated digital- and paint-works convey the lush decay of transitory still life 'paintings' (the rotting fruits and melting candles that Willow takes from *vanitas* paintings).(29) The very plenitude in which the image represents its object signals the passing of the object:

as though the represented object died, were degraded, were disincarnated in its reflection.(30)

Shortly afterwards in his essay, Lévinas speaks of 'the general economy of being', by which he means the manifold trades and exchanges that occur where the object and its sensible form have simultaneity. These are what Lévinas refers to, first with Romantic and then with Hellenic intonation, as Art and nature or truth and image. The doubling – Lévinas' shadow – should accommodate the economy of resemblance within the general economy of being. The shadow is another means of seeing something true – it is the sensible character of something that has ontological weight, even if that which it reflects in balance cannot coincide with it any more that it already does (remembering that the representational aspect of the

image is drawn from that part of the object which it already resembles.) Consequently, though there is nothing identical between reality and its shadow, these two limbs must maintain – whilst perpetually hiding – their point of juncture. There is here something like a curved vanishing point, disappearing over a spherical horizon. In contrast the fully marked image is unitary, rendered singular upon its degradation: in place of the perspectival we have the aspectival. In order to be just like its object, the image held its breath too long. And as its death spasm sufficiency jolts itself into surfeit.

Having thus captured the suffocation of sensation, Lévinas' essay proceeds to articulate two further cessations. As every image is 'a statue', its time is arrested and the image sinks into perpetual duration. Secondly, the semblance of existing that a statue-image bears leaves it locked in an atemporal torment; imprisoned. All images are then like Mark Samuels' 'mannequins in aspects of terror'.(31)

In a curious move peculiar to what he calls the non-plastic arts (better understood as narrative arts), Lévinas then has a semblance of simultaneity return into the image. The frozen image can still have its own time: Phèdre will always become 'drunk on an infallible poison'; Medea's carriage bear small corpses inside. And that is because, in a Bergsonian conceit, both (external) narrative iteration and (internal) narrative duration allow for the movement of the image against itself, creating anticipations and recollections. This return of resemblance signals a bifurcation in the image, permitting a passage between image/shadow (the economy of resemblance) whilst not manifesting a true return to the two limbs of reality and its shadow (the general economy of being).

Lévinas readily exploits the horror of the frozen instant, durational abstractions from temporal life that sublate death by deflecting its power of interruption. In Poe Lévinas finds the empty interval captured in an anticipated approach; in the fear of interment and the holding over of the once-living. Where Poe loathed sleep, as slices of death, so Lévinas loathes the interval, the slices of life which he terms "the *meanwhile*".(32) An understanding of this question of time is crucial to understanding the passage and the place from which MacCormack's ethics makes its egression.(33)

'the huge time-wound/ We lived inside'

The passage of time contains within itself the capacity for interruption; the continuous bearing the capacity for discontinuity. The instant – that nick in time – is traversed by being. As existing mortals we endure across time by traversing the continuity of time's passage. (And death is the particular interruption of time that would coincide with our travel too soon.) Too readily is this passage understood as duration but, insofar as it is, art – the artistic image – serves to constitute duration in the interval. The surfeit of resemblance traps the shadow and distances it from its object. Such inert images are locked in their internal duration: in lieu of the vital instant art has ushered in the immobilised/immobilising interval. (What has resulted is less 'time out of joint' than 'shadows out of time'.)

And this demonstrates Lévinas' notion of becoming, for it is only the instant, as a moment in the temporal passage proper to reality and its shadows, that can, in Lévinas' words "go toward the *better*".(34) Except this is not really Lévinas' phase: it is Plato's. The merit and the measure of the becoming in the instant is that it assists one in striving toward the Platonic 'good beyond being'. For all the upward aspiration, Lévinasian becoming also works at the level of bare life. Existence, this manner of existing that we are, is chained to itself inescapably. Brute being is oppressive and all around us in its undifferentiated manner of existing. Thus a facet of who we are (at the level of ontology, not as a level of species or 'character') is the particular manner in which we self assert – in what Lévinas calls hypostasis. From a raw *ur*-life we rise up, passing from existence into (being an) existent.

Thus, although invited late to the feast, the spectator or participant duly returns at the end of Lévinas' essay. Works of art *constitute* duration and install it into doubled life, thereby killing the object by saturation, as the image gluts and gorges on its resemblance. These rhythms so produced, the dry infertile rubbings of image against resemblance, nonetheless seduce and carry the viewer away. And the intimation is that it is our complicity with this participation that Lévinas so abhors. (The return of the participating spectator at this juncture is somewhat crucial, in order to forestall Lévinas' ire remaining squarely and exclusively levied at the 'death' of the shadow. As such it might seem but a pedant's pique: the very worst of a philosopher's anger at the diminution of Being/Sein/Etre.....)

Of course, I would note that 'Reality and its shadows' is careful not to reject art outright: Lévinas appreciates that art might just need to be – and arguably should then remain – merely a source of pleasure. But what the artistic image cannot do is contribute any source or seam to the 'world to be built'.(35) Its deviation from the general economy of being ensures that this is so. Yet for all Lévinas' closing fire, he offers some stepping stones out of this wreck. For criticism can help in that it "detaches [art] from its irresponsibility by envisaging its technique."(36) Criticism reintroduces the mortified world into the intelligible world; it guides the blinded participant back to the land of the living. And onward from here: philosophy can read back from the binary of life (reality/shadow) to the unitary image (image-resemblance) and thereby trace the elusive passage of the real for, as I noted above, Lévinas does allow a semblance of the original simultaneity back into the image, like a return to an old haunt. Philosophical exegesis can thus seek out "an event which eludes cognition, which goes from being to being by skipping over the intervals in the meanwhile."(37)

Walking the cooper's wife's walk

Through this reading of Lévinas' essay I have determined an account of aesthetics that draws the individual out of a cognitive and conceptual terrain temporally buoyed on the passage of instants. What remains in its place is the complicit participant, sustained on the interval-life of the frozen arts. MacCormack's *Cinesexuality* offers an exploration of haptics as subversive and an involvement in the cine-viscera of film that is both erotic and ethical. Her account is such as to turn the blade of the Lévinasian critique. The bridge bringing together these determinations from Lévinas and this reading of MacCormack are the (semiotic) rhythms and seductions that are presented in both their work. Activism and activity proceeds from the spectator: it is the spectator that comes to images and so the spectator who enters willingly into a relation with the affective. What is this but desire? Desire for the cinesexual event, the fluid seep and enervating shock that proximity to the cinematic invokes.

In the third chapter of *Cinesexuality*, 'Cinemasochism', MacCormack proceeds with an account of the self that, more than merely indebted to Deleuze and Guattari, is a productive exaggeration of their position. Self, MacCormack argues, is a congruity held stable by its disaffiliation from horizons of potential. Self is habitus: a comfort zone and contemplative pole, distinct from that which is contemplated. To this picture MacCormack's tilt introduces an additional element of risk. To 'kick the habit' is to put the self, one's stability as self and one's recognizability (over time, through concepts), into question. Such stability is perhaps the case with most people most of the time; not necessarily by way of being a reactionary position as such but, rather, as de facto conservative position. Conservation and preservation relate closely to memory and recognition. Thus, MacCormack claims, the "majoritarian does not think itself as open percept but knows itself, as thinker (more correctly as knower)."(38) Cinema is the vehicle – privileged but not exclusive – by which we seek to augment the austerity of the closed cogito with the value of the open percept. The crux of MacCormack's position can be said to arise from her contention that

the content of an image can never be good, bad, ethical, unethical, or anything else. Only the ways in which the spectator as problem communicates itself to itself matter, and is the matter, of cinema.(39)

It is not for the images – for their content, for their sake - that the spectator engages with cinema. Indeed, in themselves images are 'transparent' and 'emphatically clear', giving way to their signifieds with easy passage. In this, images preserve Lévinas' aesthetic production, wherein they substitute for the object; they remain capable of maintaining the subject as the point from which the substitute is observed. Instead of this image-transition as presentation, MacCormack speaks of cinesexual openness as understanding "the indeterminacy and miasmic depth that exceeds signification and deferral to the world outside cinema." (40) Thus, because the spectator is not using the image to navigate the world, nor the image to knot themselves to themselves (through negotiated processes of acknowledgement or acquiescence; distaste or distantiation), their relation to cinema is folded and brings the spectator into an enfolded and engulfing position with their multitudinous desire.

This haptic potential is inherently erotic, in that it brings the spectator to their desire. Folded-folding cinesexuality allows us to touch that bit deeper; to access the obverse of our desire. But this is not just inciting a proximity to viewing the off-side, a return to the naughtiness of watching graphic horror. MacCormack has turned in her work to Jean-François Lyotard's notion of 'the great ephemeral skin', seeing his account of a desiring band that supplants (psychoanalytic) accounts "of an experience of desire by a subject".(41) (As MacCormack says of the film viewer: their body "is all libidinality with no demarcation".)(42) Rather, the desire excited by extreme images lies not in the content of the images – even if that content is but found in swallowing sexualised morbidity or pornographic violence as a gratuity – but in our suffering spectatorship. The weight of a body nauseated is a metaphysical weight: our sickness is stimulating: stimulant to our movement to the good beyond being. Desire is the sundering of self-certainty, the passage away from an I-centricity into becomings. And this, as MacCormack intimates, is not without loss nor without hurt for, as she writes,

There is a risk in opening ourselves to cinematic affect, in experiencing the pain of loss of reified meaning in images.(43)

Thus, MacCormack opens out a new fold: the notion of cinemasochism that is riveted to a sense of accountability. This candid responsibility, we are told, describes "the grace of openness to images." (44) Moreover, this very openness leaves the spectator party to tangible affective sensations. However, there is no departure from this territory: thus participation of the Lévinasian sort is forestalled. In other words, there is no way out from such overwhelming ordeals as the affect-heavy envelopment of Argento's *Susperia* [1977] or Fulci's *The Beyond* [1981] through expulsion or integration.

In highlighting this aporetic position MacCormack alerts us to the 'filmy'-ness found in cinesexuality: the affective excess within which the spectator participates, always longingly but never painlessly. Indeed, *Cinesexuality* propounds a view of cinema as sacrifice, or rather a twisting dyad of 'sacrificing-self/self-sacrificing'. What we see is a spectator prepared to enter in, as an entering: a non-penetrative suffusion of the subject. This desirous twisting of the spectator is an ecstasy – a touching of the self to dangerous light, like a tongue-tip to a hot bulb. And it is fundamentally experiential, for what happens in the cinematic space happens to the spectator every time and in our time. Cinemasochism and cinecstasy (as, respectively, the openness to images and the painful pleasure in relinquishing self) are both means by which to divert our relation with the cinematic (this 'conjugal territory' as Blanchot calls

it) away from the subjugation of images to meaning. In rerouting cinema to a domain of punishment – the hurt of cinecstasy – MacCormack, quite astutely, asks "what powers are we punishing?" (45)

For a start we are slamming the resolutionary aspect of desire, thereby inching towards a certain Lacanianism. Desire here is still a lack that cannot be satisfied but, significantly, this not through a relation to the object in a domain of anxiety. Rather, satisfaction is dispelled through our entrenchment in the atemporality of desiring. There is no fulfilment or resolution precisely because, as MacCormack puts it, "Involution is a non-narrative consistency." (46) To put this otherwise: there is no meeting up with the object (of desire; of the history of the image; of cinema; of the subject's subjection) and, as such, the spectator relinquished their place of power. With a crash, the gendered object positions of cinema, carved up by the gaze and visual disempowerment, are dispelled. And how does this still serve an ethical dimension?

In a marvellous turn, MacCormack states that cinesexuality 'interrogates desire along unfamiliar lines', a phrase redolent of unnerving excursions and the whispering of unseen voices. This is also the discourse of contemporary philosophy: the articulate abstraction of the world into problematic domains; the excision of the most significant of matters (gender/sexuality/empowerment of minorities) outside of signification and materiality. A temporal projection might, as we have seen, be foreclosed by Cinesexuality's shadowlands but there is always a return and reinscription of ethical weight upon a materialist politics. As with much post structural signification, the cinesexual fantasm is hollow. The trajectories that the interrogation pursue are weavings; convolutions. There is affective play upon the spectator, or rather, the spectator is in a touching and folding with the cinesexual. This is desire writhing and it hurts the spectator to give way so: it leaves the spectator bound to the image as the proxy of its self. The image is nothing qua image but provides the affective presence against which changes in self redouble. Thus the dis-order of asemiosis is an abstraction: it draws away from the worldly and the recurrent to position a cusp or fringe subjectivity that is compelled to engage with the current (and what is current is the presence of affects). In this, and as I will mention below, cinesexuality is like troubling and taxing thought. Here though, through the emptiness of images and the invitation to cinecstasy, cinesexuality creates for itself its hither side through which an echo chamber is produced. And it is to the sounds – the moans and rhythms – that we must listen.

To write this through the dividuated discourse of spectator/screen (thereby, of course, to write against *Cinesexuality*'s grain), it would seem that, following the play of light upon the screen, the spectator – MacCormack's cinesexual – is haunted by the image. A shadow falls upon the spectator and occupies her. However, as with Lévinas' critique of the image, MacCormack's rebuttal of dialectical film theory has created a deficit in the economy. Cinema is not a subject; it cannot occupy or inhabit the spectator's subjectivity, not least because it is not itself a matter sufficient (in MacCormack's thesis) to be integrated as subject of thought.(47)

The ensuing bare spaces – the blank tension-plane of the haptic - are an heterogeneous territory in which desire is both catalyst and carrier to ethical (ex)change. Into this system of ellipses, MacCormack extends a movement to infinity. The failure (or inadequacy) of cinema as a subject means that the spectator takes 'themselves as the other of the other subject'. The 'I' that comes before cinema, desirous of the ecstatic coupling that cinesexual participation offers, fractures and fragments; twinning in cinesexual touch yields the inter-kingdom relations and hybrid selves given us through the lexicon of Deleuze and Guattari. Thus MacCormack speaks of 'the infinite combinations of spectator-desire' and the impossibility of offering a 'taxonomy of forms of cinesexuality'.(48)

MacCormack's dyad 'self-sacrifice / sacrifice of self' is a giving over, an ecstatic relinquishment that depends upon touch. Desire is the intensity wherein the (human) subject shudders out of their corporeality and enters viscerally to a non-human becoming.(49) Thus, as I have intimated throughout, *Cinesexuality concerns spectatorship under an impossibility of reflection*. MacCormack's challenge is to demonstrate acts that allow for occupation of the spectator: participation is intransitive, as the verb denotes. There is no rapprochement between dialectically dividuated subjects and images: what there is instead is a folding of the horizon; a breaching that is also a touching. This occupation of the viewer by nothing – no extended subject thing – evinces a division and hybridism, a coupling with and in the beyond. What has proved crucial for MacCormack is, in what I might deign to posit as her own Platonic turn, to ensure that the beyond is good.

Black Academic Mass

MacCormack's concern is to demonstrate what is at work in the surfeits and surpluses surrounding all images. Such a challenge could prove overwhelming but MacCormack is interested in images that "necessitate an encounter with the self as always in excess of itself"; she therefore restricts the argument to the spectator-subject.(50) Thus MacCormack's *Cinesexuality* is an open text, arguably as applicable to literature as much as to film, for, crucially, the liberty found in images is not itself contained *within* the image. Such a claim seems counterintuitive when considering *Cinesexuality*'s contribution to film theory – more so in light of MacCormack's account of her project: "This desire for the strange, impossible and corporeal within the texture of celluloid I have termed *cinesexuality*".(51) Yet whether deployed to discuss watching Susperia or utilised to understand reading *The Statement of Randolph Carter*, MacCormack's arguments seem equally germane: the affective relation which the spectator develops and subsequently retains with the image serves to vivify the subject herself. (As I have argued above, 'spectator' should here be understood as the subject encountering a territory of images that are themselves laced through with affective resonances.) This is not a question of aesthetics, of form, genre or the mimetic: it is a question of philosophy.(52) As MacCormack puts it,

I wish to argue that film is philosophy not because it is film, but because cinesexuality describes a unique consistency that is cinematically 'filmy' rather than being about films. [...] Every time a concept is

teased it affects all other concepts and the total singular whole changes its nature, function and percepts

- the territory of which is an event of the production Spinoza sees as the result of affection and affectivity.

This book [Cinesexuality] is about cinema but certain cross-over concepts arise.(53)

We are in the territory of the filmy, a reticular skein of tactile and tacky elements. Here, the image is a conduit for encounter with a material that is both excessive and sensuous and from which, we are told, a reflexivity necessarily follows. This encounter, although still eminently iterable, is an event.(54) Thus, the texture of celluloid - as the affective site from which an encounter proceeds - is a phenomenological nexus. Put thus, literature, when considered for its properties of affectivity, is arguably as much a nexus as cinema is. (Affective literature is philosophy not because it is literature but due to a consistency that is literarily 'inky'.) MacCormack has observed that "philosophy as abstract in its unapplied form, offering no appropriate subject through which it may be used as an analytic tool, is re-abstracted rather than elucidated through its play in investigating cinema."(55) Similarly for the cinesexual in her wider role as lover of the macabre: philosophical abstraction occurs when investigating the affective-libidinal prose of Caitlin R. Kiernan as much as when watching Fabrizio Jovine's priest 'stare' a victim into prolapse in Fulci's City of the Living Dead.

Ultimately however, it is to cinema that MacCormack, and *Cinesexuality*, directs us. The shattered spaces left behind when the subject-screen relation is sundered are haunted and give rise to a non-human becoming: thus MacCormack ushers in alterity in a Lévinasian sense: wholly otherwise. Whilst the lyricism, if not poeticism, of MacCormack's writing and style invoke these cinecstatic territories of desire, it can only ever teach and tempt us to find these shapes in the dark. Cinesexuality is illimitable but also individual: exposure to the self-unselved in MacCormack's cinesexual opening cannot be by consensus. To each, therefore, her own.

The subsequent reunification of the image-resemblance in the later stages of Lévinas' essay suggested the enrichment of philosophical thought through exploration of the event which eludes cognition. Because the turnings and tracings of these exegetical steps are manifold, the process is unlimited and there is an intellectual liberty in considering how flesh eludes cognition. Similarly, MacCormack's cinecstatic openings are, by definition, unfolded to a plenitude. It is through this generosity and generating that MacCormack leads us to reconsider desire as passion and passivities - but always as a love for the 'new universes' offered by the fabulous, horrific, gory and gothic. Flesh is not the gendered body (or, as MacCormack also puts it, "can we really ask what gender a spleen, intestine or corroded skin are?" (56))

In seeking to move beyond the 'image-spectator fold', *Cinesexuality* pushes asemiosis forward into responsibility. The difficulty of thought unfolds us but, when this happens, we must also retain a keen awareness of how participation affects a passage out toward new forms. Whipping the cinesexual up and out of their skin, asemiosis unhinges the spectator through abstraction-as-alterity: MacCormack expressly states: "Asemiosis is the beyond".(57)

In the playing out of affective semiosis the spectator is put through her paces in becoming more than she thought she was. There is rigour and application found here in the demands of desire and the pressure on the libidinal surface. But what comes of it, what follows from the passage into unnatural connections, is a territory of possibility held open for entry and then engagement. Thus MacCormack's claim that abstraction is ethical.

More than this, asemiosis brings the cinesexual's desire into encounter with submissive grace. Through all her vibrant and insightful readings of Guattari, Foucault, Irigaray and Serres, MacCormack can be said to arrive at *Cinesexuality*'s first sensitivity: love. Such might be the extreme shock intimated in *Nerve Scales*, wherein one is enlightened by unreality. For MacCormack's ethical conclusion is that from abstraction (asemiosis) and through passive spectatorial masochism (cinecstacy), the membrane of self is painfully and pleasurably stretched to bring desire and grace together. And perhaps this is MacCormack at her most Lévinasian: turning eros from objectified bodies and bringing flesh to desire.

My thanks to JK & JH.

- 1. Michael O'Rourke 'For the Love of Cinema' in Patricia MacCormack, *Cinesexuality* (Ashgate: Aldershot & Burlington, 2008), ix
- 2. Anna Powell, *Deleuze and Horror Film* (Edinburgh University Press: Edinburgh, 2005), 17-18. MacCormack, *Cinesexuality*, 11

- 3. MacCormack, Cinesexuality, 5
- 4. MacCormack, Cinesexuality, 7
- 5. This observation, although apparent from reading *Cinesexuality*, is amply supported by watching MacCormack's excellent lecture 'Deleuze and the Demonological Text' given at Manchester Metropolitan University (see Actual Virtual Issue -#09 www.eri.mmu.ac.uk/deleuze/journal09_2.php)
- 6. MacCormack, Cinesexuality, 2
- 7. MacCormack, Cinesexuality, 4
- 8. Antonin Artaud, Collected Works Volume One (Calder & Boyars: London, 1999) 71
- 9. MacCormack, Cinesexuality, 64
- 10. Patricia MacCormack, 'Barbara Steele's Ephemeral Skin', (Senses of Cinema www.sensesofcinema.com Issue 22, September October 2002), 6
- 11. Patricia MacCormack, 'Perversion An Introduction' (Senses of Cinema www.sensesofcinema.com Issue 30, January March 2004), 4
- 12. Gilles Deleuze & Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* (The Athlone Press: London, 1988), 262. See Massumi's notes in the same volume on affect/affection xvi.
- 13. See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (Routledge: London & New York, 2002)
- 14. I am thinking here particularly of Graham Harman's 'On the Horror of Phenomenology: Lovecraft and Husserl' in Mackay, R [ed] *Collapse Philosophical Research and Development* (Vol. IV) *Concept Horror* (Urbanomic: Falmouth, 2008) and Jean-Luc Nancy's Corpus. See also China Miéville's notion of the 'new (Weird) haptos' in the same volume of *Collapse*.
- 15. MacCormack, 'Barbara Steele', 9
- 16. Emmanuel Lévinas, 'Reality and its shadow' in Hand, Séan [ed] *The Levinas Reader* (Blackwell: London, 1989), 141. See also Jean-Paul Sartre, *What is Literature?* (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1988).
- 17. Lévinas, 'Reality', 132
- 18. Lévinas, 'Reality', 132
- 19. Lévinas, 'Reality', 132
- 20. Lévinas, 'Reality', 132
- 21. Lévinas, 'Reality', 132
- 22. Lévinas, 'Reality', 142
- 23. Lévinas, 'Reality', 133
- 24. See Lévinas Otherwise than Being (Duquesne University Press: Pennsylvania, 1998), 64
- 25. Generally understood in Lévinas' philosophy, the face is what signals the more-than cognisable existence of the other person; it is by virtue of the excessive face that I do not draw the other into my domain, assuming the other through an extension of my parameter (where greeting is more like eating). Of course whilst this is a crude simplification of Lévinas thought, it arguably reduces the ethical domain of his work somewhat, in that the simultaneity of being and reflection obtains as the same shadow falling between object and its image as that falling between the identity of a person's substance and what escapes it.
- 26. See Lévinas, 'Reality', 134-5
- 27. Lévinas, 'Reality', 136
- 28. Lévinas, 'Reality', 136
- 29. Wastelands exhibition at Newlyn Art Gallery, 25th April 16th May 2009. See also www.lucywillow.com
- 30. Lévinas, 'Reality', 136
- 31. See Mark Samuels' story 'Mannequins in Aspects of Terror' in *The White Hands and Other Weird Tales* (Tartarus Press: Layburn, 2003)

- 32. Not that Lévinas didn't also see the rank oppressive horror accompanying insomnia and sleep: see *Existence & Existents* (Duquesne University Press: Pennsylvania, 2001)
- 33. For Deleuze & Guattari's Bergsonian reading of the *entre-temps* (meanwhile) see *What is Philosophy?*, 158-9
- 34. Lévinas, 'Reality', 141
- 35. See also MacCormack, Cinesexuality, 142 for a similar theme of the 'creation of the world'.
- 36. Lévinas, 'Reality', 142
- 37. Lévinas, 'Reality', 142
- 38. MacCormack, Cinesexuality, 40
- 39. MacCormack, Cinesexuality, 40-1
- 40. MacCormack, Cinesexuality, 41
- 41. MacCormack, 'Barbara Steele', 7
- 42. MacCormack, 'Barbara Steele' 8
- 43. MacCormack, Cinesexuality, 41-2
- 44. MacCormack, Cinesexuality, 41
- 45. MacCormack, Cinesexuality, 44
- 46. MacCormack, *Cinesexuality*, 44. See also Deleuze & Guattari on involution in *A Thousand Plateaus* 238-9
- 47. i.e. as thematic cinema in the doubly-genitive sense that the phrase 'subject of thought' provides.
- 48. MacCormack, Cinesexuality, 65
- 49. MacCormack is crisp in her rejection of a certain vanguard for the post-human: the project is not to wrench away from our disavowed selves through recourse to a skittish alterity. Instead, *Cinesexuality* makes a rigorous call for a dissolutive sacrifice in the erotically-suffused haptics.
- 50. MacCormack, Cinesexuality, 15
- 51. MacCormack, 'Barbara Steele', 1
- 52. Put thus, Lyotard is as much a cinesexual writer as Lovecraft. Theory, philosophy and critical writing can itself be suffused with the residues and excesses that necessitate an encounter with self.
- 53. MacCormack, Cinesexuality, 15-16
- 54. Elsewhere MacCormack implies the singularity of the cinesexual event when suggesting that "these sensations may or may not be repeatable, while psychoanalysis relies on repeatability for its diagnoses." MacCormack, 'Barbara Steele' 6
- 55. MacCormack, 'Perversion', 4
- 56. MacCormack, Cinesexuality, 100
- 57. MacCormack, Cinesexuality, 45

The Weird of Globalization: Esemplastic Power in the Short Fiction of China Miéville

Mark Williams

Most of the [science fiction/fantasy/horror] I'm interested in is about the numinous, the transcendent erupting out of the everyday, and ironically, horror does that particularly well (though it's concerned with the Bad Numinous). [....] For me, the horrific, in the shape of the dark uncanny, the monstrous, the unholy, is one of the most fascinating aspects of fantastic literature, and it's for that reason, I think, that though I'm not normally thought of as a horror writer, I'm a writer of SF and fantasy heavily influenced by the weird, grotesque horror tradition.

—China Miéville.(1)

This article concerns the poetics and politics of 'the transcendent erupting out of the everyday' as it appears in China Miéville's short fictions. I will argue that Miéville uses techniques familiar to the Romantic poets to create a Gothic of contemporary globalisation in his stories 'Go Between', 'Different Skies' and 'Foundation'.

The technique Miéville uses is one which the Marxist-Trotskyist writer and theorist Ben Watson discusses in another context in his book *Art, Class & Cleavage*.(2) Watson borrows from S.T. Coleridge's notion of 'esemplastic power' 'a term he coined to mean "shaping into oneness", [which] elevated imagination into a mystical transcendence of time and space: a vision only available to the select'.(3) Despite objecting to its apparent overtone of 'elitist mysticism', Watson sees this as an important means for bringing the globalised interrelationships of social structures to consciousness. 'Esemplastic power' is found in texts which demonstrate a '[s]ynoptic transparency of social relations' typically through the use of fantastic or anti-realist techniques to imaginatively join-up things which are actually related but are thought of as distanced, or even distinct from one another, by history or geography. He quotes Coleridge's lecture 'On The Slave Trade' (1795) to this effect:

Provided the dunghill be not before their parlour window, they [the Many] are well content to know that it exists, and that it is the hot-bed of their pestilent luxuries.—To this grievous failing we must attribute the frequency of wars, and the continuance of the Slave-trade. The merchant finds no argument against it in his ledger: the citizen at the crowded feast is not nauseated by the stench and filth of the slave-vessel—the fine lady's nerves are not shattered by the shrieks! She sips a beverage sweetened with human blood, even while she is weeping over the refined sorrows of Werther.(4)

Many other anti-slavery pamphlets used a similar conjunction of imagery to make their point at or around this time. At a conference on Globalisation and Writing in 2007, Carl Plasa gave a particularly informative paper describing the rhetorical tactics by which abolitionists likened sugar consumption to cannibalism; one particularly Swiftian pamphlet commented that the best way to refine and sweeten rough rum was by putting the 'whole body of a roasted Negro' into the cask to soak up the impurities, adding 'far be it from me to insinuate...that any such methods are used to meliorate West India Rum'.(5) A senior academic at time commented that we do not yet have a similarly strong conjugation of images (blood and sugar) to bring to bear on contemporary globalisation protests; Miéville's short fictions demonstrate that we do have such striking imagery.

Miéville is certainly familiar with Ben Watson's writing, and the 'dialectical social-realism', or 'seeing things in their connectedness'(6), that Watson so polemically calls for is precisely what Miéville's prose achieves in his short stories 'Go Between', 'Different Skies' and 'Foundation'.(7) These stories play upon the revelation of social relations *as a totality* as a moment of either sublime terror or paralysing paranoia which offers the individual a cosmic vision of their own unseen connections to other people around the world: a vertiginous, near-Gnostic uncovering of the overdetermined linkages of globalisation. As Watson says, 'synoptic transparency of social relations provokes nausea'(8); it is a horror writer's literalised metaphor, an SF writer's dystopia, or a Fantasy writer's grotesque satire: it is about correlating the boundaries between genre style and social history.

China Miéville describes Horror, SF and Fantasy as 'different accents within an overall field of Fantastic Literature', stating that the genre fiction he prefers is that which is concerned with 'the numinous, the transcendent erupting out of the everyday', adding that 'ironically horror does that particularly well'.(9) This sentiment is particularly evident from Miéville's short fictions, the most notable of which are structured broadly as horror stories: 'Go Between', 'Foundation' and 'Different Skies' which this paper deals with in context of Miéville's writing on the history of Weird fiction.

In his essay 'M.R. James and The Quantum Vampire' (10), Miéville writes that M. R. James represents the border between what he describes as the declining 'hauntological' in nineteenth century ghost stories and the ascendant Weird in twentieth century Horror. The Weird is not about returns, spectral presences, hauntings (or absences which invoke presence) to Miéville and I suggest that his fictional project constitutes an attempt to unite or resolve contemporary Weird writing's uneasy relationships with its historical roots in Modernism and avant-garde writing on the one hand and pulp and Gothic on the other; his writings draw the analogy between this generic shift and the concrete historical shifts of contemporary modernity, thematising historical conditions as generic modes. In other words, Miéville's short fictions are Jamesean ghost stories and while their relation to realism is a spectral one, their symbolic and allegorical power is tremendous because they waver between the historical form of the 'ghost story' and the more grotesque mode of the contemporary Weird tale. The relation of these fictions to the society or social visions which they present is heterogeneous but, in the sense of 'families of realisms' where Andrej Gasiorek interprets realism as more of a 'cognitive stance' than a strict method, Miéville's short stories can be situated on the borders of realism as a mode of realist-materialist, or 'dialectical social realist' writing.(11) They haunt because they present a kind of 'realist' representation which is itself haunted by concepts which appear to be outside of realist modes but are known to exist, drawing attention to the Real which is always beyond representation. Miéville places the trans-national linkages of global trade and realpolitik into the role of the almost-repressed—he almost 'ghosts' them.

Miéville is renegotiating the space of realist discourse in these stories, taking relatively small scenes and relatively more sparse prose from the style of his novels, and loading them with conceptual associations that will enable his reader to pick out the threads which lead out into the wider world of the story; and thence into a new perspective on their own location within the complex webs of actually existing globalised interrelationships, previously unseen or unconsidered, in their own lives. These new perspectives his stories present are caused by characters overhearing or finding some object which produces an effect of 'cognitive estrangement' on the reader, the process of creating a space for critical reflection within the fantastic as described by Darko Suvin (see Suvin *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction*).(12) Suvin identifies it primarily with SF as a paradigmatically modern genre form, but Miéville argues that it can operate just as well in fantasy frameworks (see 'Cognition as Ideology' in *Red Planets*(13)), something his short stories demonstrate. Miéville's characters each receive some clue which leads to (es)strange(d) places which waver between being close representations of our own world;

they are founded on the closeness and estranging power of political division: these stories concern struggles and conflicts within the skin of mundane 'society' directly, and disturbingly, analogous to the cross-purposes of the more extreme fringes of political activism. Conflicts, in other words, which both are and are not *present* to 'mainstream' society by being represented as either marginal and of minority interest, or as pervasive and naturalised as globalisation, both equally occluded: they are allegories of fringe political activism.

In 'Go Between' this is literal as the protagonist receives messages in small containers passed to him through food items:

He stared at the chocolate and thought but I was about to take the other one. It was a long time since he had dwelled on that phenomenon. He had thought himself inured to his instructors' unerring knowledge of what he would pick. In the first months he had been constantly aghast at the fact, had imagined unseen cadres watching him, gauging what he was about to buy, somehow pushing their messages into things just before he touched them, but that was impossible. The inserts were there already, waiting for him.(14)

This latency (always already present within things), this suspended expectation and overweening sense of observation, creates a deeply paranoid worldview where the small and everyday contributes to or detracts from something greater, more momentous or meaningful, which is happening elsewhere. It is through these quiet, intense elsewheres and the feeling of invisible machinery at work—ideological, social or physical—that Miéville invests in the reader the sense of the material in these short fictions.

It is almost the opposite technique from the lush prose of his secondary world of Bas Lag because it deals with the mundane in an apparently mundane way before leading the reader into much more metaphorical realms with a relatively spare imagery. This is evident from the products which the go-between, Morley, finds his messages in: they are wholly generic and mundane (bread, chocolate) yet mystified, rendered uncanny in this world of brand-saturation precisely by being *un*-branded. Meanings which would place them into a consumer-consciousness are effaced within the story and substituted with direct instructions moving up and down through some unseen chain of command, a very different paradigmatic chain from a realist portrayal of consumer society. As products they are of course already in a system of meanings with which we are all familiar, where corporate identities quietly and persistently issue imperatives and commands all their own; by estranging them from this and into anonymity while making them repositories for *direct* instructions Miéville aligns them with the passing of concealed messages and thus with notions of resistance. It functions as a story of individualised collective actions (gone wrong?), with all the paranoia that this might suggest, and carries strong overtones not just of (anti)globalisation campaigners and international solidarity movements but of state-corporate collusion and manipulation.

Doubts necessarily circulate, almost overwhelmingly in the protagonist Morley, as in other Miéville characters: motivation, action, result, consequences—all become questionable. The precise nature of the instructions is troublingly clouded by this speculation:

For much of the time he had just assumed, vaguely, that they must be instructions, messages that could not be trusted to phone linesor email, rolled in protective carapaces. He could not fail to notice, though, that the small hard thing in his chocolate had resembled nothing so much as a bullet.(15)

Faith becomes the only guidance for the passing of the message: it must be important and worthwhile because to think otherwise would be to posit an even greater question about an insane and meaningless universe, a life-dwarfing anxiety which cannot ever be quite dispelled.

A jockey tested positive for drugs, there was a bloodless coup, a bloody intervention. Morley saw the little bullet or bullet-shaped thing or tightly folded instructions in a bulletlike case held in the hand of the horse rider or the doctor whose test discredited him, in the pocket of a the African general who took power promising peace, in the gun belt of the mercenary whose forces invaded the capital.(16)

Paranoia becomes a positive force. Morley, distracted by a discussion about Chechnya held down the pub, hopes that the people who issue him his orders from 'their white room, or their cave [....] [t]heir satellite' will send him something which affects the outcome of the Chechen conflict.(17) Where one of his nameless companions speculates about possibilities of intervention, 'if you could do something about it', Morley immediately thinks, '*I can*'.(18) Having once had this thought, or rather this feeling of connection with Chechnya, the delivery of his final package *becomes* all about Chechnya as he waits to send it on in a Post Office queue:

Men and women from his own organisation, or from *splinters* from that organisation, renegades, or opponents dedicated to destroying him, those who would make things far worse for Chechnya, for the economy, those he must stop.(19)

There is a bleak humour to the peregrinations of the protagonist here. It is a paranoiac text which seems to belong quite specifically in a post-1950s ghost story anthology (something not unlike the trauma-hauntings of Robert Westall's 'The Boys Toilets' (school bullying) and 'The Haunting of Chas McGill' (post-war psychic disturbance)). The spectral thing here is responsibility, but it could be real or imagined, product of schizophrenia or of some sinister force working in the wings of the world to organise the theatres of war and peace; it is a ghost story of a consumer as opposed to one of an antiquary.

All of these stories concern everyman figures of The People whose worlds are thrown into subtly different scales of disturbance. Of Miéville's short stories, 'Different Skies' is the one which appears the most domestic in scope and scale, yet it is key to revealing the presence of Miéville's globalised interests even in stories which do not seem to be immediately concerned with globalisation. In terms of its scale then, the story 'Different Skies' appears quite distinct from these others at first. It begins with an old man deciding to buy an antique window-pane to brighten up his flat and from there quickly evolves into something more unsettling. As a scenario this is perhaps the closest that Miéville has come to an M. R. James narrative so far, resembling as it does 'Oh Whistle and I'll Come to You' in its formal conventions, but it also connects us to Miéville's 'Quantum Vampire' discussion about the historical movement from the haunting, the uncanny, to the Weird where he writes that 'James's repeated insistence that he is an "antiquary" is not convincing' because '[h]e is acutely conscious of capitalist modernity, and a surprising number of his "ghosts" manifest through it'. (20) His own narrator makes no claims to antiquarianism but does explore his own position as consumer and the generational divide between himself and other contemporary consumers.

For the narrator of 'Different Skies' the past is definitively another country and the opening lines, 'seventy one and melancholy', are a statement of profound alienation. Here contemporary Britain is another world and we are presented with a narrative which is as paranoiac and overdetermined as that of

'Go Between', but here it is a kind of meta-Gothic narrative: it is a haunting by the contraries of the new and the old.

I found myself—I sort of *came* to, I suppose—gazing at the window over my desk. It is a splendid thing. It is very good to stare at. I was thinking of it while I walked. All the obvious, idle thoughts: Who could have made it? When? Why? Over what did it look? And so on and so on. When I walk into the little study into its light, those questions do not dissipate but return in strength. When I look at that strange glass it makes me think of all the other old windows that have been lost.(21)

There is something sinister about misplaced or displaced portals, either windows or doors, because they hold over some element or essence of their original context in a way which can threaten the stability of their new context. The window in 'Different Skies' destabilises context, driving the safe and mundane over some internal expressive brink:

I know it very well, by now. I have spent some time over the last days looking at the eight evenly spaced triangles around the central stone. Each is stained with its own impurities; each is a unique colour. Counting clockwise from the top, my favourite is the sixth, the slice between west and southwest. It is a little bluer than the others, and the ruby at its apex makes that blue shine.(22)

This style of description is like the H.P. Lovecraft in 'The Beyond' or 'The Music of Erich Zann', but Miéville then immediately undercuts it in a manner which serves only to heighten the reader's awareness of his own use of that mode:

I have reread the words above with amusement and discomfort. For goodness' sake, am I turning into some sort of mystic? I knew I was smitten with the thing—I cannot remember being so thrilled with *ownership* of anything material. But I am perturbed by what I have written: I sound like an obsessive.(23)

In foregrounding the obsessiveness of the prose—conventional to a story such as this—Miéville makes the construction of the atmosphere of the supernatural an integral part of the manifestation of the spectral. It is an understated exercise in controlling readerly expectations and its emphasis is on 'ownership' and the nature of the window as a material and constructed object alienated from its original context.

The supernaturalism of the window is cemented when it rains: 'The old pane was dry. Dirty rain was pounding against its neighbours, but not a drop spattered against it.'(24) The material detail of the window, subjected to obsessive scrutiny is what produces the uncanny effect. In other words, the mundane, familiar items around us contain histories in their construction: the staining of the different glass panes is a chemical history connected to industrial processes; the building of the frame itself encompasses a history of design and craftsmanship, and so on. Making us conscious of these histories and their vertiginous connection with histories of international trade and industrialisation reveals the invisible 'presence' of the global within the local—this complex of multiple histories is already present within ordinary mundane objects and in being brought to consciousness they become uncanny.

[T]he red glass at the centre of my window was shining.

It sent icy scarlet light onto the desk below, and onto me. I swear that was the source of the raised hair on my neck. I gaped up at it. My mouth must have been slack. All the impurities and the scratches on the inside of that central panel were etched and vivid. It seemed to have a hundred shapes, all of a sudden, to look momentarily like a huddled embryo and a red whirlpool and a bloodshot eye. [....] All I know is that one moment it shone and then it did not. My retinas retained no afterimage.(25)

The light here embodies contradictory impulses: a colour of warm association that feels 'icy', a light that is intense and arresting and yet leaving no echo on the eye's material cells. As with Morley's containers and messages in 'Go Between', no single impression is given but rather a plethora of disturbing options, each of which is in some way animated, each suggesting growth, movement or process. The embryo image is then further echoed by the protagonist waking up 'huddled like some pathetic child' in his chair.(26)

Fear in this particular haunting is of the combatitive confrontation between youth and age accentuated by the pressure of modernity. Youth itself haunts this protagonist: 'They croon at me and mock my shuffling old-man walk.'(27) Beyond the window which looks out onto different skies are a gang of malicious children whispering vague threats and intimidations—'Oi, Mister you old cunt'(28) —resonating 'in weird dimensions'.(29)

Calling me names, gearing each other up with hatred and poison to break my window and *scare me to death*.(30)

These menacing ghosts come to represent the threatening phantom of youth crime in the 'real' city. The undescribed children are the vague shapes, the 'hundred shapes' and impurities of any and all youth cultures seen from without: Teds, Mods, Skins, punks, rude boys, hoodies, etc., etc., etc. In being unclear and multiple, part of an indefinable collective moil, they become the children who surround the protagonist in London:

I have gone out and looked around, and everywhere, in all the parts of the city, wherever I have been, youth seems to fill London. I have heard animated swearing from boys and girls on bicycles and buses. I have seen signs that read "only two children at a time" on the doors of small groceries. As if that were a defence. I have wandered the streets in a strange state staring around me at the little monsters that surround us. [....] I am afraid of all these unchecked unbridled younglings. *None of them are human*. They are all like the ones who come to torment me at night.(31)

Their antipathy to the familiar is practically the entirety of their character: they are *Un*-checked, *Un*-bridled young-*lings*, Weird creatures rather than humans. It is the protagonist's own opening words—'Seventy one and melancholy'(32)—that have summoned up this spectre of youth against age:

During the night visitations, I have seen glimpses of flapping ridiculous shorts half a century out of date, and discerned the old-fashioned, clipped voices of my merciless besiegers (the tone is not disguised even when sneering in wide-eyed sadism). And yes of course I have thought of the years when I was like them.(33)

Though Miéville does not let the story sit so simply as to make it specifically the protagonist's own youthful self waiting for him, but rather something wider and wilder, more clouded and without discernable motive: the collective representative personification of Youth as aggressive, vigorous antagonist to Age. His fear is founded upon a loss and a lack within himself, so that it is *almost* his own youth which is haunting him through the undifferentiated presences of contrary children elevated and fetishised, through the focaliser of a flawed window glass, into "Modern Youth".

I cannot look at them, at any of them, without this horrible fear, but also with a jealousy. A longing. I thought at first that this was new, that it had come through the window with that alien moonlight. But when I look at other adults looking at children, I know that I am not alone. This is an old feeling.(34)

His window, a fetishised *objet d'art* of an unknown past, has become a literal fetish which grants him this epiphanic perspective on the fears he believed were unique to his own position: the sheer age inherent in the discomfort of change and of the fetishising of youth as object of desire and fear. These children are reversed *memento mori* proclaiming that they are as he once was and do not care that they will be, one day, as he is, because, as Youth, they exist only (and eternally) for (and at) that moment. Although, their description thus estranges them it also abstracts them from their social context, allowing them to be seen as representative of their time and place: they are an incarnation of the competition inherent in modernity, the aggression of the new.

This short story plays with the same terms of "Weird tale" versus "Ghost story" that Miéville dissects in his 'Quantum Vampire' essay. Comparing Dickens and Le Fanu he says on the one hand 'Dickens thinks nothing of jostling together, in "A Christmas Carol", the ghost of a person, Jacob Marley, with those of various Christmases' which he says is, to 'post-hauntological eyes', an error in, or a conflation of, categorisation; while on the other hand he also observes that Le Fanu's ghosts 'by contrast, in their moral contingency, are agents of disaster' divorced from the moral accountancy of the Ghost story schemas they apparently follow.(35) Miéville's own writings seem to be attempts to square both these circles, or elevate them into multi-dimensional forms, since they show evidence of deliberate category confusion and intimations of a catastrophe which affects even the frameworks by which we judge them.

This is continued with particular force in the story 'Foundation' where the haunting spectre is that of a war (in Iraq) whose causes and effects are closer to home than we can normally see and being granted a synoptically transparent vision of their social relations opens up a terrible gulf in the heart of the mundane. The story is China Miéville's response to the political responses to 9/11.

'Foundation' concerns a strange, quiet man who is a modern folkloric figure: 'the man who comes and speaks to buildings'.(36) The style of the narrative is rumour, with all the descriptive sparseness of a verbalised urban myth. As such it follows in the footsteps of Clive Barker's story 'The Forbidden' from his *Books of Blood* which gave the world the Candyman. Miéville's mysterious man of rumour is someone who is uncannily empowered to speak about the condition of buildings but, folklorically is cursed. He does not speak happily or willingly for, even though he 'wears a large and firm smile', he 'has to push his words past it so they come out misshapen and terse', fighting not to raise his voice 'over the sounds he knows you cannot hear'.(37) In the Gothic tradition of *Melmoth* and *The Wandering Jew* the infallibility of this man to determine which buildings will stand and which will fall comes at a hideous price which can only be imparted slightly to the listener/reader.

This 'house-whisperer' (38) is subject to powers of the world beyond his control, he hears things which others are spared and it is his curse to always be able to see and hear them where they literally underpin or undermine the visible mundane world:

He sees the foundation. He sees through the concrete floor and the earth to where the girders are embedded and past them to the foundation. A stock of dead men. An underpinning, a structure of entangled bodies and their parts, pushed tight, packed together and become architecture, their bones broken to make them fit, wedged in contorted repose, burnt skins and the tatters of their clothes pressed as if against glass at the limits of their cut, running below the building's walls, six feet deep below the ground, a perfect runnel full of humans poured like concrete and bracing the stays and the walls.

The foundation looks at him with all its eyes, and the men speak in time.

—we cannot breathe

There is no panic in their voices, nothing but the hopeless patience of the dead.

—we cannot breathe and we shore you up and we eat only sand

He whispers to them so no one else can hear.(39)

These unseen dead men are those whose deaths have cemented the way of life of others who know nothing of their lives or deaths; the structure they form the foundation of is an ideological structure, the tall buildings of 'the West' symbolising and reflecting its sky-scraping political economy. They are the dead enemy soldiers from the First Gulf War who were bulldozed alive into their bunkers. In a direct, not to say didactic, manner, Miéville makes them stand for all the dead whose unknown bodies have fallen beneath other ideational (super)structures. These buildings which they support are textual constructs standing for material history and the man who speaks to buildings is constantly in negotiation with the Foundation to keep those buildings intact. It is a provocative textual construction given that 'Al Qaeda' is typically translated as either 'The Base' or 'The Foundation'(40), and Miéville uses it to bind together two apparently opposed perspectives into a globalised context, to challenge the reader's sense of scale and of cause and effect.

Miéville's metaphor draws together all social structures into a holistically connected monolith (or rather, a construction of monoliths) whose foundations are those who speak to this man:

Every home is built on them. It is all one foundation, that underpins his city. Every wall weighs down upon the corpses that whisper to him with the same voice, the same faces, ripped-up cloth and long-dried blood and bodies torn up and their components used to fill gaps between bodies, limbs and heads stowed tidily between men bloated by gas and spilling dust from their cavities, the whole and partial dead concatenated.(41)

This massive social monolith is, of course, one which this man has, in true Ancient Mariner fashion, helped build, being one of the troops who had, in 1991, taken part in burying them in their entrenchments (42):

On the 25th of February in 1991, he had helped build the foundation. And he looked out across the spread-out, flattened acres, the desert made neat, wiped clean for those hours, he had heard dreadful sounds. He had seen suddenly and terribly through the hot and red-set sand and earth to the dead, in their orderly trenches that angled like walls, and intersected and fanned out, that stretched for miles, like the plans not of a house or a palace but a city. He had seen the men made into mortar, and he had seen them looking at him.(43)

Thus individual social responsibility is placed back into the context of the superstructures which 'determine' the behaviour of the people who live out their lives 'under' them—meaning us—and we are forced to confront our own responsibilities for the political choices made by our representatives as an extension of our own actions. Miéville's Marxist perspective is central to his point about the application of our imagination to bridge global distances, it is a demonstration of the esemplastic power of fantasy; it carries a great deal of critical import for constructing and analysing other, dissenting political positions for developing globalised literary theories. In Miéville's Fantasy fiction there are no Orcs (whose very names connote hellishness), just different people with different problems; fittingly then, in this, his most overtly Gothic short story, it is significant that his Everyman figure here is a former soldier presented not as a devil but as a scapegoat.

This modern Ancient Mariner is a conduit of exchanges in the manner of a peacekeeper. He is constantly haunted by a presence of history that those around him do not feel, and constantly in dialogue with that history. Through this constant communication he seeks to prevent further horrors occurring even though he knows it is sometimes inevitable, and sometimes he ambivalently walks away. The point of this fable is that communication is essential to prevent horrible events and, when they have happened, even more necessary to attempt an understanding of them in human terms away from the dehumanising rhetoric of political absolutes which see Satans, great and small, in everything. Its narrative is as concerned with the nature of story-telling as with a specific political perspective: how to attempt to tell unfamiliar stories about apparently familiar events. In grappling with this it shows its generic inheritance as a tale from a modern Arabian Nights, or a smoke-darkened Persian Gulf day.

These stories resemble the early Gothic novels in important ways: like novels such as Beckford's *Vathek* these texts both tongue-in-cheek and grotesque by turns but with serious import in their grotesquerie. More specifically: they are texts where the baroque extremes of description are drawn directly, and recognisably, from exaggerated focus upon the small details of the mundane world. The development of a contemporary Gothic of globalisation in Miéville is a recuperation or revisitation of the esemplastic power of the Romantic imagination as a renewal of the Marxist imaginary, linking the local to the global through the tools of modern genre writing.

- 1. Miéville, China in interview with *Science Fiction & Fantasy Chronicles* online forum—see http://www.sffchronicles.co.uk/forum/3169-the-china-mieville-interview.html, 28/11/2007.
- 2. This text is a polemic and a provocation designed to agitate and argue with its potential readership, reading it provokes completely contrary responses, laughter and agreement one moment and fierce disagreement with his analysis the next. Although there are significant aspects to disagree with because of its idiosyncratic stance, the book can be used very productively in conjunction with readings of left wing Fantasy writers to emphasise the importance of materialist conceptions of the function of the imagination.
- 3. Watson, Ben, Art, Class & Cleavage (London: Quartet Books, 1997), p. 28.
- 4. Coleridge, from *The Watchman* (1796), quoted in Watson, Ben, *Art, Class & Cleavage: Quantulumcunque Concerning Materialist Esthetix* (London: Quartet Books, 1997), p. 24.
- 5. Burn, Andrew, 'A Second Address to the People of Great Britain: Containing a New and Most Powerful Argument To Abstain From the Use of West India Sugar. By An Eye Witness to the Facts Related' (1792) quoted in Plasa, Carl, "Stained with Spots of Human Blood": Sugar Abolition and Anthropophagy', Paper delivered Globalisation and Writing, organised by Jonathan Neale (Bath Spa University, March 31st April 3rd, 2007).
- 6. Watson, Art, Class & Cleavage, p. 22.
- 7. Miéville referred to Watson by name as a fellow defender of maximalism in prose writing during a debate on 'Maximalism versus Minimalism', UEA 06/03/2008.
- 8. Watson, Art, Class & Cleavage, p. 24.
- 9. Miéville, China in interview with Science Fiction & Fantasy Chronicles online forum—see http://www.sffchronicles.co.uk/forum/3169-the-china-mieville-interview.html, 28/11/2007.
- 10. Miéville, China, 'M. R. James and the Quantum Vampire' from *Collapse*, vol. IV ed. Robin MacKay, pp. 105—28.
- 11. Gasiorek's book on post-war British fiction says 'If realism is a multi-faceted family of writings that alter from period to period, then its various products need to be seen in a historical rather than formalist manner. Realism discloses not so much a set of textual characteristics as a general cognitive stance *vis-à-vis* the world, which finds different expression at different historical moments, manifesting itself in a wide range of fictional forms. The formalist conception of realism, so passionately attacked by Brecht in his debate with Lukács, rests on an unchanging conception of literary form that in turn presupposes historical stasis. It "fixes" both social reality and the literary work.'(Gasiorek, Andrej *Post-War British Fiction: Realism and After* (London: Edward Arnold, 1995), p. 14.) It is this idea of a plurality of Realisms shifting with historical circumstance which comes closest to expressing the relationship between Modernism and Realism in contemporary Fantasy writing, but it needs to be modified in respect to Miéville. One of the first nuances to add must be the conscious application of genre, not just as techniques and isolated tropes but as tradition.
- 12. Suvin, Darko, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1979), p. 64.
- 13. Miéville, 'Cognition as Ideology: A Dialectic of SF Theory' (pp. 231-48) from *Red Planets: Marxism and Science Fiction* eds Mark Bould and China Miéville (London: Pluto Press, 2009).
- 14. Miéville, 'Go Between', p. 128.
- 15. Miéville, 'Go Between', p. 132.
- 16. Miéville, 'Go Between', p. 133.
- 17. Miéville, 'Go Between', p. 133.
- 18. Miéville, 'Go Between', p. 134.
- 19. Miéville, 'Go Between', p. 136.
- 20. Miéville, 'M.R. James and the Quantum Vampire', p. 121.

- 21. Miéville, 'Different Skies', (pp. 147—164) from *Looking For Jake* (Ballantine Books: New York, 2005), p. 150.
- 22. Miéville, 'Different Skies', pp.150—151.
- 23. Miéville, 'Different Skies', p. 151.
- 24. Miéville, 'Different Skies', p. 154.
- 25. Miéville, 'Different Skies', p. 152.
- 26. Miéville, 'Different Skies', p. 154.
- 27. Miéville, 'Different Skies', p. 160.
- 28. Miéville, 'Different Skies', p. 158.
- 29. Miéville, 'Different Skies', p. 157.
- 30. Miéville, 'Different Skies', p. 160.
- 31. Miéville, 'Different Skies', p. 161.
- 32. Miéville, 'Different Skies', p. 147.
- 33. Miéville, 'Different Skies', p. 162.
- 34. Miéville, 'Different Skies', p. 161.
- 35. Miéville, 'M.R. James and the Quantum Vampire', pp. 117—118.
- 36. Miéville, China, 'Foundation' from Looking For Jake (New York: Ballantine, 2005), p. 25.
- 37. Miéville, China, 'Foundation', p. 25.
- 38. Miéville, 'Foundation', p. 25.
- 39. Miéville, China, 'Foundation', p. 27.
- 40. Jason Burke writes: "Al-Qeada" comes from the Arabic root *qaf-ayn-dal*. It can mean a base, as in a camp or a home, a foundation [...] beneath a house or a pedestal that supports a column' as well as meaning 'a precept, rule, principle, maxim, formula, method, model or pattern'. Burke, Jason, *Al-Qaeda: The True Story of Radical Islam* (London: Penguin Books, 2007 [2003]), p. 1.
- 41. Miéville, 'Foundation', p. 28.
- 42. Miéville refers his reader to an article by Patrick Sloyan entitled 'How the Mass Slaughter of a Group of Iraqis Went Unreported', *The Guardian*, 14th February 2003.
- 43. Miéville, 'Foundation', p. 31.

'I'm scared to death she'll kill me': *Devoted Ladies*, feminine monstrosity, and the (lesbian) Gothic Romance

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In his discussion of what he sees as the predominant narrative of homosexuality, the 'coming-out story', Ken Plummer identifies a handful of motifs on which this narrative often centres. These include secrecy, guilt, persecution, and the incoherency and/or fragmentation of the self.(1) Although he himself does not explicate the connection, what is perhaps most illuminating about Plummer's observation is the fact that all four are also dominant themes of Gothic fiction. Moreover, the Gothic is particularly noted for its transfiguration of the heteronormative spheres of the family unit and the domestic home from sites of love and security into raucous sites of buried secrets, maltreatment and paranoia; this is particularly significant, it may therefore be argued, for gay and lesbian characters within those spaces. Indeed, it often suggested that, as a genre so bound-up with notions of marginality, the Gothic has an inherent connection with discursive representations of homosexuality. In its original, eighteenth-century manifestation, the Gothic was positioned as a marginal genre in terms of cultural taste, gender, political affiliation and, importantly, sexuality, as two of its earliest practitioners, Horace Walpole and William Beckford, were (notoriously in Beckford's case) in relationships with men that we would now retrospectively categorise as homosexual. Thus, as a genre that 'is notable for its marginality and stylistic eccentricities [...] [in the portrayal of] an eccentric, disruptive subject who exists in marginal relation to mainstream society'(2), the connection between the unsettling and often violent return of that which has been repressed, and the exposition of secreted homosexual acts and relationships is an association readily observed in more recent critical interpretations of the genre. It is therefore also unsurprising that many cornerstones of the genre, including R.L. Stevenson's Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr Hyde (1886), Oscar Wilde's The Picture of Dorian Gray (1890), and Bram Stoker's Dracula (1895), have produced numerous readings of themselves as parables of homosexuality (some, it should be noted, more convincingly than others).(3)

Indeed, this essay explores the utilisation of such Gothic structures and motifs in relation to the depiction of (specifically female) homosexuality in Molly Keane's 1934 novel Devoted Ladies. Set partly in the glittering, bohemian world of 1930s London, and partly in the 'haunted countryside of Ireland [...] full of old spirits and tensions and moods'(4); and, on one level, a doppelgänger tale concerning the novel's similarly named lesbian couple, Jessica (Houpe-Boswell) and Jane (Barker)(5), Devoted Ladies is a novel that is fundamentally doubled and divided. Indeed, this sense of perpetual doubling even extends to the life of the author herself, who, from 1926 until 1952, maintained a successful career as an author of 'middlebrow' Irish hunting romances (which *Devoted Ladies*, at least in part, is one example of) under the non de plume 'M.J. Farrell'(6), but who later went on to enjoy what may be essentially seen as a second authorial career in her own name, publishing three more novels of a somewhat more serious or 'literary' countenance from 1981 through to 1988.(7) Furthermore, my reading of Devoted Ladies is not just as a work of Gothic fiction, but specifically as a Gothic Parody: a text which employs the traditional conventions of the genre specifically for comic purposes. As such, texts of this nature thereby promise what Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik refer to as 'the laughter of accommodation' rather than 'the terror of disorientation', which is traditionally associated with what I shall henceforth refer to as 'genuine' Gothic texts.(8) Moreover, my re-situation of Keane's novel within the context of the parodic-Gothic tradition is intended to be in-tune with recent critical revaluations of particular middlebrow writers' use of the Gothic mode more generally. This takes form principally through Horner and Zlosnik's monograph, Daphne du Maurier: Writing, Identity and the Gothic Imagination (1998) and their discussion of Stella Gibbons' pre-eminently middlebrow Cold Comfort Farm (1932) in their study Gothic and the Comic Turn (2005).

Indeed, the relative neglect of middlebrow literary culture by critical discussions of the Gothic (even within those volumes that deal extensively with twentieth-century Gothic) is highly surprising (9), as many middlebrow novelists engage with Gothic narrative and conventions in both a parodic (Keane, Gibbons, Rachel Ferguson, Dodie Smith) or genuine manner (Du Maurier, Ivy Compton-Burnett, Agatha Christie and other 'Golden Age' crime novelists). Moreover, with its intense focus on domesticity and the domestic space, an underlying affinity between middlebrow fiction and the Gothic tradition is arguably manifested in a shared preoccupation with what Chiara Briganti and Kathy Mezei refer to as the 'visceral embodiment of the house'.(10)

As previously stated, the first half of *Devoted Ladies* centres on the lesbian relationship between two young women, Jessica and Jane. Whilst the existence (or otherwise) of a challenge to traditional gender roles brought about by World War I has been an established and highly debatable area of historical and literary discussion - with critics such as Martin Pugh and Sharon Oudett contesting the more generally accepted view that the both the rapid depletion of the male population and women's adoption of more traditionally masculine roles created new, if temporary, freedoms for women in the early twentieth century - it is only more recently that it has also come to be documented that these challenges to established constructions of gender, coupled with an enlarged popular consciousness of psychological theories, resulted in an increased interest in homosexuality during the interwar years. For example, Nicola Humble argues that 'the work of sexologists at the turn of the century and the public dissemination of Freudian ideas lead to a more general openness about the sexual, and the trauma of the First World War created a more fluid sense of gender identities, allowing concepts of androgyny to feed into the public understanding of homosexuality'.(11) As such, the 'open' (that is, un-coded) representations of homosexuality that we find in Devoted Ladies became progressively more commonplace in the characterisation of both male and female characters during the period. This is most evident in Radclyffe Hall's notorious The Well of Loneliness (1928) which was banned within four months of its publication under the Obscene Publications Act (1857). In some sense, the novel's lesbian protagonist, Stephen Gordon, acts as an arena in which a tussle between competing theories on homosexuality is played out; be it sexological claims of sexuality as innate or emerging psychoanalytical perspectives which figure sexual identity as acquired. Therefore, as Esther Saxey comments, Radclyffe Hall's novel ultimately 'shows the broad spread of meanings [and re-evaluations] given to sexuality and gender in the 1920s'.(12) Indeed, Radclyffe Hall's was not the only novel of the decade (nor of the entire interwar period) to offer a 'daring' portrayal of lesbian sexuality. Published one year previously, Judith, the protagonist of Rosamund Lehmann's Dusty Answer (1927), earnestly considers homosexuality as a sexual possibility in the form of her intense and romantic friendship with Jennifer. However, it is not until the arrival of Geraldine (who diverts Jennifer's affections away from Judith and onto herself) that Judith begins to comprehend the exact disposition of Jennifer's feelings. From this point onwards, the sexual underpinnings of the relationship between Jennifer and Geraldine are figured through the 'courageous' sexual imagery of Judith's imagined scenes of the two women wrestling; with Jennifer 'vying for [Geraldine] [...] a match for her in all magnificent unfeminine physical ways'.(13)

What is particularly remarkable about the proximity of these two novels is that whilst one was subject to an infamous obscenity trial and banned from British publication until 1948, the other matched its critical acclaim with a tremendous level of popular success, ultimately becoming one of the bestselling novels of the decade.(14) Defenders of Radclyffe Hall's novel emphasised its literary merits as a reason it should be read. However, as James Douglas's scathing 1928 editorial illustrates, this very same reason was used as further justification for the book's suppression: 'It is no excuse to say that the novel possesses "fine qualities" or that its author is an "accomplished" artist [....] The answer is that the adroitness and cleverness of the book intensifies its moral danger'.(15) A work of 'highbrow' literary production, *The*

Well of Loneliness, therefore, is dangerous precisely because it is 'good writing'. On the other hand, dismissed as trivial and inconsequential, the middlebrow novel appears to possess a remarkable capacity for the open and unpoliced depiction of 'other' sexualities and alternative domestic setups. For example, as Humble observes, the sexualised female protagonist 'becomes an increasingly stock figure in the feminine middlebrow during this period'.(16) One example of which is the enigmatic Hannah Mole, spinster-heroine of E.H. Young's Miss Mole (1930); a novel which is centred around Mole's attempts to secrete her sexual relationship with a dishonoured soldier, who currently resides in her 'four-roomed cottage washed in pale pink' (suggesting sexual illicitness though its fleshy colouring).(17) Indeed, the exposition of Mole's furtive liaison would both signal her expulsion from her current housekeeping position and devastate the Austenian marriage resolution on which the novel ends. Thus, it can be seen that women's middlebrow fiction often presents sexual experience outside of the heteronormative realm of the marriage bedroom as an increasingly routine part of female existence. However, because of the critical disregard for middlebrow literary culture, what are ultimately quite dissident fictions are able to pass unproblematically into the public arena, often entirely under the radar of censorship.

Indeed, it is exceedingly difficult to imagine such a comic and superficially frivolous novel as *Devoted Ladies* eliciting such a response as 'I would rather give a healthy boy or girl a vial of prussic acid than this novel' (James Douglas, on *The Well of Loneliness* again).(18) In an interview with Polly Delvin, the evidently heterosexual Keane explains how she came to author a novel with such a probing interest in female homosexuality:

I suppose I was rather curious and shocked by coming upon all that. Before that no one thought anything of two elderly ladies setting up house together. I'd certainly never heard a murmur. I was excited by finding out about lesbians and homosexuals. It was new. It made a subject. My interest went in spasms, there would be a sudden arousal of interest that took over, something new – like this – that would be the start of a new book.(19)

Although it is never possible to absolutely accept the author's words at face value, from this statement it at least certainly appears that Keane did not appear to have any specific ideological agenda in writing Devoted Ladies. In other words, the book is neither a manifesto supporting nor condemning homosexuality. Instead, lesbianism is simply a new subject matter to be explored by a writer already so adept in darkly humorous portrayals of human relationships. Thus, although, as Mary Breen contends, on one hand, 'Keane is unusual in presenting gay and lesbian desire as an integral part of a complex range of sexual possibilities' (20), it may also be argued that Keane's novel is part of a more generalised sweep within middlebrow literary culture, which treats lesbian relationships with what might perhaps be viewed as an unexpected degree of tolerance, examples aside from *Devoted Ladies* including E.F. Besnon's *Mapp* and Lucia series (1920-1939), Agatha Christie's A Murder is Announced (1950) and, as previously discussed, Lehmann's Dusty Answer.(21) Having stated, however, that Keane's novel does not overtly condemn homosexuality, the relationship between Jessica and Jane is by no means enabling, indeed, it is highly detrimental for both parties, but no more so than any heterosexual relationship within Keane's oeuvre. Moreover, the central relationship in Devoted Ladies is still governed by a heterocentric model of desire, consisting of the active, masculine lover and the passive feminine beloved.(22) Therefore, as Breen suggests, within the novel Keane parodies the butch/femme aesthetic of Jessica and Jane's relationship by exaggerating the two women into 'grotesque' (thus, I would add, Gothic) figures.(23) The ailing Jane, for example, slowly-but-surely dying from alcohol poisoning (if not from her lover's frequent maltreatment) is presented as almost ludicrously feminine and helpless. Not dissimilar to Charlotte Perkins Gilman's Gothic story 'The Yellow Wallpaper' (1892), the architectural space of the bedroom, within which Jane is practically imprisoned (much like the 'unwell' narrator of Gilman's story) is used in

order to confuse and conflate the identities of 'woman' and 'child'. For example, Jane's bedroom reads more like a nursery or playroom, as 'there was no height in Jane's bedroom. Everything squatted on the floor. The dressing table was about twelve inches high and the stool where Jane sat about to make up her face about six inches high'.(24) Moreover, just as the enraged Mrs. Danvers taunts the nameless heroine-narrator of what is arguably the most prominent example of middlebrow Gothic, Du Maurier's *Rebecca* (1938) – 'She's the real Mrs. de Winter, not you. It's you that's the shadow and the ghost' – the Gothic imagery of the ghost is employed in relationship to vulnerable and submissive femininity in *Devoted Ladies*.(25) This connection between 'weak' femininity and the ghostly is particularly evident when it is suggested that Jane's 'bones were no more than small enough to justify the theory that she was ghost like'.(26)

Another interesting physical detail Keane gives Jane is her, frequently mentioned, scar from the correction of a 'hare lip'; a scar which, although hardly repellent (indeed, in Jane's case it is makes her face 'fascinating' and 'complell[s] curiosity'(27)), technically still signifies a physical deformity. Moreover, deriving its name from its resemblance to the mouth of a hare or rabbit, Jane's scar, to some degree, destabilises boundaries between humanity and animalism. This may be considered an example of 'monstrosisation' because, as Jeffrey Jerome Cohen contends, monsters are 'disturbing hybrids whose externally incoherent bodies resist attempts to include them in any systematic structuration'.(28) However, if Jane is a defenceless and docile hare, the powerful and aggressive Jessica, in contrast, with 'lips curled back from her teeth like a dog, saliva their corners', is rather more of a predatory fox or wolf.(29) Moreover, Jessica possesses a marked *penchant* for violence, both towards others and herself, often relieving her temper by biting on the bath until her teeth bleed or cutting herself with fragments of ceramic; and thus, for much of the novel, is figured as 'a genuinely frightening figure from whom there can be no escape'.(30)

Keane's descriptions of Jessica, however, also corresponds to a more general trend in literature of the period in which the fashion for unfeminine bodies is mocked and satirised as 'paradoxically drawing attention to female physical attributes'.(31) In Jessica's case, the novel's narrator comically deflates her own masculine self-fashioning through comments such as, her 'dark hair was cut with a charming severity. If her dark face had been less heavy and turbulent in expression, Jessica would have almost succeeded in looking as hard and boyish as she hoped to look'.(32) Jessica also has a favoured exhortation of 'How rude!', which she employs in various scenarios throughout the novel. As Delvin suggests, 'the word "rude" is used throughout the book to denote shocking or *aberrant* emotion' (my emphasis).(33) Therefore, it might also be proposed, that, within the context of the novel, the term 'rude' moreover signifies what Julia Kristeva terms 'the abject'. As Barbara Creed elucidates:

Kristeva argues that the constitution of acceptable forms of subjectivity and sociality demands the expulsion of those things defined as improper and unclean. Whatever is expelled is constructed as an abject, that which 'disturbs identity, system, order' [...] A crucial aspect of the abject is, however, thats it can never fully be removed or set apart from the subject or society; the abject both threatens and beckons.(35)

Defined as that which threatens to disturb the established structures of heteronormative society, there is also a sense in which homosexuality is figured in terms of abjection. Indeed, as Palmer insists, representations of 'lesbian[s] in fiction and film as monstrous, and the relegation of [them] to the realm of the abject' are exceedingly commonplace.(36) Thus, it is not surprising that, although it may be her own choice catchphrase, it is Jessica herself, as the novel's most unswervingly homosexual character, that

'take[s] endless pains to be rude'(37); with the doubly-coded term working on the level of both Jessica's diction and a wider connotation implied by the author.

Furthermore, the relationship between the boisterous Jessica and the vulnerable Jane appears, I would argue, to be a lesbian re-configuration of the Gothic Romance; a genre that comes to be exemplified by Du Maurier's *Rebecca*. A particular variant of one of the most fundamental narratives (the 'romance plot') in the Gothic Romance, the second stage of the narrative – in which the hero and heroine become emotionally and/or physically distanced – is facilitated through the female protagonist's suspicion and/or discovery of the hero's capacity to harm her. In the case of Du Maurier's novel, this moment of facilitation is Maxim de Winter's confession to his new wife of the murder of his former bride: the titular Rebecca. It is not surprising, therefore, that Joanna Russ has both humorously and influentially stripped-back the Gothic Romance to the basic narrative formula of 'Somebody's trying to kill me and I think it's my husband' in her 1973 article of the same name.(38) Indeed, if we are to consider Jessica as fulfilling the masculine role in a masculine/feminine dichotomy then this transfiguration of the husband character from a 'protector' to an aggressive and dangerous masculine 'other' is precisely what we witness in the opening chapter of Keane's novel when Jessica unleashes 'fine torrents of abuse' at Jane, ultimately attacking her with a glass bottle:

'I can't bear to see her like that [...] half asleep - half drunk. It disgusts me. Why I'd rather see her dead I think.' And with this she picked up the bottle of Tonic Water and made menacing gestures with it across the room at Jane. Jane had just enough time to scream: 'Now Jessica, don't you throw that bottle at me' when Sylvester [...] saw the crash of broken glass and heard Jane scream: 'Oh – you're *horrible* to me,' as she bowed her bleeding head upon his divan.(39)

Although Gothic fiction is often associated with notions of excessiveness, particularly, as Fred Botting explains, an aesthetic excess characterised by 'an over-abundance of imaginative frenzy untamed by reason and unrestrained by [...] demands for simplicity'(40), I must also argue that excess is moreover a key comic strategy deployed by *Devoted Ladies* in parodying the Gothic mode. Jessica's assault of Jane is rendered highly amusing precisely because it is unprompted and needlessly violent. After all, she simply decides to attack Jane and does so without a second thought. Thus, whilst under different circumstances (that is, within a work of 'genuine' Gothic), this may well have been a terrifying scene of abuse, through its excessive and farcical dimensions Keane's novel engages the reader in a different emotional treaty to that of a horror narrative, promising humour and amusement rather than the trepidation and anxiety conventionally associated with the transfiguration of the husband figure into an 'uncanny', double site of both safety and hazard.

Furthermore, much like other middlebrow Gothic Parodies, such as Gibbons' Cold Comfort Farm, Ferguson's The Brontës Went to Woolworths (1931) and Smith's I Capture the Castle (1949), Devoted Ladies is an intriguingly metafictional novel. Indeed, Jane's escape from her exciting, but detrimental, 'lesbian Gothic Romance' is initiated by Jane's reading of the evocative images of the Irish countryside in Keane's own earlier novel, Young Entry (1928). Keane's book is sent to her by the man to whom she eventually gets engaged, George Playfair (pleasant, but dull, as his name suggests), in a job-lot of (entirely made-up) books, which, like Young Entry, possess oddly yet knowingly sexualised titles; titles such as, 'The Wanderings of William', 'Joan Whips-in' and 'The Girl who Gave' ('a masterpiece of suggestive tact', as Jessica describes it).(41) Thus, after much crying and pleading, Jane convinces Jessica to let them holiday in Ireland, where they end up staying at Kilque, family home of their friend Sylvester. Set against the sublimity of the Irish mountains, Keane's depiction of the crumbling and ruinous Kilque initially bears pronounced Gothic overtones. Although it is certainly true that, as Delvin

maintains, Keane's fictional houses 'are never safe places, never sanctuaries' (42), there is, however, a fundamental difference between Keane's portrayal of Kilque as opposed to more genuine apogees of the Irish Gothic tradition: a genre in which, instigated by a severe sentiment of culpability inherent to the Protestant Ascendancy, the ruined Irish manor house comes to symbolise centuries of political and colonial conflict.(43) As Rachael Jane Lynch observes of Keane, 'horrifying at times as her vision of [the] impotence and decay [of the Anglo-Irish Descendency] can be, she is unquestionably funny'.(44) Thus, any apparent Gothic inflection of Kilque as a property is entirely tempered by the excessive, farcical behavior of its inhabitants. Defusing that which is threatening by underscoring that which is absurd, the sharp, witty dialogue and excessive gestures of its characters uphold the novel's comic frame which the darker, more Gothic undercurrents of the text attempts (though never quite succeeds) to break. Kilque is therefore, in some sense, a house without history: that is, the house is in a ruinous state for no other reason apart from the fact that it is simply is! Bearing no references to Ireland's fraught history, the novel displays a distinctly laissez-faire attitude towards the 'trauma' of colonisation, which representations of the crumbling Irish mansion are usually thought to typify.(45) As Milada Frankova suggests, Keane's decaying Anglo-Irish households 'certainly [do] not carry the emotional load of some other Big House novels' (46), rather they are comic parodies of a more genuinely Gothic subject-matter.

Moreover, it is whilst at Kilque that Jessica and Jane's explicitly lesbian relationship comes to be paralleled by the peculiar friendship between Sylvester's cousin 'Piggy' (whose real name is Viola) and her married friend Joan. 'Piggy' (subsequently 'nasty Piggy', 'wretched Piggy', 'stupid Piggy')(47), as her cruel pet-name suggests, is overweight, unattractive and well of aware of herself as 'Alone, burningly alone, terribly apart and unwanted'.(48) Although it is not suggested that theirs is an explicitly lesbian relationship, such as Jessica and Jane's, Piggy and Joan's friendship is still imaged in sadomasochistic terms through Piggy's disproportional loyalty and devotion to the aloof, disinterested and, at times, strikingly malicious Joan. As such, Piggy allows herself to be repeatedly ill-treated and taken advantage of by her friend: 'such moments try love almost too highly, but Piggy's love has survived many and still endured'.(49) I would suggest the primary reason for such a deliberate paralleling of these two relationships, is that it is precisely through such mirroring that the rather distinctive sexual dichotomy of the novel is revealed. Indeed, within the novel the binary of sexual behaviour is not the expected one of heterosexuality/homosexuality, but rather the privileging of those who are involved in sexual relationships over those who are not. In Devoted Ladies, the only marginality to be feared is the exclusion from sexual activity, as to be in a relationship, whether with a man or a woman, is, indeed, to be a stable and coherent individual. In fact, part of the inherent Gothicism of Keane's writing is derived from the idea that, within her oeuvre, sexual attractiveness is tantamount to successful subject formation. Thus, to lack the ability to command sexual interest is to 'becom[e] a body which has no stable identity', which, as Rosemary Jackson insists, is a key anxiety articulated through the Gothic mode.(50) Moreover, as men, so the internal logic of Keane's novels decrees, are never sexually unattractive, it is only women who suffer from this malfunction in identity acquisition, and this is precisely where Keane's representation of sexuality intersects with notions of monstrosity. If sexual desirability is situated as the cornerstone of identity, then, as Breen comments, it is the undesirable single woman (rather than the homosexual per se) who 'is perceived as the true aberration, the freak of nature', or, in other words, the *monster*.(51)

Thus, in its malicious treatment of Jessica and Piggy, *Devoted Ladies* appears to engage with interwar debates surrounding spinsterhood and what *The Listener* described, three year's prior to the novel's publication, as the 'Present Crisis in Marriage'.(52) Indeed, marriage remains a contentious issue throughout the decade, for on one hand, as Martin Pugh asserts, the 1930s 'marked the start of a significant long-term trend towards marriage'(53), yet at the same time, sustained campaigning for more tolerant divorce laws resulted in A.P. Herbert's Matrimonial Causes Bill (1937); a bill which granted both

men and women the right to attain a divorce on the grounds of brutality, insanity or desertion. (54) Middlebrow responses to these issues are therefore equally divided, as on one hand there exists a general trend within the interwar middlebrow novel which sees the peculiar rise to power of the spinster. Examples include Christie's Miss Jane Marple, endowed with superior intellect and powers of observation that verge upon the uncanny; Young's aforementioned Hannah Mole, and the astoundingly capable Guinevere Pettigrew of Winifred Watson's modern fairytale Miss Pettigrew Lives for a Day (1938); the unmarried middle-aged woman becomes a strangely empowered figure in literature of the period. These characters categorically refuse the marginalisation indicated by their financial hardship and diminished social standing, ultimately 'ris[ing] above class, gender and indigence to control house and novel', as Briganti and Mezei have argued (my emphasis).(55) On the other hand, concurrent to this celebration of spinsterhood, there are those middlebrow novelists, such as Keane and Ferguson, whose response to the figure of the interwar spinster is rather more conservative, sporting a kind of spinster-baiting more indicative of Jane Austen. Ferguson's The Brontës Went to Woolworths, for example, is, as Patsy Stoneman suggests, marked with a pronounced 'fear [...] [of the Brontës] as spinsters ruled by erotic consumption'(56), in its dispelling of the nineteenth-century models of male-female relationships, represented by the Brontës as an almost grotesque fantasy. Similarly, in Devoted Ladies, single women are, as Breen insists, 'cruelly lampoon[ed] [...] and no corrective or consolatory moment is ever staged'.(57) Ultimately, the unmarried woman is set-up by Keane as a monstrous figure to be desperately avoided.

Unsurprisingly therefore, the climax of *Devoted Ladies* witnesses the destruction of these 'monsters' in a move to uphold the dominant ideologies set up within the novel. Having been excluded from the local hunt by the other characters, Jessica and Piggy arrive late and remain somewhat ostracised from the festivities. Then, having been insulted beyond repair by Joan on her arrival, Piggy transfers her subservience onto George and thus, when alone in the car with Piggy, Jessica reveals her intention to devastate the relationship between Jane and George by disclosing an account of Jane's lesbian past, a violent impulse is released in Piggy, who...

did not think. She only felt and knew. Her blind gift of serving where she loved cast out all fear. She put her foot down on the accelerator and the car leapt forward and dropped.(58)

Taking into account Keane's symbioticism between sex and identity, Piggy's physical act of deliberately crashing her car to kill herself and Jessica; the two figures ostracised by the sexual (or soon to be sexual) relationships that exclude them, can be seen as mirroring a more psychological process of the 'sickening dissent into disintegration' which Chris Baldick identifies as exemplifying the Gothic narrative.(59)

Ultimately, like all works of parodic Gothic, *Devoted Ladies* problamatises the boundaries between parody and 'genuineness' by locating itself 'on the unstable boundary between humour and horror and transgress[ing] it in both directions'.(60) Thus, Keane parodies established Gothic conventions – including the anthropomorphised house and landscape, the *doppelgänger* and female insanity – in order to achieve a supremely comic narrative. Moreover, the added advantage of the parodic-Gothic mode (compounded by its relegation to the status of 'middlebrow') is that that the novel is able to explore so-called 'transgressive' sexualities and alternative domestic arrangements without the risk of censure that might accompany a realist method, as in the case of *The Well of Loneliness*. However, although, in an almost canavalesque inversion of values, *Devoted Ladies* positively delights in the glorification of the 'rude' ('I hope you have something really rude and unkind to tell me, darling', as Jessica implores(61)), ultimately it is a moderately conservative narrative which sees a complete 'clamping down' on transgression and, through Piggy and Jessica's deaths, the restoration of (herteronormative) order and

harmony to the house of Kilque. Thus, Keane's processes of monstrosisation, resulting in the loss of bodily and psychological integrity, is a genuinely frightening undercurrent of the novel. Continually threatening to interrupt the narrative's light-hearted and comic framing, in some sense this 'darker' facet of Keane's novel replicates what David Punter considers to be the paranoid structure of the Gothic narrative: that Gothic novels are works of 'paranoiac fiction [...] [in which] readers are placed in a situation of ambiguity with regards to the fears of the text'.(62) Whilst, for once, homosexual and bisexual characters, such as Jane and her (and Jessica's) valet, Albert, may have escaped the Gothic prism unscathed, unwanted and sexually marginalised spinsters such as Piggy and Jessica (regardless of her sexuality) are not so lucky. Their deaths are described in the stylistic detachment of the narrative voice, with a characteristic coolness and indifference that is truly horrifying, particularly for the reader who happens to coincide with the object of Keane's attack. What's more, if we are to accept the intended audience of the middlebrow novel as middle-class, middle-aged women, this object of attack may indeed have been a frighteningly large proportion of her own readership.

- 1. See, Ken Plummer, *Telling Sexual Stories: Power, Change and Social Worlds* (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 81-96.
- 2. Paulina Palmer, Lesbian Gothic: Transgressive Fictions (London: Continuum, 1999), p. 11.
- 3. Elaine Showalter's homoerotic interpretation of Stevenson's text, for example, is predominantly based on a complete mis-reading of an 1885 painting of Stevenson and his wife by John Singer Sargent in which Showlater maintains that what is clearly a front hallway with a visible staircase and front door is a 'closet' which Stevenson appears to be walking out from. She also invests words from Stevenson's texts with dubious sexual significances, such as 'chocolate-brown fog' and 'back-end of the evening' both referring to anal sex, which, with no further evidence, I would insist, is a poor stretch at best. See, Elaine Showlater, *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin-de-siècle* (London: Bloomsbury, 1992), pp. 105-126.
- 4. Polly Delvin, 'Introduction', in Molly Keane, *Devoted Ladies* (1934; London: Virago, 2007), p. xi.
- 5. This notion of the similarly named Jessica and Jane as *doppelgängers*, rather than as independent subjectivities, is one certainly emphasised by the delightful, yet highly anachronistic, cover art to Virago's latest (2007) edition of the novel, in which the figures representing Jessica and Jane are almost identical mirror images save for minor changes in hairstyle, jewelry and costume.
- 6. A note is perhaps required on the way in which I have employed the term 'middlebrow' throughout this article. 'Middlebrow' is a disparaging phrase developed in the 1920s as a neologism formed in relation to the more historically and culturally established term, 'highbrow', and used to delineate popular fictions of the early twentieth-century that are deemed suitable for a reader of 'middle-bred' intelligence from the 'intellectual' works of literary Modernism. Thus, as opposed to the works of early twentieth century writers such as James Joyce and Virginia Woolf, middlebrow fiction is often charaterised by traditionally linear narrative structures and a lack of formal experimentation. Indeed, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, middlebrow fiction only demands from the reader 'a moderate degree of intellectual application, typically as a result of *not deviating from convention*' (my emphasis). Nicola Humble therefore argues that, as such, middlebrow fiction often performs a dexterous balancing act 'between the low pleasures of romance and simple narrative fulfillment and more elaborate intellectual satisfactions'. Nicola Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel 1920s to 1950s: Class, Domesticity and Bohemianism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 11.
- 7. Indeed, the first of these three later publications, *Good Behaviour* (1981), was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize (then the Booker-McConnell Prize) of that year, thereby emphasizing its perceived 'literary' merit.
- 8. Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik, 'Comic Gothic', in David Punter, ed., *A Companion to the Gothic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), p. 252. My use of the term 'Gothic Parody' therefore loosely corresponds to what Horner and Sloznik refer to as 'Comic Gothic'. Whilst I am in absolute agreement with Horner and Zlosnik's definition of the features which differentiate 'comic' (parodic) from 'serious' (genuine) Gothic, in light of Linda Hutcheon's theory of parody, my preferred term for this type of text is still 'Gothic Parody'. Hutcheon's argument is that parody, as opposed to comedy or satire, is specifically directed at literary or linguistic targets 'coded forms of discourse, literary genres or particular texts', which, in the case of the novel under examination, would include Gothic Romance novels such as Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca* (1938), as well as more general Gothic tropes such as the 'mad', Gothic lesbian. See Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody: Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms* (Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2000), pp. 43-45.
- 9. These include David Punter, *The Literature of Terror: A History of Gothic Fictions from 1765 to the Present Day* (London: Longman, 1980), Fred Botting, *Gothic* (Oxon: Routledge, 2007), and Catherine Spooner, 'Gothic in the Twentieth Century' in Catherine Spooner and Emma McEvoy, ed., *The Routledge Companion to Gothic* (Oxon: Routledge, 2007), pp. 38-47.

- 10. Chiara Briganti and Kathy Mezei, *Domestic Modernism, the Interwar Novel, and E.H. Young* (Hampshire: Ashgate, 2006), p. 21.
- 11. Nicola Humble, 'The Queer Pleasures of Reading: Camp and the Middlebrow', *Working Papers on the Web* 11 (July 2007) http://extra.shu.ac.uk/wpw/middlebrow/Humble.html > accessed 02 March 2010.
- 12. Esther Saxey, 'Introduction', in Radclyffe Hall, *The Well of Loneliness* (1928; Hertfordshire: Wordsworth, 2005), p. xxiv.
- 13. Rosamund Lehmann, Dusty Answer (1927; London: Virago, 2006), p. 158.
- 14. See, Humble, The Feminine Middlebrow Novel 1920s to 1950s, p. 213.
- 15. James Douglas, 'A Book That Must Be Suppressed', *Sunday Express* (August 19, 1928) reprinted in Laura Doan and Jay Prosser (eds), *Palatable Poison: Critical Perspectives on The Well of Loneliness* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), pp. 37-38.
- 16. Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel*, p. 227; Humble's own examples of this figure includes Harriet Vane of Dorothy L. Sayers' 'Lord Peter Wimsey' series and Laura from E.M. Delafield's *Diary of a Provincial Lady* (1930).
- 17. E.H. Young, *Miss Mole* (1930; London: Virago, 1989), p. 263.
- 18. Douglas, 'A Book That Must Be Suppressed', *Palatable Poison*, p. 38.
- 19. Molly Keane, qtd in, Mary Breen, 'Piggies and Spoilers of Girls: The Representation of Sexuality in the Novels of Molly Keane', in Eibhear Walshe, ed., *Sex, Nation and Dissent in Irish Writing* (Cork, Ireland: Cork University Press, 1997), p. 213.
- 20. Ibid., p. 207.
- 21. See, Humble, The Feminine Middlebrow Novel, p. 234
- 22. For a fuller account see, Catherine Belsey, *Desire: Love Stories in Western Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), pp. 21-23.
- 23. Breen, 'Piggies and Spoilers of Girls', Sex, Nation and Dissent in Irish Writing, p. 214.
- 24. Keane, Devoted Ladies, p. 30.
- 25. Daphne du Maurier, Rebecca (1938; London: Virago, 2007), p. 275.
- 26. Keane, Devoted Ladies, p. 3.
- 27. Ibid.
- 28. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, 'Monster Culture (Seven Theses)', in Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, ed., *Monster Theory: Reading Culture* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), p. 6.
- 29. Keane, *Devoted Ladies*, p. 4.The hare/fox metaphor, which I have derived from Keane's animalistic imagery throughout the novel, seems particularly appropriate, as the second half of the novel, in-keeping with many more of Keane's early work, is primarily a hunting romance.
- 30. Delvin, 'Introduction', Devoted Ladies, p. x.
- 31. Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel*, p. 205.
- 32. Keane, Devoted Ladies, p. 31.
- 33. Devlin, 'Introduction', Devoted Ladies, p. v
- 34. For an intriguing analysis of the significance of processes of abjection in the Molly Keane's last three novels, *Good Behavior* (1981), *Time After Time* (1983), and *Loving and Giving* (1988), see, Ellen L. O'Brien, 'Anglo-Irish Abjection in the "very nasty" Big House Novels of Molly Keane', *Literature, Interpretation, Theory* 10, 1 (1999), pp. 35-62.
- 35. Barbara Creed, 'Dark Desires: Male Masochism in the Horror Film', in Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark, eds, *Screening the Male: Exploring Masculinities in Hollywood Cinema* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 121.
- 36. Palmer, Lesbian Gothic, p. 14.
- 37. Keane, Devoted Ladies, p. 5.
- 38. Joanna Russ, 'Somebody's Trying to Kill Me and I Think It's My Husband: The Modern Gothic', *Journal of Popular Culture* 6, 4 (1973), p. 666.

- 39. Keane, Devoted Ladies, p. 10.
- 40. Botting, Gothic, p. 3.
- 41. Keane, Devoted Ladies, p. 57.
- 42. Delvin, 'Introduction', Devoted Ladies, p. xi.
- 43. For further discussion of the use of Gothic conventions as a means of responding to Anglo-Irish occupation and the negotiation of waning social and economic power structures see, 'Chapter 4: Ascendency Guilt in the Anglo-Irish Gothic Novel' in Vera Kreilkamp, *The Anglo-Irish Novel and the Big House* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1998), pp. 96-111.
- 44. Rachael Jane Lynch, 'The Crumbling Fortress: Molly Keane's Comedies of Anglo-Irish Manners' in Theresa O'Connor, ed., *The Comic Tradition in Irish Women Writers* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 1996), p. 73.
- 45. Indeed, Margot Gayle Backus suggests that Keane's later novel *Two Days in Aragon* (1941), which very much deals with the devastating and traumatic legacy of England's colonisation of Ireland, may have been written as a sort of 'atonement' for her nonchalant attitude towards Irish history in earlier novels, such as *Devoted Ladies*. See, Margot Gayle Backus, *The Gothic Family Romance: Heterosexuality, Child Sacrifice, and the Anglo-Irish Colonial Order* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), p. 195.
- 46. Milada Frankova, 'Molly Keane's Black Comedy: A Critique of Class', *BRNO Studies in English* 23 (1997), p. 104.
- 47. Keane, Devoted Ladies, pp, 170, 181, 241.
- 48. Keane, *Devoted Ladies*, p. 153. This is also, of course, another striking example of the collapse of the human/animal binary already discussed in relationship to Jessica and Jane.
- 49. Ibid., p. 197-98.
- 50. Rosemary Jackson, Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion (London: Routledge, 1998), p. 143
- 51. Breen, 'Piggies and Spoilers of Girls', Sex, Nation and Dissent in Irish Writing, p. 209. In this sense, Shirley Jackson's 1959 novel The Haunting of Hill House bears a striking resemblance to Devoted Ladies, in that it is the lonely, isolated and unloved Eleanor that the titular house chooses to torment, ultimately driving her to suicide (in the very same manner that Piggy kills herself and Jessica) rather than the novel's noticeably lesbian character, Theodora. Indeed, Robert Wise's 1963 film adaptation, The Haunting, is particularly noted in Gay and Lesbian studies for this very reason: that is one of, if not the, earliest film in which the transgressive, aberrant, homosexual character lives on, whilst the normative, dutiful, heterosexual character dies in their place. For a fuller analysis of Jackson's novel see, George E. Haggerty, Queer Gothic (Chicago IL: University of Illinois Press, 2006), pp. 131-150.
- 52. Patsy Stoneman, 'Jane Eyre in Later Lives: Intertextual Strategies in Women's Self-Definition', in Lynne Pearce and Gina Wisker, eds, *Fatal Attractions: Rescripting the Romance in Contemporary Literature and Film* (London: Pluto Press, 1998), pp.42-43.
- 53. Martin Pugh, Women and the Women's Movement in Britain: 1914-1959 (London: Macmillan, 1992), p. 222.
- 54. See, Diana Wallace, 'Revising the Marriage Plot in Women's Fiction of the 1930s' in Maroula Joannou (ed.), *Women Writers of the 1930s: Gender, Politics and History* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), p. 64.
- 55. Briganti and Mezei, Domestic Modernism, p. 102.
- 56. Stoneman, 'Jane Eyre in Later Lives', Fatal Attractions, p. 43.
- 57. Breen, 'Piggies and Spoilers of Girls', Sex, Nation and Dissent in Irish Writing, p. 209.
- 58. Keane, Devoted Ladies, p. 242.
- 59. Chris Baldick, 'Introduction', in Chris Baldick, ed., *The Oxford Book of Gothic Tales* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. xix.

- 60. Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik, *Gothic and the Comic Turn* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 165.
- 61. Keane, Devoted Ladies, p. 6.
- 62. Punter, The Literature of Terror, p. 404.

BOOK REVIEWS

Jeffrey Weinstock, Scare Tactics: Supernatural Fiction by American Women (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008)

"I am secretly afraid of animals — of all animals except dogs, and even of some dogs," Edith Wharton confided to her diary in the mid-1920s. "I think it is because of the Usness in their eyes, with the underlying *Not-Usness* which belies it, and is so tragic a reminder of the lost age when we human beings branched off and left them; left them to eternal inarticulateness and slavery. *Why?* their eyes seem to ask us" (Lee, *Edith Wharton*, 2007, p. 741]. A quintet of ghostly dogs appears in Wharton's 1916 short story "Kerfol," connecting its worldly twentieth-century narrator to a three-hundred-year old tragedy. These "uncomfortable beasts," as the narrator calls them, were once the lady of the manor's pets. Suspecting her of infidelity, her husband destroys them one by one, leaving strangled pooches on the poor woman's pillow as a lover might leave roses. After he dies in suspicious circumstances, his wife is tried for murder and secluded for life; her secret admirer joins a Jansenist house in Paris where, as the narrator rather callously reflects, "he must have talked with Pascal." By contrast, the cruelty and confinement suffered by the heroine — a fate hardly better than that of her pets — offers no grounds for scintillating repartee.

Wharton's link between inarticulacy and enslavement, or at least victimhood, was a lesson hard-learned by successive generations of American heroines, with the narrator of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892) not least among them. Yet Wharton was also conscious that articulacy, however glib, is more appealing than the silent witness offered by "uncomfortable beasts": those imaginary chats with Pascal are somehow more memorable for "Kerfol"'s narrator than any archival records of the emotional and legal persecution of a woman. Hence, from before the Civil War to the present day, a "d--d mob of scribbling women" have exerted their ingenuity to recapture American literature for women writers and readers (one wonders if Nathaniel Hawthorne would have allowed himself such careless vituperation had he known how jealously future feminist critics would treasure his phrase). The fact that so many talented female voices of this period remain unheard, despite reprints by modern editors like Jessica Salmonson or Alan Ryan, sadly vindicates the indifference of Wharton's narrator. Jeffrey Weinstock's Scare Tactics: Supernatural Fiction by American Women is part of a determined effort by modern critics to embed American Female Gothic writing in the nineteenth-century canon. Weinstock is best known to historians of the national ghost as editor of Spectral America: Phantoms and the National Imagination (2004), a vibrant essay collection which investigates ghosts as markers of "untold stories" within modern culture (my favourite article, by Mary Findley, casts Stephen King's haunted automobiles as indicators of "the contemporary American fear of spiritual loss in the face of technological advancement" ('Stephen King's Vintage Ghost-Cars: A Modern-Day Haunting', p. 207)).

Scare Tactics is neither an original nor an isolated project: Lynette Carpenter and Wendy Kolmar (Haunting the House of Fiction: Feminist Perspectives on Ghost Stories by American Women, 1991) sketched the need for this type of analysis of American Female Gothic and even predicted its thematic strands: domesticity, maternity, misogyny. Most of the texts selected by Weinstock already have a critical history, such as Harriet Prescott Spofford's mid-century Gothic novel Sir Rohan's Ghost (1860) and most of the fictions by so-called Local Color writers (such as Sarah Orne Jewett). Nonetheless, Weinstock deals ably and fairly with an over-abundance of precursors, weaving nimbly between the godmother of American Female Gothic, Ellen Moers, and recent scholarship such as Diane Hoeveler's Gothic feminism

and Terry Castle's *Female Thermometer*, while citing a number of – frustratingly – still-unpublished dissertations on individual writers. I have rarely read a clearer summation of Female Gothic criticism than Weinstock's introduction on "The Unacknowledged Tradition." Pledging to evade pat conclusions, such as the "compelling equation" that "woman equals ghost" (16), Weinstock generally favours textual analysis over theory, at the risk of involving himself in detailed plot summaries. Chapters 4 and 5, which do privilege theory ("Familial Ghosts" and "Ghosts of Desire"), are the weakest by far. The latter revisits the faultline between lesbianism and romantic friendship (which, for too many critics, is predicated on numeric analysis of iterations of the word "queer") in the nineteenth century, while 'Familial Ghosts' seems to confirm the very feminist truism this study originally sought to avoid – that ghosts signal the disempowerment of women. Such redundancies are better inferred than stated, or – to reference yet another Wharton spectre – not realised at all, until afterward.

At its best, however, Scare Tactics revisits writers we need to read – if only for the pleasure of their ubiquitous and resonant triple names (so redolent of Washington Square privilege, even if some of these women lived precariously off fees from monthly magazines and occasional journalism): Sarah Orne Jewett, Harriet Prescott Spofford, Georgia Wood Pangborn (mother of Edgar Pangborn), Mary Heaton Vorse, and many more. My favourite is Josephine Daskam Bacon, fondly remembered for her sinister medico, Dr Stanchon, an eminent Philadelphia alienist, who features in the collection The Strange Cases of Doctor Stanchon (1913). Weinstock's six chapters draw on this and similar material to examine (respectively) violence, domesticity, affection, maternity, socio-economic pressures and intertextuality. He mingles obscure and semi-obscure authors with the Stowes, Whartons, and Gilmans, and with a social adroitness that would have done him credit in a fin-de-siècle Boston parlour. The opening chapter, "The Ghost in the Parlour," explores the supernatural as a response to cruelty, rape or violence. He identifies Spofford's Sir Rohan's Ghost (1860) not only as a clever Gothic pastiche, but as an exercise in narrative subtlety: Sir Rohan is revealed as the villain of the piece only after he has won the reader's sympathy, and the heroine is left without a viable hero to weep on. Equally disturbing are Harriet Beecher Stowe's little-known "The Ghost in the Cap'n Brown House" (1872), the story of an old sea salt who may or may not have immured a woman in his home; and Anna M. Hoyt's "The Ghost of Little Jacques" (1863), in which a wife reluctantly abets her son's murder.

In the same chapter, Weinstock offers a searching and intelligent analysis of "Kerfol," although he misses the chance to note that, although the heroine is generally objectified by her spouse and family, her husband does acknowledge her sentience in the cruellest way – by unerringly killing everything she loves. Weinstock argues that the mute ghosts mustered in these stories collectively demand "a reordered social structure that affords autonomous personhood to women" (55). Less dramatically, Chapter 2, "Queer Haunting Spaces," investigates the dangers of domestic interiors, while Chapter 3, "Ghosts of Progress," intriguingly investigates the consequences of mid-century urbanisation and industrialisation for female authors and subjects. "Ghostly Returns," the final chapter, takes on the intertextuality between Male and Female American Gothic, discussing Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 1891 "The Giant Wisteria" (which Weinstock intriguingly describes as *The Scarlet Letter* with a darker outcome) and Gertrude Atherton's overtly Jamesian "The Bell in the Fog" (1905) as both homage to and parody of Henry James. Overall, Weinstock convincingly shows how quotidian female anxieties – domestic, maternal, sexual and social – re-emerge in print as supernatural fables.

To his credit, Weinstock never venerates a text beyond its due simply because of its rarity: he is fully aware that many of these writers, often highly prolific, wrote rather from economic necessity than skill. As Louisa May Alcott confessed in advance of writing her early and now obscure ghostboilers, "I intend to illuminate the Ledger with a blood & thunder tale as they are easy to 'compoze' & are better paid than

moral and elaborate works of Shakespeare" (Louisa May Alcott, letter of 1862). But the hardship which inspired many of these tales – and informed their narratives – does not preclude the rediscovery of some real delights. Madeleine Yale Wynne's "The Little Room" (1895), the story of a room in a Vermont farmhouse perceptible to women but not to men – nor, in a particularly acerbic touch, to women accompanied by men – which gave its name to a Bohemian writers' club, is one such gem revisited by Weinstock.

While Weinstock defines American Female Gothic on the basis of shared themes with its European equivalent - oppression, sexual violence, imprisonment, and their domestic analogues - he avoids contrasting works by his American subjects with those of their direct contemporaries across the pond. It would be fascinating to compare Margaret Oliphant with the equally prolific Spofford or Pangborn, or to weigh Cynthia Asquith against Edith Wharton (a social acquaintance), considering not just shared themes, but the shared pressures that defined and limited their careers. Scare Tactics is both engaging and meticulously organised, but it polices itself too efficiently. Those few bald statements Weinstock allows himself, such as "Either explicitly or implicitly, ghost stories are always about violence" (p.105), invite demur: there are plenty of peaceable ghosts in the ether, and not every ghost story inevitably rewrites F. Marion Crawford's The Screaming Skull. Indeed, Crawford's 1911 tale (told by a male narrator) of misogyny, uxoricide and female revenge reminds us that it was not only the women of this period who wrote Female Gothic. Men were (and continue to be) equally haunted by the spectres of gender. Is it perhaps, ultimately, specious to define any genre by its authors' sex, rather than their theme? Surely an over-exclusive focus on women authors risks isolating them from male peers, mentors and rivals (a risk Weinstock only partially addresses in his chapter on intertextuality), and hurts the significance of feminist criticism in the long term? I would welcome a revised and expanded version of Scare Tactics that explores how both male and female writers visualised the terrors and tremors of nineteenth-century womanhood. Women writers are uncomfortable beasts, but so are the males of the species.

MUIREANN MAGUIRE

Mary Y. Hallab, Vampire God: The Allure of the Undead in Western Culture (New York: SUNY, 2009)

Vampire God aims to explore the persistent presence of the vampire in western culture, tracing the trajectory of the vampire from its origins in "early Greek and Slavic folklore" to its ubiquitous, alluring presence in "present-day popular culture." The vampire is at once a thing of fascination and of fear, and Hallab analyses the ways in which vampire literature provides society with a means of working through these fears and fascinations. For Hallab, the vampire ultimately becomes a kind of deity, a lord of the underworld who simultaneously embodies our projected desires for resurrection and rebirth. The central, underlying question of this text is why vampires are so popular and Hallab, more than anything, seeks to find answers for this question and to account for western society's growing obsession with vampires. Rather than tracing the history and development of vampire literature chronologically, Hallab arranges her work thematically. The text is divided into four sections exploring the different functions vampires fulfil in western culture – scientific, in which the vampire myth may provide a primitive explanation for illness; social, in which the vampire represents an ancestor or a living representative of history; psychological, whereby the vampire is seen to externalise the problems of life and death, universal human fear of death and the desire for eternal life; and finally religious, wherein the vampire is considered as a supernatural being whose violence and powers of resurrection bring it close to both demonic and deific states. A fifth chapter discusses vampires in the Christian tradition in the twentieth century where the demon/deity dualism is examined more closely. Hallab's final chapter discusses the role of the sublime in vampire literature and considers what vampire myths, ancient and modern, "imply about the meaning of death and universal order."

There are some small problems with this book. There are inconsistencies in format – for example, book titles are not always or consistently followed by publication dates, which can make it difficult to appraise the relationship between two texts under comparison. The "wry humour" promised by the blurb manifests itself only as parenthetical comments in casual slang which detract from the academic style which Hallab seems to be straining for, and which quickly become tedious.

However, these small flaws are overshadowed by the major problems which litter this book. Though it purports to be a critical overview of the representation of vampires in modern literature, Hallab's analysis depends heavily on a mere handful of texts. Essentially, Hallab critiques Bram Stoker's *Dracula* – and its various film versions – *Varney the Vampire*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and a small selection of Anne Rice's novels. A quick glance at the index reveals the astounding bias in favour of these texts. Some modern and popular texts are hardly dealt with at all; the graphic novel and film *Blade* merits one solitary reference, while Stephanie Meyer's phenomenally popular *Twilight* series gets four scant lines (in which the series is treated as a homogenous whole). Some influential authors, such as Angela Carter, are omitted and, even more unforgivably, whole genres and sub-genres are left out of Hallab's analysis. Children's fiction, such as Marcus Sedgwick's *My Swordhand is Singing*, and crossover texts such as L.J. Smith's *The Vampire Diaries* (now a major TV show) and Mary Janice Davidson's *Undead and Unwed* series are completely absent. Even Charlaine Harris's phenomenally successful *True Blood* books and TV series are ignored. These omissions prevent Hallab's book from becoming an up-to-date reference guide to vampire literature, and also prevent it from fulfilling its potential as a truly comprehensive overview of the history and development of the vampire myth in western culture.

Moreover, the research underlying the book is deeply flawed. The blurb declares the book to be "thoroughly researched" and if that is the case then it is a great pity that such research is never evident in

the finished product. Firstly, the research underpinning this book is out of date. The vast majority of critical texts quoted or referenced by Hallab were published in the last century. In the fifteen-page bibliography, only thirteen of the references are to non-fiction or critical works published in the twenty-first century. That, perhaps, would not be an issue if we were witnessing a sudden or unprecedented revival of interest in vampires in literature, but Hallab assures us that the vampire is a "constant presence" [1] in western culture. Indeed, the vampire is also a constant presence in academic studies of Gothic and horror fiction and it is jarring to see that such a recently published work contains in its opening chapter only one reference to a study published in the last ten years. Overall, the impression is that Hallab completed this book some time ago and it has been dredged up for publication on the strength of the recent "rise" in vampire criticism.

Furthermore, there is a distinct lack of original research here. Much of the thesis of this book is based around the folkloric origins of the vampire myth but while Hallab quotes and references various anthropologists, she does not deign to find out anything new. There are no interviews, no newspaper reports, and no exclusive surveys of superstitions or beliefs – nothing to suggest that Hallab ever questioned the findings of anthropologists (whose work dates from the middle of the twentieth century). Most worryingly, Hallab does not distinguish between different folkloric traditions, treating Slavic traditions and Greek customs in the same paragraph, as though "folklore" is homogenous and ubiquitous. Hallab frequently refers to "folk cultures," assuming that folklore can only persist in isolation from modern civilisation. It is clear from this that Hallab sees herself as writing from the centre of the modern world. Folklore and folk-culture are something strange and esoteric that happens "out there" in the wilds of a barely-civilised Europe. America, the apex of reason and logic, has moved away from folklore to a much more sensible thing called "popular culture". Her work is founded on this stark binary and she even calls attention to it in her introduction, saying "I prefer to take the approach that most people – peasants and scholars – pretty much know what they think and believe" [5]. Thus, Hallab's world is neatly divided: superstitious folkloric peasants on the one hand and clear-thinking, wise-cracking scholars on the other.

Perhaps we can forgive Hallab for not spending years interviewing "peasants" but we cannot forgive her for not reading the books she claims to analyse. Hallab writes of "mindless zombie-vampires" and cites Frank Norris's "Grettir at Thorhall's Stead" as a text containing such an example. However, Frank Norris did not write *Grettir at Thorhall's Stead*. He adapted it from the Old Norse translations of William Morris. Perhaps, if Hallab had bothered to read Morris' translations rather than the much shortened and bowdlerised form which appears in *The Vampire Omnibus* [1995], she might have found in the Grettir's saga some of the authentic "folkloric" evidence for belief in the undead that her book desperately lacks. I say "undead" because Glam who appears in the Grettir saga is not a "zombie-vampire" but a draugr, a very different fish. He does not drink blood, nor is he infected in any way. Neither is Glam mindless; when Grettir, the hero of the saga finally defeats him, Glam still has the awareness and the linguistic control to curse Grettir to see horrors in the dark which will "drag [him] unto death."

Rather than adding to the recent critical movement, Hallab's dated, flimsy, unoriginal work weakens the academic position of Gothic literature. If this is scholarship, I'd rather be a peasant.

JANE CARROLL

Ian Conrich, ed., *Horror Zone: The Cultural Experience of Contemporary Horror Cinema* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2010)

Horror is often studied under a psychoanalytic or a historicist lens. This is perhaps why *Horror Zone: The Cultural Experience of Contemporary Horror Cinema* (2010) feels like such a fresh take on a genre that only recently has started to receive the critical attention it deserves. Taking an approach closer to cultural materialism, this collection offers a variegated range of articles on contemporary horror and focuses on the socio-cultural aspects of what editor Ian Conrich calls a "definitive return within the contemporary form to its modern origins and to the classics of the horror new wave of the 1970s and the 1980s" (1). He acknowledges, as does the collection itself, the impressive number of remakes in recent years that do not necessarily hark back to the early Universal blockbusters (*The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* [2003] or *The Hills Have Eyes* [2006], among many others) and that have helped develop a new horrific mythology for the X and Z generations. Superseding an exhaustive scholarship that has favoured, for instance, Hammer productions, this collection puts special emphasis on particularly neglected areas of study like the role of special effects, the impact of the digital age, theories on audiences, or the relevance of an aesthetics of mutilation. Thus *Horror Zone* analyses the current state of horror and its importance as a particularly contemporary phenomenon whilst considering its many eclectic para-sites.

The first section, "Industry, Technology and the New Media," argues for the difficulty of considering contemporary horror as an isolated phenomenon. Much like the Gothic tradition, from which it has often been seen as originating, horror has fragmented and impregnated contemporary culture; horror is no longer a constrained filmic collection consigned to generic viewing, but rather an influential experience to be acknowledged at different cultural sublevels. Simultaneously, in a time when cinema is driven by a capitalist ethos, the simulated horrific experience needs to be rendered marketable and capable of being consumed over a range of different media. This necessarily expands the concept of a "horrific product," and indeed the experience of horror itself, into new uncharted territories. Drawing on Steffen Hantke's argument that horror should not be understood but rather felt, Angela Ndalianis's article, "Dark Rides, Hybrid Machines and the Horror Experience," establishes an affective link between the general notion of horror as a bodily lived-in experience and the experience created by horror-themed rides like *The Revenge of the Mummy*. Ndaliani explains this particular case as an example of hybridity where filmic and sensorial horror might come together productively, thus paving the way for further study in the field.

In the same section, Stacey Abbot's "High Concept Thrills and Chills: The Horror Blockbuster" considers the rise of neo-Gothic narratives, comic-based adaptations, and sequels, all of which she understands as a reaction to the success of the "arty-slasher" (29), especially in the wake of *The Silence of the Lambs*. A detailed discussion of the filmic successes and failures of the post-1990s period allows for a nuanced reading of contemporary horror that leads Abbot to conclude that these years may have been formative in encouraging the mainstream to embrace the genre. In "Bringing It All Back Home: Horror Cinema and Video Culture," Linda Badley contends that domestic consumption of horror films has intrinsically changed their creation and distribution. Through a very well-argued look at direct-to-video releases, "auteriusm" and successful horror films shot with small budgets like *The Blair Witch Project* or *The Last Broadcast*, Badley suggests that these phenomena may be contributing to a democratisation of taste, but also, and simultaneously, to the increasing representation of the "horror of video" (57) itself by revealing anxieties surrounding surveillance and voyeurism. If nothing else, these three articles problematise the activity of watching horror by pluralising the experience in terms of context, distribution and production.

This discursive approach is further expanded in the second part of this collection. "Audiences, Fans and Consumption" further pushes commonly-held beliefs of the genre and its audience by analysing them in a contemporary context. The section opens with an abridged version of the influential essay "Trashing the Academy': Taste, Excess and an Emerging Politics of Cinematic Style" by Jeffrey Sconce. Originally published in 1995, this article explores the cultural relevance of what its author terms "paracinema," which is "less a distinct group of films than a particular reading protocol, a counter-aesthetic turned subcultural sensibility devoted to all manner of cultural detritus" (104). Seeking partly to legitimise films like *The Corpse Grinders* or 2000 Maniacs, the value of which is very much contested or even denied, Sconce argues for their potential subversive qualities. Similarly, Matt Hills carries on the legacy of his work on Fan Cultures (2002) in his article "Attending Horror Film Festivals and Conventions: Liveness, Subcultural Capital and 'Flesh-and-Blood Genre Communities," where he argues, following Bourdieu, for the importance of the subcultural value added to the experience of "being" in horror festivals and how this might contribute towards establishing an elite status within the community. Festivals like "right Fest" put into relevance the existence of a "body" of fans with its own internal workings, and how these tend to function around access to material that is not generally available for immediate mass consumption.

These fans also preoccupy horror critic Brigid Cherry in "Stalking the Web: Celebration, Chat and Horror Film Marketing on the Internet." This article considers the impact that horror fans and their on-line practices have upon marketing success, but also demystifies customary notions of horror fandom as uncritical and uninformed, demonstrating that this section of the public can also be highly educated and discriminatory in their tastes. If suffering from a lack of immediate relevance (some of the examples in this section are from 2003), this section still manages to bring together the particular overarching preoccupation of this volume: that horror is a genre that cannot be easily defined or pinned down, and that its audiences are as complicated as the thought processes that go beyond the films.

Naturally following this much-needed examination of aspects largely neglected by scholarship, comes a section on those even more overlooked elements of the horror genre; manufacture and design. Part Three, comprises two articles on overlooked cinematic elements - mainly special effects and set designs - and two loosely related articles on the ascent of "art horror" and *The Friday the 13th* series. "They're Here!: Special Effects in Horror Cinema of the 1970s and 1980s," by Ernest Mathijs, builds on the work of directors like Tom Savini or publications like Fangoria to prove that these practical considerations not only constitute an important discursive site, but can even become the main premise around which the horror film itself is created. In a similar vein, Tamao Nakahara's "Making Up Monsters: Set and Costume Design in Horror Films" paints an interesting picture of the relevance of the mise-en-scene to the construction of the film. Nakahara argues that the reason why such elements pass unacknowledged is precisely because if they are to serve their artistic purpose, then they should become as intrinsic to the filmic intradiegesis as to be unnoticeable. Violence and its re-enactment in the form of sites of cultural resistance is the main topic of Joan Hawkins article "Culture Wars: Some New Trends in Art Horror," in which she considers new subgenres like the New French Extremity or films like the Saw series, and explains that dislikes for such cultural products might not necessarily stem from their use of exploitative techniques and gore, but rather from their "lack of a consistent humanistic tone" (133). As an interesting juxtaposition, Ian Conrich's "The Friday the 13th Films and the Cultural Function of a Modern Grand Guignol" reads our on-going cultural fascination with this "slasher" series and its depiction of murder as revealing the dynamics of what he understands as a contemporary theatre of cruelty. If this section is particularly illuminating, it is also somewhat loose in its critical objectives, and perhaps too diverse for a productive sustained analysis.

Similarly, Part Four is also loosely connected by the theme of boundaries and their subversion, but offers some of the most enlightening articles. This final section updates certain myths and themes of horror film as well as investigating the limits of representation. Particularly revealing is Jay McRoy's "Parts is Parts': Pornography, Splatter Films and the Politics of Corporeal Disintegration," where he analyses the relevance of "splatter" and pornographic films and establishes the subversive quality of their rejection of "fixed borders" (199). Likewise, Julian Petley's "Nazi Horrors: Hystory, Myth, Sexploitation" offers a well-researched and culturally sensitive reading of this particular subgenre of horror; while Mick Broderick's "Better the Devil You Know: Film Anthichrists at the Millennium" sees the rise of antichrist narratives as a post-war move towards the secular which culminates in the subgenre of "secular apocalypse" (235). The limits of female representation are also explored by Estella Tincknell in "Feminine Boundaries: Adolescence, Witchcraft, and the Supernatural in New Gothic Cinema and Television," which analyses the foregrounding of gender in products like *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* or *Ginger Snaps* but ultimately criticises their lack of adherence to a gender politics which is not sufficiently radical.

The closing piece, Angela Marie Smith's "Impaired Visions: The Cultural and Cinematic Politics of Blindness in the Horror Film," undertakes a rethinking of disability in the modern horror film and contends that, by portraying blindness as fragile and vulnerable, these narratives may be articulating contemporary anxieties about vision, but that they also, at a deeper level, could be "throw[ing] into relief our culture's solipsistic and self-serving vision of itself" (273). This is a debate that has long preoccupied horror-focused academia, especially after the scopophilic nightmares raised by *Peeping Tom* (1960), but has rarely been discussed outside the psychoanalytic remit. This article, like the entire section, is especially successful at proving that these diverse preoccupations (apocalyptic, power-related, gender-inflicted, visual) exceed the platform of horror studies and testify to their relevance to contemporary culture.

The extent to which a sustained discussion of these issues, and of those intrinsic foundational para-sites that have been pushed to the periphery, can have an important impact outside its scholarly niche seems to be the collection's main driving source, and this is perhaps what makes *Horror Zone* such a useful tool of study both for the horror connoisseur and the uninitiated. Perhaps at times too cursory to provide a nuanced analysis of any of the topics raised, this collection should rather be envisaged more as an all-encompassing introduction to the genre in its many contemporary manifestations than as an in-depth monograph. Most importantly, its contributors have managed to find fertile ground in which to base their research and open the way for future research in the field. Given its scope, it would be surprising if this collection failed to become a seminal text for academics working on horror films from the last three decades.

XAVIER ALDANA REYES

"A Creature Born Neither of God nor Man" Richard Marsh, *The Beetle: A Mystery*

(Reissued by Penguin, London: December 2009)

A miserable night somewhere in Victorian London: delirious from hunger and exhaustion, Robert Holt seeks shelter from the pouring rain. Seeing an open window, he cannot resist. Climbing inside a seemingly empty house, Holt feels that he is safe at last, but he is wrong. Already within the house is a creature of unimaginable horror whose terrible mesmeric powers turn him into a weapon that will allow it to wreak untold havoc. Thus begins one of the greats of mad late-nineteenth-century Gothic literature, Richard Marsh's *The Beetle*.

If *The Beetle* has any reputation today it is for being the Victorian horror novel which, at least initially, beat Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. Both books appeared within a few weeks of each other in 1897 and Marsh's tale outsold Stoker's by a considerable margin. *The Beetle* was the first to receive a stage adaptation and was even the first to be filmed, with a silent version produced in 1919. It is an indicator of the novel's unusual popularity that it only went of print in 1960. It's our good fortune that, along with works by Ambrose Bierce and Wilkie Collins, Richard Marsh's spectacularly strange story has now been resurrected by Penguin books.

Reading *The Beetle* more than a century after it first appeared, and in view of the phenomenal impact that *Dracula* has had on contemporary culture, it's impossible not to compare the one novel with the other. Both involve the arrival in England from a distant land of a malevolent, seemingly-immortal, shape-shifting monster. Each is a patch-work of accounts, whereby the story is told from a number of viewpoints. In both novels the monster can drain the life of its victims, grows ever younger and possesses hypnotic powers that turn people into its puppets. Finally, both novels conclude with a race against time to save a brave young woman from the foul beast's clutches.

In fact, almost every feature of Stoker's novel has a parallel in Marsh's. *The Beetle*'s vile villain is an even more terrifying creation than Stoker's vampire Count, and Marsh's ability to send shivers along every last inch of his reader's nerves is even greater than his Irish counterpart's. In the same way, Marsh's heroes are as bland and uninteresting as Stoker's and *The Beetle*'s flop denouement is as much a damp squib as *Dracula*'s famously bungled finale. However, what separates the two books is the way they treat horror itself. Stoker's tale, apart from a few memorably ghoulish sequences, largely relies on the power of implication, whereas Marsh is inclined to let everything visceral and bloody hang out.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in the case of his monster. When not manifesting itself as a deformed, wizened and manically chattering old man, the Beetle assumes the form of a gigantic, buzzing, slime-oozing scarab or of a beautiful nude woman with skin the colour of burnished gold. If this were not enough, the story also features cultists, cross-dressing, male and female rape, orgies, cannibalism and human sacrifice! No wonder it sold so well. While the monster's sexual polymorphism is a cause for concern for everyone, what surprises most of all, for a book written in 1897, is that (in spite of the last-minute rush to save the heroine) it is more often masculinity which is under threat in *The Beetle*. One man is kept as a sex-slave in the creature's Egyptian lair. Another has to endure the loathsome monster salivating over his "white skin" and kissing him as he lies naked and unable to move in the grip of its hypnotic influence. Aside from the fervent homoeroticism, Marsh's fixations with sadomasochism and sexual savagery are forever bubbling away beneath the novel's surface.

Recent research has revealed that Richard Marsh (1857-1915) was the pseudonym of Richard Bernard Heldmann, who wrote boys' school and adventure stories and rose to become co-editor of *Union Jack* magazine. Heldmann was fired for reasons unknown in 1883 and when he re-emerged five years later, his literary output could not have been more different. The mystery and horror novels he began writing are all concerned with the darkness and brutality inherent in human nature. It has been suggested that Marsh may have been involved in a financial or sexual scandal. This would certainly explain *The Beetle*'s preoccupation with blackmail, hidden pasts, false identities, secret papers and violent vendettas. The novel is certainly the product of a crazed, extremely jaundiced and even misanthropic imagination.

The Beetle also proves Marsh to be an expert exploiter of the prejudices and bigotries of his age. In his fantasy world, the Englishman is the only force for moral good: women are pretty idiots; every country aside from Britain is a "dog-hole"; and the "foreign bogies" (and this is what the hook-nosed, tiny-skulled, blubber lipped and luminous-eyed Beetle is – a composite of racial caricatures) who live in them are always either trying to sneak into the beds of nice, decent English girls or, even worse, nice, decent English boys. The object of the Beetle's revenge, Paul Lessigham, is a politician reviled as exactly the kind of "wretched radical" whose weakness of character would be the undoing of the Empire. His beloved, Marjorie, is depicted as a dangerous and incompetent New Woman who is neglecting her duty to have sons to further Britain's glory. In other words, anyone who deviates in any way from being a good, clean, upstanding chap is worthy of the deepest suspicion.

The Beetle is ripe with the kind of clap-trap that sent millions into the trenches. Violence is presented as the only effective means of defeating an enemy. Perhaps the novel's most disturbing scenes involve the scientist Sydney Atherton who merrily goes about creating the perfect weapon of mass destruction for Her Majesty. As he states, chillingly, "If weapons of precision, which may be relied upon to slay, are preservers of peace - and the man is a fool who says that they are not! - then I was within reach of the finest imagination ever yet conceived." As he declaims, "What a sublime thought to think that in the hollow of your own hand lies the life and death of Nations." And these are the words of the novel's hero!

The Beetle is one of the most deranged of books ever, and a treat for fans of Victorian horror. It's the sort of thing that is already so far beyond parody that the League of Gentlemen would have great fun with it, and it's a wonder that Hammer never produced a version (one can't read the story without imagining a Ray Harryhausen-animated Beetle). Indeed, it is a pity that this reissue comes without a proper scholarly introduction, as it's high time that Richard Marsh's work was set in its cultural context and his gift for the macabre and depraved finally recognised. The book may never live up to its stomach-twisting opening, which would be envied by Edgar Allan Poe, H.P. Lovecraft, Stephen King and Clive Barker, but it's a unique, terrifying read, all the more frightening for the fact that, once upon a time, it must have been taken seriously. As for the greatest mystery – what was going through Richard Marsh's mind when he wrote it – we shall have to keep guessing.

RICHARD ENNIS

Stephen P. Unger, *In the Footsteps of Dracula: A Personal Journey and Travel Guide* (New York: World Audience, 2010)

In the blurb of Stephen P. Unger's In the Footsteps of Dracula, Dr. Hugh Fox informs the prospective reader that "Bram Stoker's novel Count Dracula was based on the life and killer-deeds of Prince Vlad the Impaler". Ignoring the fact that Stoker's novel was not called *Count Dracula*, it should be stressed that the story was emphatically not based on the "killer-deeds" of Vlad the Impaler. As Unger makes clear in the book, Stoker's source on Transylvania and its history, An Account of the Principalities of Wallachia and Moldavia, "never mentions either Vlad Tepes - that is, Vlad the Impaler - or his monstrous deeds, and neither does Stoker's novel" (48). This confusion succinctly sums up the problematic nature of this book. The link between the fictional Dracula and the historical Vlad the Impaler has always been tenuous and, as is clear to any reader of the book or traveller to the area in which its opening scenes are set, it is largely a fabricated link exploited for much-needed tourist income in rural Romania. Having travelled to many of the places mentioned in the book, I can certainly attest to the beauty of Transylvania as a travel destination; however, the various "Dracula's Castles" and other sites immediately bring to mind the numerous similar tourist traps of Europe - from "Romeo and Juliet's Balcony" in Verona, to the "traditional Irish pubs" of Dublin's Temple Bar. Unger is, of course, aware of the exploitation of the link as a means of attracting tourism, and takes a light-hearted look at many of the sights. Furthermore, there is nothing intrinsically wrong with using a literary and a historical character as the basis of a travel book, regardless of the rather loose connections between them. The question is whether Unger manages to blend the literary, travel and historical elements of his topic successfully; and, in the end, this is a task which he manages with somewhat varying degrees of success.

The book is divided into five parts, the first dealing with the two primary locations of *Dracula*, Transylvania and the North Yorkshire coastal town of Whitby. Given that "Stoker's Transylvania was the pipe dream of an armchair traveler with a genius for writing" (53), Unger sticks to illustrating the more generic descriptions of Transylvania as found in Jonathan Harker's diary, rather than any of the more specific scenes from the novel. To this end, landscape photos are provided with titles such as "The Lofty Steeps of the Carpathians" (21) and "Before Us Lay a Green, Sloping Land". In fact, as the title of Chapter 2 ("Bistriţa and the Borgo Pass Today: Life Imitates Art") recognises, the novel was not influenced to any large extent by the country itself and, in many cases, the inverse is true. An entire Dracula industry has been established in Romania and Unger visits some fairly tacky-looking sights such as "Hotel Castle Dracula," "Dracula's Vault" and "Salon Jonathan Harker". In reality, the town of Whitby, where much of the novel was written and set, is the only place where one can "truly walk in the footsteps of the literary Dracula" (53). It is here that Unger uncovers the far more direct inspiration for Dracula, and, accordingly, investigates many of the key locations in the Whitby section of the novel. He explores the location of the library where Stoker read an account of Voivode Dracula, "a sort of Warrior Prince... who crossed the Danube and fought the Turks" (48); of the wreck of the Dmitry of Narva (which became Dracula's Demeter of Varna); and the legend of the phantom Barguest Hound. Reading the Whitby section, one quickly realises that Unger's description of Stoker as an "armchair traveler" is extremely pertinent. Dracula the character may be connected to Transylvania but, as the reader soon understands, *Dracula* the novel is far more closely connected to Whitby.

Parts Two and Three return to Romania for an account of "Prince Vlad Dracula, aka Vlad Ţepeş, aka Vlad the Impaler" and a tour of the various locations associated with his life. The figure of Vlad the Impaler has been obscured and mythologised over centuries, and Unger provides a straightforward introduction to the real life of a staggeringly violent ruler. Having established the history, he then heads off to visit the

sights himself. The blend of history and travel narrative in this section works well, and Vlad's Romania is far more interesting than Dracula's, as reflected in the much longer section given to the former. For those seeking further links between the two lives, however, there are (mildly connected) instances such as the "uncanny resemblance" of Vlad's fortress at Poenari – "the *real* Castle of Dracula" – to "Count Dracula's fictional castle at the top of the Borgo Pass" (165). Again, depending on how one views Unger's attempt to merge his fictional and non-fictional characters, this resemblance can be taken as a fascinating coincidence, or a dubious attempt to make the historical element of the book more relevant.

It should be noted in passing that, curiously, in writing a travel narrative of Stoker's Romania, Unger is not just discovering the sights of *Dracula*, but actually recreating much of the opening section of the novel. Jonathan Harker's trip to Dracula's Castle is a recreation, if not a parody, of the Victorian travel narrative. With its comments on the "picturesque" Romanian people and villages, and Harker's complaints about the inefficient public transport, the novel sets up a sharp division between East and West. This division is subsequently shattered by the character of Dracula, a Romanian who not only speaks far better English than Prof. Van Helsing, but who has studied English property law and train timetables and wishes to pass as a local in London. It is this blurring of racial and social divisions which would have rendered the novel particularly frightening to the contemporary British reader. Seemingly, Unger is walking in the footsteps of Harker's depiction of Romania, as the author laments the difference between "England, which is modern and efficient" and Romania, in which it is difficult to travel "because of the decentralization and lack of infrastructure" (236). Harker's picturesque villagers become Unger's rural Romanian "Woman with Buckets" (26) or "Couple with Cart" (27), while Harker's stagecoach becomes Unger's MaxiTaxi. With this, the subtlety of Stoker's narrative is replaced by the mundane episodes of the travel narrative.

The final two sections provide "A Practical Guide to the Dracula Trail" and information on Bucharest and London, not destinations directly connected with the novel, but the presumed departure point within each country of any traveller following the route. The lack of any information on Dublin seems like a fairly major oversight at this point, and it is unusual that the book never mentions the city where Stoker was born and raised, or Trinity College, where he was educated. A lack of space may have dictated against an entire section on Dublin, but one imagines that any follower of the Dracula Trail would have an interest in visiting Clontarf and Trinity at the very least. While this information might have been included in the "Practical Guide," in examining this section, one of the major problems of the book is clearly highlighted: who exactly is it aimed at? Subtitled "A Personal Journey and Travel Guide," the book is a little bit of everything, but not quite enough of anything. As a travel guide, it is adequate, but certainly no substitute for a Lonely Planet. As a literary guide, it is well-researched but provides little if anything that an academic in the area would not already know. As a history of Vlad the Impaler, it is interesting, but far too short to provide anything more than a preliminary examination. Finally, as travel literature it is very readable, but lacking in any major insight into the destinations or people under discussion. What we are left with is an illustrated "personal journey" which is, in many cases, too personal. Does the reader really want to know that "the next morning [Unger] found an optometrist outside the citadel walls of Sighişoara who agreed to put the lenses [of his broken glasses] in a new frame for about \$30"?

A more problematic example of this tendency is the numerous photos reproduced throughout. In a number of cases the photos serve an illustrative function, complementing descriptions of, for example, "The Houses of the Old Town" (58) in Whitby, or a "Dragon Crest" (114). Nonetheless, it soon feels like you are stuck in an overly-enthusiastic Unger's living room, watching an interminable slide-show of his holiday photos (there are over 180 photos in a 256-page book). The selection could be reduced by at least two-thirds without any real loss to the narrative, especially given that dozens of them are out of focus,

under/over-exposed, and, in any event, extremely badly reproduced. "Genealogy of Vlad Ţepeş" (149) provides an illegible family tree with flash glare in the centre; it is difficult even to find the violinist in "Violinist and Archway" (142); and an early illustration gives us a *black-and-white* photo of "A House of Many Colours" (24). A small assortment of key illustrations, ideally with a selection of them in colour, and a good quality map (I found myself continually consulting the tiny, colour map on the back cover) would improve the reading experience immensely.

Unger's stated aim in the introduction is "to entertain, to inform, perhaps even to inspire" (9) and, to some extent, he has succeeded. Certainly, the enthusiasm for his subject can be felt throughout, and the book is well-researched and stimulating in many parts (particularly the "Whitby" and "Vlad the Impaler" sections). In the end, however, it is let down by its attempts to be all-encompassing, and by its overly subjective narrative and photography, both of which can leave the reader rather uninspired for much of the book. Ultimately, it is a worthwhile introduction for a reader with a casual interest in Romania or Dracula but, unfortunately, very little beyond that.

CONOR REID

FILM REVIEWS

Arrested Development
Dogtooth (Kynodonthos)
(Dir. Giorgos Lanthimos) Greece 2009
Verve Pictures

Seldom has Philip Larkin's poetic observation "They fuck you up/Your Mum and Dad" been more grimly appropriate than in relation to Greek director Giorgos Lanthimos' morbidly witty *Dogtooth*, winner of the *Un Certain Regard* Prize at Cannes in 2009. The 'children' of the offending parents in *Dogtooth* are three young adults – two women and a man – in their late teens or early twenties who have been kept completely isolated from the outside world for as long as they can remember. Although 'father' goes out to work every day in his Mercedes (to his job as manager of the factory that provides our only glimpse of the outside world), his wife and children remain at home, confined within the gated surrounds of their country home. There's a huge back garden, a luxurious swimming pool, and a well-appointed house. The grass is green, and the sun always shines. A large wooden fence cuts off any view of the outside world. 'The children', as they are always identified within the film, spend their days playing childish, bizarre games, bickering among themselves, and bartering with each other for the few small trinkets – a hair-band here, a measuring tape there – which their parents permit them to own.

It's as though they've been on school holidays for every single day of their lives. The youngsters are most often dressed in shorts, t-shirts and swimming costumes, often clad entirely in white, while their father, a man of the world, is almost always seen in a suit and tie. There's a sense of paralysing boredom and, understandably, barely suppressed frustration to the children's sorely restricted lives that Lanthimos and his cinematographer evoke with considerable skill, often by framing otherwise unremarkable shots in a deliberately off-kilter manner which reinforces the wholly unnatural, artificial nature of their lives.

Indeed, the technique brings to mind the cinematography of another middle-class family nightmare, Michael Haneke's 1989 film *The Seventh Continent (Der Siebente Kontinent)*, in which the profound alienation of the characters – who ultimately kill themselves rather than continue to live in a world of apparent meaninglessness – is reinforced by the fact that Haneke often included shots in which body parts were filmed in disorientating close-up as his characters carried out 'ordinary' household tasks. In fact, the subject matter and deliberately skewed cinematography of *Dogtooth* bring to mind the thought that if Haneke were Greek (and had a sense of humour) this is a film he could have made.

It must be noted as well that Lanthimos' premise is actually quite a common trope in the modern horror movie, although the execution is genuinely original. Wes Craven's *The People Under the Stairs* (1991), for instance, features a deranged brother-and-sister who live as man and wife and keep their kidnapped 'daughter' Alice a prisoner in their booby-trapped suburban home, forcing her to wear little-girl dresses and sleep in a room obviously meant for a much younger child. In both the 1993 Australian horror film *Bad Boy Bubby* (dir. Rolf de Heer), and the 1970 British film *Mumsy, Nanny, Sonny and Girly* (dir. Freddie Francis), grown men are treated like giant babies by their overbearing 'mothers'. A more recent exploration of many of the same themes can be found in M. Night Shyamalan's 2004 film *The Village*, in which, remarkably, the director seems wholeheartedly to endorse the fact that the parents of his artificially 'old world' community have deliberately been lying to their children for years about the nature of the world outside. Just as the youngsters of *The Village* have been told that venturing beyond the boundaries

of their community will mean death at the hands of monsters which dwell in the forest, so too are the young people in *Dogtooth* told that terrible creatures called 'cats' stalk the land beyond the safety of the garden fence. An older brother, (never seen, but referred to several times during the course of the narrative) is said to have been devoured by them, although the audience knows that the truth is that he has probably escaped. This lie leads to one of the film's most gruesomely funny scenes: when a tiny kitten strays onto the property, brother bravely (and graphically) dispatches it with a pair of garden shears while his screaming sisters look on from the 'safety' of the house.

The claustrophobia of the basic set-up is heightened by the fact that everyone in the film, except for the sole outsider to enter (disastrously) into this hermetically sealed world, is referred to only in relation to their position within the family – as brother, sister, father, mother, daughter, son, etc. It's a telling sign: individual identity has been subsumed into the family itself. Although the children are prisoners, they don't even know it, or at least, certainly not on a conscious level, making their position all the more tragic. Even language itself has been used as a means of authoritarian control. Their parents have deliberately given them false definitions for certain words that are usually associated with the outside world – "Pass the telephone" for instance, means "Pass the salt". Their ability to understand the world, and to piece together the truth about their predicament, is fatally compromised by the fact that they have so deliberately and systematically been given the wrong words with which to define reality - "zombie" is a small yellow flower, "sea" is a "leather armchair" and most bizarrely (and suggestively) of all, "pussy" is, according to their mother, "a great light". The children therefore lack even the language which would allow them to realise just how constrained their lives actually are: they are as much prisoners intellectually as they are physically. It's a realisation that Lanthimos cleverly reinforces by having the actors playing the children always speak in the slightly halting, inarticulate and naïve manner of someone with a mild intellectual impairment. Mary Tsoni, the actress playing the younger daughter is particularly good at this and effectively conveys childlike incomprehension and innocence throughout.

From the very opening scenes of the film – in which the children take part in their latest bout of a game they call 'Endurance', a competition to see who can withstand pain for the longest – violence, barely suppressed, bubbles underneath, occasionally exploding on the surface, such as in the scene in which the eldest sister (who gradually becomes the main focus of the narrative) suddenly slashes her brother on the arm with a knife during an argument. Eldest herself has a prominent scar on her shoulder – is this a remnant of an earlier incident? Tellingly, she slashes her brother because he found the toy airplane which she believed was hers: their parents throw them into the garden whenever a real plane passes overhead and then tell the children that it has crashed. As far as the children are concerned, they are the only people in the world, and so it makes complete sense that the only media the family consumes are home movies of themselves, a neat reflection of the insularity and narcissism of the nuclear family.

Given the circumstances then, it is hardly surprising that the introduction of an outsider from the 'real' world should have unsettling and ultimately horrific consequences. The father decides that his son's sexual needs should be facilitated (those of his daughters are, of course, ignored) and assigns the job to Christina, a young security guard at his factory. He drives her in a blindfold to the family home, ushers her in to his son's room, and then pays her to have sex with him. But any contact at all with the outside world is contamination. The 'children' – and in particular the young women – gaze upon the insouciant, deadpan outsider with absolute fascination, intrigued by the fact that she comes from beyond the boundaries of their home. And Christina turns this fascination to her own advantage, exploiting the eldest girl's childish enthralment and naïveté by encouraging her to exchange sexual favours for things like hair gel, and sparkly hair-bands. The eldest then unthinkingly and mechanically replicates this behaviour with her younger sister.

As if the introduction of sex into this world of perpetual childhood isn't destabilising enough, Christina reluctantly accedes to eldest's demands that she provide VHS movies for her to watch. After watching the likes of Jaws and Rocky in secret, the eldest, who, of all the children, has always shown the most awareness of their entrapment, re-enacts scenes from the forbidden films with an intensity that is at first amusing – as when the siblings pretend there is a shark in the swimming pool – and then downright disturbing, as when she recites monologues from Rocky with unhinged intensity. There's also a truly remarkable sequence – perhaps the standout scene in the film – during one of the family's many entertainment nights (during which the children are excepted to perform for their parents), eldest suddenly diverges from the endearingly awkward dance she and her sister have prepared to engage in what seems to be an impromptu recreation of the famous routine from Flashdance. Like many moments in the film, it's so bizarre that it starts off morbidly funny but soon becomes deeply disturbing, as the long-limbed, gawky young woman (excellently played by Aggeliki Papoulia) throws her body around the neat living room with a manic and desperate energy which manages to unsettle her parents as much as the audience.

Like any repressive regime – be it Iran, China or North Korea – power lies in controlling all access to the world outside, and to the media, and when Christina's crimes are discovered she pays a terrible (and grimly appropriate) price. Eldest is punished too, by being battered around the head with the illicit tapes themselves. VHS features in another important way in the film: the parents' late night viewing of hardcore porn is suggestive of the latent (and not so latent) sexual dysfunction that pervades the house. It seems horribly inevitable, then, when the father decides that it would be simpler – and safer – to keep things in the family instead, and declares that his son will have to chose between his sisters.

At a time where certain notorious real-life instances of abuse within the nuclear family (the Fritzl case naturally comes to mind but Ireland has also had its fair share of domestic horror stories reported in the media of late) have helped reinforce the suspicion that real horror all too often lies within the home, *Dogtooth*'s premise isn't as unlikely as it may once have seemed. While the subject matter is familiar, though, the execution is anything but. This Greek tragedy is one of the best films I've seen all year: a true *tour de force* of considerable originality, energy and vision which convincingly refutes the saccharine 1950s truism that father knows best.

Bernice M. Murphy

The Road (Dir. John Hillcoat) USA 2009 Dimension Films

John Hillcoat's adaptation of Cormac McCarthy's 2006 novel *The Road* is a heart-rending tale of the love between a father and son, and a stark portrayal of humanity on its last legs. McCarthy's book has garnered both critical and popular appeal, winning a Pulitzer *and* gaining a spot on Oprah's Book Club list, and it was always going to be tricky to follow up with an equally successful film version. McCarthy's unique style in particular presents a potential stumbling block, and personally I was intrigued to see how his sparse, poetic prose, bare-bones dialogue, and haunting descriptions of dark, bleak beauty would translate to the screen. Nevertheless, director Hillcoat (who previously found success with *The Proposition*) and screenwriter Joe Penhall have proved more than up to the challenge, ably supported by stunning cinematography by Javier Aguirresarobe, and a resonant soundtrack from Nick Cave and Warren Ellis.

The Road is a post-apocalyptic tale of a father, known only as The Man (a haggard Viggo Mortensen), and his son, known as The Boy (Kodi Smit-McPhee), trying to survive the cold and hunger in a desolate America; the wife and mother of the family, The Woman (Charlize Theron), is a mere memory as she committed suicide some years before. Now, father and son are faced with negotiating the reality of life after an unidentified disaster - ash falling from the sky; intermittent earthquakes; a clouded sun; no animals, food, or light; marauding cannibalistic gangs and desperate, terrified refugees. Deciding that their chances of survival will improve by walking south in search of the ocean, warmth and the hope of salvation, they set off, encountering a series of tests to the man's humanity and moments of powerful tension along the road. One key encounter is with the prophet-like Old Man or Eli (Robert Duvall), a remnant of the old world. At the boy's persuasion, they share a meal with Eli, whose wise, desperate words and utter vulnerability inspire Man to keep struggling. Another occurs further toward the end of their journey when a thief (Michael K. Williams from *The Wire*) attempts to steal from Man and Boy, prompting a pathetic chase scene between the two scrawny men. The intensity of the scene in which Man instructs The Thief to strip as the latter sobs for mercy is unflinching and overwhelming in its harrowing depiction of hunger, desperation, and fear, and the cruelty of our hero seems to drive another stake in the heart of hope. When Man and Boy finally reach the coast, there are few signs of deliverance from despair, and the final scenes depict both the frustrating frailty of the human body and, ultimately, the determination of humanity to hope and love.

The road itself, long an icon of American popular culture, is, of course, central to the visual aesthetic of the film. The normal landmarks of the road trip are subverted here in the stark, post-apocalyptic reality. The ubiquitous gas station is typically a source of respite from the journey and sometimes a source of malevolent energy and hidden horror (think *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, dir. Tobe Hooper, 1974); here, it is rendered anachronistic, abandoned and covered in ash and ice. The bank's lopsided ATM sign and a sequence of long shots of grey streets with broken power lines also clearly serve to state the fact that the supposed bastions of power – oil, money, energy – are useless in the face of such a disaster. These shots are essential in the conveyance of loneliness. John Ford-esque wide shots of American landscape and tiny, vulnerable human figures fill the screen. However, rather than the blue skies and lush prairies of the Westerns, these shots are of a muted, grey palette, and the land is devoid of life or growth. In a particularly stunning series of shots that perfectly capture the bleak beauty of McCarthy's prose, the tiny figures of Man and Boy stand with their backs to the camera, facing a line of burning forest (a veritable hell–hole) or bent into the wind pulling their cart as they relentlessly move south. Moreover, these images

of the pair's struggle to keep moving to find safety while pulling their entire belongings behind them through horrendous desolation have obvious resonance with contemporary disasters such as Hurricane Katrina and the Haitian earthquake which have generated a barrage of images of suffering refugees in the media. The desperate need to hope that at the end of the road lies some sort of salvation is exquisitely and poignantly rendered in *The Road* and is all the more powerful in the light of these all-too-real disasters.

Indeed, there does seem to be an underlying ecological message in both the book and the film. The environmental argument that the earth is dying and that we are killing it is conveyed in an extreme (and arguably heavy-handed) manner here. The point is made apparent when The Man states that the earth is dying, all the animals are dead, soon all the trees in the world will be dead; worse still, as Eli elaborates, there were clear warnings that this would happen. The sound effects and shots of the tree roots ripping from the soil just after Man and Boy discover the most shocking of scenes in an underground cellar hit the viewer hard as it seems there is no respite, light, or goodness left in the world (although the discovery of a beetle and a bird flying in the grey sky do provide glimmers of hope toward the end of the film). While the cause of the disaster is never made explicit in *The Road*, it does seem to be part of a trend of films bemoaning the destruction of the planet, be it because of a super volcano, nuclear war, or climate change. Many films, such as *Avatar* (dir. James Cameron, 2009) or *The Book of Eli* (dir. Albert Hughes and Allen Hughes, 2010), have explored this theme in recent years. Whatever the cause, the fear remains that we could very possibly see the destruction of the earth as we know it. Few post-apocalyptic films have dealt with the theme as subtly and stirringly as *The Road* with its emphasis on the destruction of humanity.

Ultimately, though, the film is about the strength of this humanity. The typical obsession with 'good guys' and 'bad guys' is played out here where the only options left are suicide, cannibalism, or scavenging on the road. The first two options have a long history of taboo in popular culture and are dealt with interestingly in the film. The Woman's decision to die is cleverly told through a series of flashbacks which become progressively more muted as her despair takes hold. The opening scene of the film is of a smiling Theron in sunlight and honey tones. This light gives way to beige and grey shadows as The Woman decides to choose death. The chillingly beautiful lines "the coldness of it was her final gift" echo throughout – the absence of a mother haunts every scene and also inspired the soundtrack by Cave and Ellis. The Man rejects suicide yet he teaches the boy how to shoot himself in the mouth should they be captured by cannibals in an especially disturbing and challenging scene. Cannibalism, we soon learn, is "the great fear", and the fundamental division between good and bad guys. In cases of survival, cannibalism is sometimes accepted, as in the real life horrors of Alive (dir. Frank Marshall, 1993), for example. Here, however, Hillcoat goes for the more common rendering of cannibalism as the ultimate evil. Much of the horror and tension come from encounters with this great crime, in particular in the cellar scene in which Man and Boy discover men and women awaiting dismemberment and slow death as they are farmed for cannibals' consumption. The horror of cannibalism is the fact that it reduces humans to the status of animals in an abattoir. Hillcoat's cannibals are a remnant of Rural Gothic cannibals found in the likes of The Texas Chain Saw Massacre or The Hills Have Eyes (dir. Wes Craven, 1977) - filthy, gap-toothed, overall-wearing savages who ride pick-up trucks, speak in a deep southern drawl and whoop as they chase their prey. Also similar to these other cannibal movies is the question of revenge and who deserves to survive. Man's blind need to protect his son leads him to acts of cruelty. His constant need to demarcate the lines of savagery belies his doubts, an anxiety similarly expressed in colonial adventure texts. Indeed, the film boasts references to Conrad's Heart of Darkness in the Kurtz-like fence of skulls and to Robinson Crusoe in the association of washing and shaving with higher morals, placing it within a long history of cannibal versus non-cannibal culture.

Despite the melancholic nature of this film, I would not call it unrelenting as other critics have. In fact, the beauty of the relationship between the father and son provides depth and light in an otherwise savage, grey world. Certainly, it is not a light-hearted romp, and while Mortensen's heroics are not as eye-catching as some of his other sword-wielding roles, the subtle beauty of this film make it very much worth watching. The questions it poses about survival and dignity, the desperate loneliness of refugees, and the frailty of our world are well worth pondering.

Jenny Brown

Ghost Story (Dir. Stephen Weeks) UK 1974 Nucleus Films (2009)

Although visceral, bodily horror became increasingly popular on British screens in the 1970s (as censorship slackened, and as an ailing film industry produced films to satisfy audiences bored with traditionally more sedate television fare), Stephen Weeks's *Ghost Story* emerges as a true oddity for its time. A dialogue-heavy, reserved, atmospheric period piece, it was principally filmed in a furnished Edwardian house in India (standing in for a late 1920s-into-1930s rural Britain), and builds its chills through gradual realization rather than outright assault.

McFayden (Murray Melvin) invites school friends Duller (Vivian Mackerall, popularly known as the principle inspiration for the "Withnail" character in Bruce Robinson's Withnail & I [1987]) and Talbot (Larry Dann) to a remote country estate, under the pretence of having a hunting/shooting weekend. Although he initially professes not to know who owns the house, it is soon revealed that McFayden stands to inherit it from his family and has actually invited his friends to join him in investigating claims of its strange, unresolved history. Talbot, the earnest scholarship boy who tries to remain optimistic and practical against the snobbish, aristocratic airs of the other men, is the first to be privy to the history of the place. The mysterious appearance of a doll sends Talbot into a series of fever dreams, in which he uncovers the suppression and gradual incarceration of the young Sophie Kwyker (Marianne Faithfull) at the hands of her brother Robert (Leigh Lawson), the erstwhile family patriarch who is the recipient of his sister's dangerous sexual advances. These two stories—of the men bickering over the strange circumstances of the weekend, combined with the torrid family psychodrama—come to connect directly, but to reveal the link here would lessen the gradual impact of the tale. Needless to say, this atmospheric film works precisely because its scares morph with the story: once the past has ruptured the present, the pervasive feeling of uneasiness (nested in a reserved mise-en-scene reliant on the "haunted house" subgenre) shifts to monstrous dread, as violence, conflagration, and evil ritual converge on our polite vacationers. It might be a stretch to over-praise Ghost Story, as it certainly suffers from pacing issues, the usual imperfections of a hurried and modestly-budgeted independent feature, and a sometimes tenuous sense of logic, but the film somehow turns these flaws into endearing characteristics. Philip Norman's script manages at once to juggle period-specific dialogue and the surreal stuff of nightmare, while the visually creative Weeks wrings atmospheric value out of many under-lit, overly dark set-pieces. The acting is uniformly strong.

Though it was previously released on VHS, illegally, as *Madhouse Mansion*, this Nucleus Films two-disc set gives the film a proper, restored presentation. Director Weeks, who independently produced the film during one of the British film industry's intermittent periods of decline, extensively participated in the preparation of this release's bonus features, dispelling the myths and apocryphal rumours that often accompany discussions of his film. A fine audio commentary, moderated and prompted by Samuel Umland, features an array of scene- and anecdote-specific recollections, while much contextual background comes courtesy of this DVD set's centrepiece, an original documentary called *Ghost Stories* (also produced by Nucleus, who have made similar productions such as the recent *Kim Newman's Guide to the Flipside of British Cinema* [2010]). *Ghost Stories* features memories from the cast (including Murray Melvin; Hammer star Barbara Shelley; Larry Dann), crew (Weeks; composer and Pink Floyd collaborator Ron Geesin), and extensive contributions from Kim Newman. He discusses the film in relation to others of the time, describing it as very much a "one-off," with no other direct kin. Of

particular interest are Weeks's comments on the coincidences that made filming in India possible, as well as the various accounts of food poisoning and the inclusion of as much appropriate incidental material as turned up, such as the collaboration with Western hippies from a nearby spiritual commune, who appear in the film as patients of an insane asylum!

Other films from Weeks's concentrated body of work have previously been made available on DVD—specifically his Christopher Lee/Peter Cushing collaboration for Amicus *I, Monster* (1971), and his self-remake of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (titled *Sword of the Valiant: The Legend of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* [1984])—but his amateur and early TV works have not. Thus, what truly makes this DVD set remarkable is its inclusion of his early, and in some cases almost totally unseen, films. While "The Chelsea Cobbler" is something of an era-inflected curio (an off-beat, swinging commercial for a trendy shoe store), and TV short *Deserted Station* (1965) comes across like many overwrought experimental student films (pretentious, belaboured, and technically spotty), they provide a fascinating glimpse at the variety of film production encouraged at the time. Weeks seems to have had a personal interest in war, as three of these films (including his short feature for Tigon *1917* [1968]) are set during World War I, but his real talent lies in the suggestion of sublime moods. *The Camp* (1965), a brief look at a WWI prisoner camp by way of Alain Resnais's *Night & Fog* (1955), combines narration, photographs, and footage of a deserted POW barracks to powerful effect. Better still is *Moods of a Victorian Church* (1967), a colour short which combines expertly chosen architectural detail, occult ritual, and a simple narrative to produce a mini-masterpiece of the architectural uncanny.

Though not for all tastes, *Ghost Story* is compulsively interesting due to its thematic and stylistic uniqueness as compared with other British horror films of the 1970s, as well as its impressive convergence of cult talents. On their own, Mackerrell, Faithfull, Hershey, Geesin (and now Weeks) would each help make a film worth seeking out, but their collaboration here—and the dignity afforded the film by Nucleus—amounts to a borderline-essential DVD release.

Kevin M. Flanagan

The House of the Devil (Dir. Ti West) USA 2009 Metrodome Distribution

Set during an unspecified point in 1980s America, Ti West's recent release *The House of the Devil* has a plot that recalls a well-told urban legend and stylistically resembles a long-forgotten video nasty. The opening credits play out to a dated synth-pop score replete with freeze-frames and even some old-fashioned zooms. West also chose to shoot on 16mm film, rather than digital which surely would have been more cost-effective, thus creating a creepy murky visual style in keeping with the era. The marketing of the film has also been quite sensitive to the film's intentions – the theatrical poster sports the schlocky tagline: "Talk on the phone. Finish your homework. Watch TV. DIE"; and promotional copies were even released on VHS. These details, coupled with some canny wardrobe and make-up choices, help lend a sort of period authenticity to the film.

This suggestion of a standard 1980s horror also extends to the film's somewhat typical premise. If you were to break the set-up of The House of the Devil down into its most basic components, it would consist of the following: a college student in need of money; a too-good-to-be-true proposition; an isolated house in the woods. But it is out of these familiar (one might say hoary) elements that West assembles one of the most interesting and certainly the most tense horror film of recent years. After an opening with a disclaimer which states that Satanism was rampant in the 1980s and that the following story was based on "true unexplained events", we are then introduced to Samantha (Jocelin Donahue), a young college student who's searching for her own place to live but can barely afford the deposit. To make ends meet, she responds to an urgent bulletin board message for a babysitting job on the same night there's going to be a lunar eclipse. After some initial hesitation Samantha decides to take the job and she makes her way to an isolated mansion. Here credit must be given to Donahue for her engaging performance. She occupies the frame for most of the film; as the camera stalks around corners, down corridors and through windows it seems always to follow her. Her angular face - all cheekbones and wide eyes - recalls the likes of Jamie Lee Curtis in Halloween (dir. John Carpenter, 1978) or Mia Farrow in Rosemary's Baby (dir. Roman Polanski, 1968). Admittedly, the character of Samantha is drawn somewhat broadly, but Donahue is an intriguing presence and the babysitter is a stock figure typical of the sort of straight-to-VHS horror that West is so painstakingly recreating here (babysitters being one of the more popular forms of fodder for horror films of this era). Her character is a cliché but West is all-too-aware that clichés have their own particular pleasures and they can yield surprising results when utilised correctly. What happens when one takes familiar elements from horror such as the babysitter or the abandoned house or the creature in the attic and reconceptualises them? West seems to be more interested in putting video nasties under the microscope and seeing what made them work by stretching and dissecting their various elements, but in the end assembling something that feels more original.

Indeed, apart from genre manipulation *The House of the Devil's* setting in the 1980s has a possibly functional motivation. The issue of technology is one that has to be addressed in every modern-day horror. For example, another recent low-budgeted film *Paranormal Activity* (dir. Oren Peli, 2007) confronts this issue head-on by making use of home-video to chilling effect. Nowadays it would no longer be sufficient for a budding terroriser of babysitters simply to cut the phone lines. Michael Myers would have to carry a mobile phone jammer, disable the wireless internet and hope that his presence hasn't already been tweeted.

However, despite its retro milieu and aesthetics *The House of the Devil* avoids becoming a reverential museum piece as its sensibilities are unmistakeably modern. West is a contemporary of other notable American directors such as Joe Swanberg and Andrew Bujalski who make talky, indie films, sometimes collectively referred to as "mumblecore". They usually utilise non-professional actors to portray the travails of young Americans. This film plays like a nightmarish inversion of their usual preoccupations: the fears and anxieties of adulthood; trying to get money together for your first place; menial work; and all the other attendant horrors of maturity. West even casts one of the scene's breakout stars Greta Gerwig as Samantha's best friend. In stylistic terms, if the horror element of *The House of the Devil* were to be removed, it would strongly resemble many of these films, with its long scenes of someone plodding around a house and making aimless phonecalls. Although there have been other mumblecore horror films in recent years (most notably the Duplass Brothers' *Baghead* (2008), which also stars Gerwig) *The House of the Devil* seems to be the first that could masquerade as a traditional and (possibly more significantly), marketable horror film.

Perhaps the most admirable and radical achievement of the film is West's expert building of a tension throughout the film. We know something supernatural has to occur, as is plain from the title of the film. What's more, you don't cast Tom Noonan as a creepy guy with a strange proposal, and cult actress Mary Woronov as his unsettling wife, and then give them the same surname as the hotel owner in *The Shining* without setting off some alarm bells. So how does West make it work? Well, we know something has to happen, we just don't know what or, more importantly, when. The middle portion of *The House of the* Devil, in which Samantha is alone in the house, extends what would usually take about 15 minutes in a regular horror film to an almost unbearably tense length. And so for the bulk of a 90 minute film a girl prowls around an apparently fathomless house; she turns the television on and then off again; she makes numerous phone calls and searches through drawers. In short, she does what anyone would do if left alone in a creepy mansion and this is precisely what draws in the viewer. It manages to be simultaneously unsettling and riveting. We are even allowed a moment of lightness as Samantha switches on her walkman and dances around the house in a sequence that references that particularly 80s propensity for montages and provides a brief respite from the suspense. When the inevitable scenes of horror and gore do occur they are all the more affecting because of the film's initial moderation. Otherwise there are no hokey musical stings or cheap scares to make the viewer jump; just pure paranoia and tension.

Ultimately, what makes *The House of the Devil* such a notable achievement is this refusal to deliver easy thrills which would only detract from the film's overall atmosphere. At a time when horror films, such as *The Human Centipede* (dir. Tom Six, 2009), are depicting increasingly explicit scenes of cruelty and mutilation, *The House of the Devil* takes the opposite tack, in being an exercise in extreme restraint and is all the more memorable for it.

Brian Davey

Alice in Wonderland (Dir. Tim Burton) USA 2010 Walt Disney Pictures

When a young Tim Burton started his career as an animator and conceptual artist at Disney, he reputedly found himself constrained by a studio aesthetic that seemed to be at odds with his own darker worldview. Nonetheless, it was during his apprenticeship at Disney that he eventually produced a number of short films - Vincent (1982) and Frankenweenie (1984) - that functioned as his calling card with the wider Hollywood community. By the mid-80s, Burton had struck a deal with Warner Bros that eventually saw him emerge as a leading proponent of gothic and fantasy filmmaking with the likes of *Beetlejuice* (1988), Batman (1989) and its sequel three years later, and Edward Scissorhands (1990). In recent years his idiosyncratic style has evolved to see the likes of Big Fish (2003) and Sweeney Todd (2007) garner plenty of awards and critical acclaim, and help distract from his growing roster of creative missteps such as the likes of the ill-advised 'reimaginings' of Planet of the Apes (2001) and Charlie and the Chocolate Factory (2005). Now, some 25 years after he parted company with Disney, Burton has found his way back to the House of Mouse with Alice in Wonderland, but this is not quite the happy reunion between a magnanimous studio and its wayward prodigal son that might have been hoped for; nor has Burton returned triumphant to produce a successful marriage between his brand of fantasy gothic and family-friendly Disney fare. Quite the opposite, in fact, as Alice in Wonderland actually exposes the full extent to which he's lost his way.

Burton's live-action but CGI-heavy Alice in Wonderland is set up as a sequel of sorts to Lewis Carroll's Alice's Adventures in Wonderland (1865) and Through the Looking Glass (1872), those classic texts of children's and nonsense literature. Carroll's first Alice novel closes with a vision of his young heroine's future as a grown woman who "would keep, through all her riper years, the simple and loving heart of her childhood; [...] would gather about her other little children, and make their eyes bright and eager with many a strange tale, perhaps even with the dream of Wonderland of long ago; [...] would feel with all their simple sorrows, and find a pleasure in all their simple joys, remembering her own child-life, and the happy summer days." Not so Burton's Alice (Mia Wasikowska), who continues to be haunted by dreams that act as a reminder of bygone days in Wonderland that she has long since (perhaps consciously) forgotten. Now 19, Alice is forced to face up to the reality that comes with being a young Victorian lady of marriageable age - marry she must, lest she end up like her unfortunate spinster aunt (Frances de la Tour) and doom herself and her mother (Lindsay Duncan) to a life of comparative poverty, following the death of her father (Martin Csokas), a successful businessman. Faced with a proposal from the unappealing but rich Hamish (Leo Bill), Alice runs away from unpleasant reality and follows the White Rabbit (voiced by Michael Sheen) down a rabbit hole, ending up in Underland (as we are informed it's actually called) where she encounters a series of familiar faces from Carroll's original texts -Tweedledum and Tweedledee (Matt Lucas in a dual role); the Mad Hatter (Johnny Depp); and an array of CGI creations voiced by Britain's national treasures – the Cheshire Cat (Stephen Fry); the Caterpillar (Alan Rickman); the March Hare (Paul Whitehouse); and the Dormouse (Barbara Windsor). The famous inhabitants of Underland now constitute a rebel alliance that seeks to overthrow the despotic reign of the Red Queen (Helena Bonham Carter) and her henchman Stayne, the Knave of Hearts (Crispin Glover). It has been prophesied that Alice will return to defeat the Jabberwocky (voiced by Christopher Lee) on the Frabjous Day and restore the White Queen (Anne Hathaway) to her rightful place on the throne and depose the megalomaniacal Red Queen. Initially, Alice fails to recognise that she is indeed "the right Alice" and does not seem up to the task - she has, as the Mad Hatter repeatedly tells her, "lost her

muchness" – but it's little surprise that all she needs is a spell in Wonderland in order to recover it again, and return to the real world rejuvenated and equipped with the gumption to strike out on her own by the film's end.

It is in its conservative narrative structure that Burton's film really falls flat, sacrificing the surreal dream logic and the spirit of Carroll's originals in favour of a linear framework that negates the possibility for such playfulness. The 'prophecy' device sets up a quest narrative that is fundamentally uninspired and never in any danger of going unfulfilled - the climactic battle between Alice and the Jabberwocky is signposted and even previewed once our heroine arrives in Wonderland and is shown a handy scroll that outlines precisely what will happen, emptying the plot itself of any dramatic tension. Alice's adventures are all harnessed to this linear framework, and are the poorer for it, as each run-in with a familiar face from Wonderland is woven into the elaborate quest narrative, losing their potential to function as episodic, dream-like and surreal diversions in the process. All seems designed to repackage Alice's tale as a lazy and near-sighted take on female empowerment, as young Alice rediscovers her "muchness" and slays the Jabberwocky before returning to the real world and taking a stand against the rules of the Victorian marriage market by choosing instead to become a businesswoman and set sail for China to make her fortune and open up east-west trade routes. Alice's apparently triumphant conclusion is worrying on a series of levels, as she seems to assert her authority by becoming a good capitalist and a good coloniser, a troublingly conservative and antiquated outlook for these times. What's more, Alice's independence can only ever be partial, as she has signed up as an apprentice for the firm owned by the man that would have been her father-in-law, had she accepted Hamish's marriage proposal – so she may have rejected a role as surrogate-daughter to him but she remains firmly under his control as an employee. Hardly a rallying cry for women everywhere to throw off the shackles of patriarchal oppression, despite what the film itself tries to imply elsewhere, right down to its inclusion of an incongruous end-credits song by Avril Lavigne.

Even more disappointingly, Burton's usually slick and inventive visual flair is notably absent, and the film seems hampered by its reliance on overwrought CGI animation and substandard 3D effects. What's more, his gothic worldview is starting to look tired as he cannibalises his own work in a way that seems less like the practice of a signature style than evidence of an uninspired mind. Again and again, it seems he falls back on certain visual tropes as shorthand for the Burton brand - the tree from Sleepy Hollow (1999), for example, pops up for no good reason here – but increasingly it's starting to look as though he's fresh out of ideas. His ongoing overdependence on an established stable of actors – Depp, Bonham Carter, Lee – contributes even further to a sense that the film has been phoned in, with Depp's Mad Hatter recalling the lazy habits and worst excesses of his Willy Wonka. As Alice, Wasikowska tries her best but seems a bit lost within the film's CGI landscape and hemmed in by a characterisation that is as emptily 'Burtonesque' as the rest of the film, right down to her ashen face, doe-like eyes and blonde hair that recall so many Burton heroines past (among them Sleepy Hollow's Christina Ricci and Edward Scissorhands' Winona Ryder). Like his adaptation of Charlie and the Chocolate Factory, Burton's Alice in Wonderland appears to be the work of a director on autopilot, and worryingly it seems set to continue – next up for the director is a feature-length remake of his 1984 short Frankenweenie, also with Disney. It's about time he stopped remaking and readapting 'beloved' classics and get back in touch with the man who gave us the sublime Ed Wood (1994) and Sleepy Hollow at the height of his creative powers. Alice in Wonderland is a far cry from those heady days, and worst of all is the degree to which it comes across as a tame retread of a series of recent family-friendly fantasy film franchises, with visual echoes of and shameless borrowings from the likes of the Narnia and Lord of the Rings series. In fact, as Alice faces off against the Jabberwocky in her climactic battle, the viewer might be forgiven for thinking that the projectionist had accidentally put on the final reel of *The Return of the King*, so reminiscent is it of that film's face-off between Éowyn (Miranda Otto) and the Nazgûl.

With his return to Disney, Burton has now produced a film that tries to tick all of the boxes of family-friendly fantasy filmmaking that have become *de rigueur* since Peter Jackson first put Middle Earth onscreen, but ultimately in *Alice in Wonderland* these tropes come across as both stale and derivative. Like his heroine, then, it seems that Burton has returned to Wonderland only to discover that he's lost his "muchness" – whether or not he can recover it remains to be seen.

Jenny McDonnell

MULTI-MEDIA REVIEWS

Silent Hill: Shattered Memories

Developer: Climax Group, Publisher: Konami Digital Entertainment Platform: Nintendo Wii

[Please note, this review contains spoilers!]

Silent Hill: Shattered Memories is the most recent instalment in Konami's survival horror series. Centred in and around the lakeside resort town of the same name, each game reveals more about the place's sinister history, while uncovering the tortured past of various characters unlucky enough to find themselves within its streets.

Memory – and its unreliability – constitutes a recurring theme of *Silent Hill*, and as the title implies, the preoccupation is central to this episode. Ostensibly a remake of the first game, in which Harry Mason searched the town for his missing daughter Cheryl, the franchise's seventh instalment contains many elements familiar to players of the series. An ordinary protagonist finds himself trapped in the sinister location, armed only with a flashlight and a radio. Tasked with escaping alive, players uncover more about their on-screen surrogate as they solve baroque puzzles, navigate maze-like buildings, and battle grotesque monsters. Previous *Silent Hill* characters have included a guilt-stricken wife murderer hiding from the knowledge of his crime, a teenager ignorant of her previous incarnation as a mystical child, and a truck driver repressing a childhood in which he witnessed his mother's insanity and his father's suicide. Progress through *Silent Hill* involves these characters' layers being slowly peeled away, revealing the truth about their past.

This latest offering develops other tropes of the series and elements of the survival horror genre. For example, self-conscious psychoanalytic dimensions are explicitly foregrounded in the game's framing. Each level requires players to perform tests for a cynical psychiatrist, such as answering personal questions, organising a school timetable, pairing married couples from a pile of photographs. Players' responses and further in-game choices influence the aesthetics of the digital experience, modifying character design, locations and conversations. The degree to which *Shattered Memories*, as the opening title suggests, 'plays you as much as you play it' is open to debate. The game has only a limited number of potential alternatives, and is unalterably centred on the actions of a white male heterosexual. This inflects upon the redrawing of the game world, much of which concerns the attire of female characters, something quite at odds with the game's final reveal – that the character answering the psychiatrist's questions and the one experiencing the horrors of Silent Hill are not the same.

But this may be missing the point of *Shattered Memories*, which is not to produce an authentic psychologically-tailored experience, but rather to present narrative, in the tradition of Gothic fiction, as a projection of the protagonist's possibly-deranged psyche. It certainly corresponds with previous instalments of *Silent Hill*, which frequently adopt a critical attitude towards their heroes' masculinity and sexuality, as they disintegrate under the burden of increasing self awareness.

Survival horror has traditionally sought to employ the modes and technologies of the videogame medium in delivering suspense and terror. *Eternal Darkness: Sanity's Requiem* (2002, GameCube) had a 'sanity meter', inducing digital hallucinations if the gauge dropped too low, *Haunting Ground*'s (2005, PS2)

panic mode temporarily removed player control during the most perilous situations, and *Forbidden Siren*'s (2004, PS2) 'sight jacking' afforded the optical perspective of armed zombies. On the Nintendo Wii, *Shattered Memories* exploits the console's unique interface. The wiimote allows players to nod or shake in answer to questions, to rotate objects, and to interact with surroundings: sliding cupboard doors, pulling nails from a shut window, tipping tin cans. This provides the game world with a gritty physicality, and although the effect can occasionally feel contrived. The game ably integrates the Wii's peculiar interface into the hectic gameplay which characterises survival horror.

More integral is the remote's function as the flashlight which determines the direction in which Harry moves. Within the *Silent Hill* universe, at scripted points during play, the town transforms into a diabolical Otherworld. During these disturbing set pieces the game becomes purely action-driven as players hurtle through the environment, violently shaking the controller to fend off skinless creatures, while keeping sight of distant doors and ledges offering the means of escape. These sequences of arcade action feature no weapons, ammunition, health packs or puzzles to distract from the urgency of flight. Contrasting with its less integral application in the Wii version of *Resident Evil 4*, *Shattered Memories* employs the Nintendo control system to provide central elements of survival horror – flight and defencelessness – requiring players to frantically alternate between the controller as navigator and as imperfect means of defence.

Another component of the series, the crackling radio which indicates nearby monsters, is substituted by a somewhat incongruous smart phone. While this contemporary device initially seems out of place in the austere world of *Silent Hill*, the phone's operation suggests something spooky resides in even the most modern of technologies. Despite its North American location and Portsmouth-based developer, through this *Silent Hill* reveals its Japanese origins, echoing films like *Ring* (1998) and *One Missed Call* (2003), in reflecting a world in which spirits make themselves known through domestic media. Hotspots positioned throughout game locations cause the digital device to buzz and whine with distortion. These points trigger an ominous flash across the screen as voice messages appear on the phone, afterimages of past events imprinted by some supernatural presence. Listening to these recordings involves placing the remote to the ear like a telephone receiver, disturbingly disrupting the separation between the game world and the player's living room. The effect is genuinely eerie, providing a degree of tactility never afforded by previous games' console technologies, while the sound of digital interference proves as unsettling as the analogue crackling of previous *Silent Hill* episodes.

The ambiguity of the series is exemplified in the multiple versions of the game's narrative which players' actions generate, while the shattered memories of the title reference both the figure in the psychiatrists office, and the protagonist players control. Throughout the game, Harry forgets his daughters' age, his own address, the last few years of his life. As in previous *Silent Hill* games, the figure players are tasked with rescuing – be it a runaway child, a dead wife, or a missing brother – is less significant than the deeper psychological truths discovered along the way, often uncovering buried memories concerning the protagonist's true relationship with their missing loved ones. The twist to *Shattered Memories*, revealing that the psychiatrist's patient and the game protagonist are different people, suggests the 'memories' narrated in supposedly flashback sequences are more fiction than fact.

Shattered Memories' Otherworld crystallises such themes. A nightmare glacial dimension which invades the game environment like a sudden frost entombing everything and everyone in solid ice, this frozen world represents a metaphor for the patient's psychological state. This is a person petrified by their own false memories, unable to move on from traumatic experiences which may, ironically, be the product of a deranged imagination. Mementos, lost objects hidden throughout the environment, continue this motif: a

plastic doll in a freezer compartment, an insect embalmed in amber, undeveloped photographs; while the phone messages Harry receives express the Gothic concern with the past's inescapable influence.

If *Shattered Memories* represents a return to survival horror form, following the more action orientated *Silent Hill Homecoming*, it undeniably suffers from failings traditionally levelled at the genre. The game undoubtedly privileges visual complexity over interaction. Aesthetic details – bicycles in the playground of Midwich School, barrels piled outside Annie's Bar – are merely decoration, with limited opportunity for engagement.

Gameplay is remarkably linear and does not even pretend to offer multiple pathways, beyond the superficial impact of its crude psychological profiling. And the control system is clumsy and inaccurate. Nevertheless, such qualities are perversely prised as defining characteristics of survival horror, and *Silent Hill*'s latest instalment constitutes a worthy addition to both genre and franchise.

Ewan Kirkland

Silent Hill Shattered Memories

Graphics: 7 Gameplay: 7 Sound: 8

Replay Value: 8 Overall Score: 8

Alan Wake

Developer: Rocksteady Studios, Publisher: Eidos Interactive Platform: Xbox 360

Writers often have a hard time of it. It's an isolated career: with days, weeks, months and years spent locked away in a tiny room typing your life onto a page. So is it any wonder that sometimes, you just want to get away from it all?

Alan Wake is one such horror writer, with a lot in common with Stephen King. He's written best sellers, everyone knows who he is and the world is waiting with baited breath for his next novel. Only he's got writer's block. And has had for two years. His wife, Alice, concerned for his deteriorating mental condition (Alan can't write and can't sleep and when we first meet him he's a bit sulky...), takes him away to Bright Falls, an isolated mountain community where he can get some peace away from the horror that is the typewriter and an empty page.

After meeting a few locals, and a creepy incident in the local diner involving the local mad woman, Alan and Alice go their cabin deep in the mountains. This being a horror game, things deteriorate relatively fast. No, he doesn't get hit by an van whilst out for a walk, or mauled by a rabid golden retriever (admit it, we're all hoping it happens to Dean Koontz one day). Rather, it gets dark. Really dark. Which is bad for two main reasons. One: Your wife is terrified of the dark and becomes hysterical if the lights go out; and Two: The darkness is sentient and out to kill you. Admittedly, the second point is probably the more serious of the two.

After a fight with his wife, Alan storms out of the cabin only to find it soon engulfed by darkness and Alice's screams echoing in his ear. Wake's quest begins as he wakes up a week later to find Alice still missing and himself the prime suspect in her disappearance. Wake soon discovers that more is going on than meets the eye, as pages from a book he doesn't remember writing begin to appear, telling him exactly what's about to happen. The errant author soon finds himself chased by local law enforcement (with one brilliant chase scene involving police, rogue FBI agents and a helicopter chase in a moon lit forest) and possessed villagers as he tries to find Alice and discover what happened in the week he can't remember

Throughout the game Wake is assailed by locals possessed by the darkness, resulting in a multitude of psychotic loggers, farmers and hunters rising out of the forest and attacking him. Wake also comes under attack from possessed objects, from dustbins to diggers.

The game is not limited to just running around a forest at night. A number of scenes take place around the town during the day, with Wake interacting with the locals and his agent and friend Barry, who acts as comic relief (and actually manages to be funny on occasion).

Combat involves a combination of flashlight and various firearms. The flashlight is used to eliminate a veil of darkness that hangs over the various possessed townsfolk you meet. Once this is removed, shown by a flash of light, they become vulnerable to gunfire. The flashlight also acts as your targeting reticule which is an interesting convention that, although slightly awkward to get used to initially, fits within the story and works well.

Interesting touches abound in *Alan Wake*, which is to be expected from a game that has been in development for so long. Throughout the game you can turn on radios and listen to a local DJ talk to locals and give out news stories which relate to the game itself. For example early in the game you're told to keep an eye out for a missing dog and the next day you meet his owner bandaging up the aforementioned hound's paw; the pooch having been attacked by something in the woods...

In terms of the technical achievements of the game, Alan Wake succeeds brilliantly. Visually the game is a marvel, the day time scenes of Bright Falls and the moments when you get to walk through the mountains and forests in daylight look amazing and you almost wish you could visit the place. At night, the forest crowds around you giving you a feeling of both claustrophobia and, strangely, space, as you can easily get lost in the woods. There is the occasional wall and the odd moment where you will have no idea where you are, however this doesn't get in the way of the game or its story. The sound and music for the game are also excellent, warning you of approaching enemies and carrying you along into the plot.

The game has a somewhat tongue in cheek attitude to the gameplay, with pages from the novel Wake wrote that he can't remember scattered throughout the game, warning you of events to come or happenings elsewhere in the game. Add to this the *Twilight Zone* style show that appears on television sets within the game (a show, written and filmed by the game designers, which you can watch from start to finish). Small touches like this help create a real world around you and encourage you to go back and find that extra page or coffee thermos you just can't locate.

Alan Wake is an excellent game. Not as traumatising in scare terms as mainstays such as Resident Evil and Silent Hill and at times it plays fairly tongue in cheek (the rock concert stage built on a farm by ex-rockers Odin and Thor is one of the stranger and more fun sequences in the game). There are moments throughout, however, when you will find the hairs on the back of your neck rising and your palms going sweaty as the wind starts to blow and the darkness creeps in all around.

Eoin Murphy

Alan Wake Graphics: 9 Gameplay: 8 Sound: 8

Replay Value: 7 Overall Score: 8

Pigeons from Hell

(Publisher: Dark Horse Books) Original Story: Robert E. Howard Writer: Joe R. Lansdale Artist: Nathan Fox

The Southern States of the United States of America are a bastion of Gothic horror. Lonely bayous, slavery and abandoned homes of former stately families with a dark past, all forming a perfect backdrop from which to develop tales of things in the dark.

Robert E. Howard's classic tale of the Southern Gothic, *Pigeons from Hell*, first published in *Weird Tales*, May 1938, is one such example, the story firmly rooted in the sordid past of the USA's Deep South.

Howard's original story followed John Branner and his friend Griswell (but not for long...), who spend the night in an abandoned mansion. During the night, Branner awakes to find Griswelll walking down a flight of stairs carrying the axe that had just cleaved his head in two. Suffice to say, the story takes off from there.

Joe R. Lansdale, the writer of the *Drive in Series, The Nightrunners* (1987) and innumerable other novels, has taken on the job of retelling (or indeed reimaging, to use that hateful term) the story, updating it for the modern world, with the tale now focusing on two sisters, Claire and Janet, who have inherited the abandoned Blassenville estate, left to them by their grandmother. It is quickly established (via a significant amount of exposition) that the sisters are the descendants of slaves who were once owned by the mansion's original occupants, but following an unnamed incident, which resulted in the end of the family line, the home becomes the property of the slaves (it's all very ironic...)

The sisters arrive at the dilapidated mansion just as the sun starts to set, a massive flock of pigeons taking flight as they pull up in a van, which is a tad reminiscent of the mystery machine. The sisters and a rag tag group of friends, who strongly resemble the Scooby Gang, proceed to explore the house, which is filled with the abandoned detritus of its former occupants.

One of the group, overexcited at the site of thousands of dead pigeons, breaks his leg and when the group attempt to get him to the hospital they crash the van in a bayou and become trapped in the house overnight, all the while commenting (over and over again) on how it's hot outside but cold inside – could there be something supernatural going on?

Soon after, but not soon enough for this reviewer, the group becomes embroiled in the horror that lives in the heart of the house, a mystery that leads back to its pre-Civil War roots, slavery and, of course, voodoo.

Although the story is based on the Robert E. Howard short story it loses a lot of the original story's impact, mostly as a result of additions by Lansdale. In the original story it was two friends, who, tired after a day's travelling, take shelter in the abandoned Blassenville mansion, only for its supernatural resident to attack.

Introducing a brand new cast of characters and making them descendents adds little to the story, other than forcing Lansdale to introduce a lot of exposition in the first ten pages, most of which was handled comfortably within the original tale but here comes across as little more than an information dump.

The large group of friends, who do little more than provide cannon fodder, draws away the intimacy of the original tale, with many of the characters purely superfluous to the story itself, other than to walk around carrying cell phones and commenting on how they cannot get a signal (which after a decade or more of this appearing in films is starting to becoming a cliché in itself. Just don't mention the phone!). The fact that these characters are drawn from a bad slasher film couldn't be more obvious than if two of them had wandered off from the group and had care-free teenage sex (which never ends well in these situations).

Two other characters from Howard's original make an appearance and, strangely, Lansdale has done nothing to update them. In the original a sheriff appears, having chased an escaped prisoner into the bayou on horseback. In the modern retelling, the sheriff arrives on horseback in the same manner, with similar dialogue, and just doesn't fit properly into the retelling. I found myself wondering why he was on horseback when most rural police seem to prefer 4x4's. Strangely, the sheriffs reaction to Branner's story in the original is a much more modern (and sensible one) compared to this retelling.

Lansdale has bulked up the story with the arrival of the Scooby Gang, the inclusion of a Haints (the ghosts of dead slaves) sub plot, a pointless leg breaking and car accident that only serves to drag out the story.

The updating of the story simply doesn't work, with the original tale much better at eliciting a reaction from the reader. Frankly, the graphic novel update is filled with annoying characters and it misses much of the import of the original tale.

Visually, the character drawings are surprisingly ugly, Claire and Janet coming off the worse. Their features regularly change so that at times you can't tell them apart and three panels later they look nothing like each other. The other characters are standard teen templates (see insert) but again are remarkably unappealing. Backgrounds are serviceable enough, but the gritty style of art again appears ugly and yes, a dilapidated mansion filled with dead pigeons won't be the prettiest of places, but I'd still like to be able to identify objects in the house rather than grey blue ill-defined debris.

Whilst I'm a fan of Joe R. Lansdale's other work, the adaptation of *Pigeons from Hell* just did not appeal to me. It carried none of the skill in storytelling that is present in Howard's original tale and the change from Branner to Claire and Janet just doesn't work, with exposition dumps early in the graphic novel which are clumsy and somewhat irritating to read. If you're interested in reading a good Southern Gothic tale, then please, look for a copy of Howard's original story, it has all the elements needed to make sure you never look at a pigeon in the same way again. Otherwise, avoid this graphic novel.

Eoin Murphy

TELEVISION REVIEWS

America's Next Top Victim: Scream Queens, Season 1 (VH1,Oct-Dec 2008/ MTV, Jan-March 2010)

It's easy to scoff. It's equally easy to sneer, to groan with exaggerated exasperation and roll one's eyes heavenward, as if asking for deliverance from the crime against humanity's finer intellectual, aesthetic and feminist sensibilities that is being acted out on the screen of one's television (surrounded, of course, by collectors' edition DVD box sets of *Friday the 13th* and *Cube*). After watching several episode's of VH1's recent (it's only recently been shown in Ireland courtesy of the always-tasteful MTV) 'reality' show *Scream Queens*, however, I began to get the feeling that if I did that, acting coach John Homa would roll his eyes right back at me, tell me I'm not being "real," that I need to "bring it," and that he simply isn't convinced that I'm committed to the role of Scoffer #2 (the slutty one who gets disembowelled from behind near the end of the first hour).

I admit without hesitation that, over 350 minutes of total running time later, *Scream Queens* may indeed have brainwashed me into not rejecting it outright as total, irredeemable tripe. Still, despite my awareness of having been manipulated by its cliff-hanger ad breaks and cannily contrived narrativising and character identification, I remain incapable of telling whether the programme really is total, irredeemable tripe, or, in fact, a work of pure genius.

The format is a simple and a familiar one, being almost identical to that pioneered by Big Brother and developed (or perhaps more accurately honed by the merciless knife of TV formula-creation to its most basic and repeatable elements) through such gems as Love Island, Beauty and the Geek and, most successfully, the America's Next Top Model franchise. Indeed, there is little to differentiate this effort from the latter (which contains almost equal quantities of screaming and crying, both in front of the camera and in the "reality" sections). Competing, not for a modelling contract this time but for a "break-out" role in Saw VI (2009), ten aspiring but more or less unknown actresses move into a lavish hacienda-style dwelling somewhere in sunny California, complete with swimming pool, hot-tub and – in a development surely meant to crank up the shouting even more – no dishwasher. The aspirant scream queens compete in a series of weekly challenges of increasing formality and intensity, and at the end of each episode (which neatly corresponds to a week in their highly ordered existence) they stand in front of a panel of judges for elimination. Sure, there are some tweaks (not everyone is called for judgement every week and, well, that's it) but it is conducted by means of an all-but unaltered version of "Tyra Mail" - missives left by some unknown agent in a pre-ordained place in the house informing the contestants of new challenges and elimination meetings – while during the latter, the contestants must walk along what is to all intents and purposes a catwalk. The judges, in both cases, are a mixture of women who have previously held roles similar to those the girls weep and cat-fight over, and the men who direct, train and hire or fire them.

It's an entirely unreconstructed replication of Hollywood power structures, but in *Scream Queens*, the Gothic potential of this world of Svengali-types and wicked step-mothers is brought nearer to the surface by means of a heavy (and yes, quite hammy) emphasis on people being "axed," "cut," "given the chop" or looking forward to days in front of the camera that are going to be "hell." This may be fairly obvious and cheap, but it does manage to serve as a reasonably satisfying commentary on the melodramatics of what

reality TV has been doing since the advent of *Big Brother* ten years ago. The show does this in terms only slightly less overt than those employed by Charlie Brooker in his zombies-in-the-*Big-Brother*-house mini-series, *Dead Set*. As in every reality TV programme, for the duration of the show, being told that they may no longer be on that particular television slot is the worst thing that can befall these girls. *Scream Queens* takes this basic premise and writes it large in letters dripping with fake blood. Even "conventional" reality TV shows, it would seem, are rarely far away from Gothic material in the terror that the death-like finality of elimination inspires, and in the unquestionable, even arbitrary power and sadistic cruelty wielded like a weapon by the judges who reward or punish behaviour: *Scream Queens* merely takes this to its logical conclusion.

With another nod to the genre from which the show draws its inspiration, the sumptuously yet tackily appointed house where the often mutinous tensions between the girls are most evident comes amusingly decked out in purple drapes, cheap Gothic "mouldings" that the Osbournes would be envious of, some gratuitous faux-cowbebs (nicely off-set by the usual mess in the bedrooms, making the mocked-up dirt look almost chic) and "creepy" dim lighting. This influence is played up with particularly heavy hand in the extenuated corridors down which the girls are filmed walking in skimpy clothing, clearly prepped by the director to overplay the trepidation and "oh-I'm-so-vulnerable" posture. The fear, of course, is not that someone is stalking them in the shadows, but that they will discover a letter calling them to the "Grand Ballroom," as the elimination room is hyperbolically monikered; but it still invites a brief snigger of genre recognition, especially as this letter dangles, not un-wittily, from a meat-hung hung in the hallway. Some effort has also been put into the delivery of information on weekly challenges which more than live up to Alfred Hitchcock's exhortation (via the playwright Sardou) that we should "torture the women!" They include jumping out of a high window, being covered in cockroaches, having to kiss another girl in a hot-tub ... honestly, this one caused the greatest consternation of them all. The messengers range from a vomiting zombie (which apparently actually smelled of vomit), through a weird doll-child thing with a camera, to a monster trapped in a mirror and a box full of snakes, providing ample opportunity for the contestants to scream and run away prettily.

What rapidly becomes apparent, however, is that these contestants can't quite be written off as an undifferentiated mass of camera fodder - some of them have (gasp!) what might pass for personalities or at least characters. Somewhat predictably, the whole "final-girl" narrative, and the ways in which it overlaps with the elimination process of more ostensibly straightforward reality shows, gets laid on pretty thick here. Tanedra, the eventual winner, is presented from the first ten minutes of the show as the plucky African-American underdog with no acting experience and a down-to-earth grittiness that allows her to stand out as the evident heroine against slick white and Asian girls straight out of stage school. The villainess here is, of course, the shiny-haired brunette, Michelle, whose confidence in her own beauty and abilities renders her an ideal and worthy opponent, but, equally, marks her out as doomed in the slasher-movie logic that the show itself follows (with its tongue firmly in its cheek). Only the girl who appears more reticent about her own sexuality/ privilege/ talent will win through, both in terms of gaining the audience's trust by not alienating them, and of battling off the monstrous killer (in this case, elimination), who is only looking for weaknesses in the glossy armour of the overtly attractive girls. Michelle is, to all intents and purposes, Cordelia in the early episodes of Buffy the Vampire Slayer (but not in Angel, where she's a completely different kettle of tentacled things altogether), not so much beautiful as what the French call soignée, groomed to robotic perfection in a way that is entirely anathema to the role of the final girl. Anyone watching this show who knows anything about the genre would not be fooled for an instant into thinking that she might win.

As in any good horror film, or reality show for that matter, almost all of the rest of the girls are literally used as nothing more than bait dangled in front of an audience hungry for the humiliation, tears and abuse-hurling that make such productions so enduringly popular. The exceptions, rather more interestingly, are Lindsay, the luminous former child star who, presumably thanks to her (UK) size 12 figure, fulfils a prophecy made by one of the guest judges in the first episode and takes the role of the nice girl next door rather than the leading lady by finishing third; and Jessica, the show's inevitable "psycho" whose "bizarre" and manic behaviour guaranteed her presence on the show right up until Episode 7. Once these characters – sorry, *personalities* – have been established, and after a rather shaky, sloppily edited first episode, *Scream Queens* becomes surprisingly gripping, and even well put-together as a programme. Each challenge is lead up to by some reasonably detailed training, during which the tensions between the girls are allowed to spill out into the day-to-day world of their working lives, outside of the hothouse atmosphere of their living quarters.

And it's this that makes the whole thing really quite compelling in places – as these things go, at any rate. The director, James Gunn (writer of the 2004 *Dawn of the Dead* remake, and writer/ director of *Slither* (2006)), can be frustratingly obtuse sometimes in his instructions to his leggy charges; while the machinations of Michelle-the-appointed-bitch vacillate between the works of an evil genius and the desperate flailings of someone who knows she would have got nowhere without her hair straightener. Watching the girls we're rooting for struggling against all of this while attempting to look genuinely frightened by something obviously fictional but not too upset by "real" events might not change the face of television, but it's certainly engaging, and at times, absorbing. The "themes" of each episode (campiness, stunts, the "gross-out factor," what they call "altered states" like possession and vampirism, and so on), while far from groundbreaking, are also generically entertaining as miniature genre exercises, and add some much-needed variety to what could easily become a visually repetitive format. Even if all of this would appear to be derivative in the extreme – which it is – it should be remembered that this is part of what horror is all about – startling the audience into screaming at what they knew was going to happen.

It's still unclear whether MTV (or even a more widely available Irish TV channel) decide to bring the forthcoming Season 2 of Scream Queens to this side of the Atlantic (and how very amusing it would be to see Ryan Tubridy struggling politely to interview the winner, or Karen Koster fawning all over her on a mid-week edition of *Xposé* ...). In either case, the question remains – would I recommend watching it? Satisfying as it would be to respond with a resounding "No," it wouldn't be entirely honest of me to do so. If, as I mentioned at the beginning of this review, you sit down in front of the show expecting your moral/ feminist/ aesthetic sensibilities to be outraged, then you certainly won't be disappointed – in fact, this may be something of a recommendation for some. And on a more technical level, some tweaking definitely needs to be done. When a contestant gets "the axe," and the aforementioned weapon chops into her portrait, down which blood proceeds to spill, it takes a good few minutes to figure out that it is in fact an axe, and not a particularly tiny and not-at-all-scary hammer. Even less satisfactory is Shawnee Smith (who plays Amanda in all six Saw films), the Tyra-figure here, a pretty poor substitute for the reigning queen of all-girl reality contests: wooden, uninspiring and lacking in any real sense of leadership or mentoring skills. It would also improve the show significantly if more of the film roles and actresses which the contestants should be aspiring towards were incorporated into the show itself in the form of film clips or acting challenges which ask the contestants to recreate famous (or notorious) scenes. When they do this, as with a scene from The Brain that Wouldn't Die, it reminds us of what it is that they're trying to do, and gives the girls an opportunity to show off how well they know the genre they're trying to fit themselves into – not to mention providing the audience with those vital genre-recognition moments

again (and if the IMDb message boards are anything to go by, that audience includes as many hard-core horror fans as it does those unfamiliar with the genre who just like a good talent contest).

Inevitably, however, the show veers a little too close to the misogyny that so many commentators see as inextricable from the slasher film. It's difficult to ignore the delighted smirk on the face of the "director" James Gunn as pretty girls wearing not very much at all scream in terror, and even the most hardened post-feminist couldn't help but shudder at his ghoulish enthusiasm for female panic. This is precisely the kind of director who springs to mind when one reads Laura Mulvey's arguments about the close identification of killer, camera and (in her formulation, generally male) audience. Nevertheless, Scream Queens by no means exclusively for boys – indeed, quite the opposite. As with all reality TV shows, it's aspirational, and, like its older sister America's Next Top Model, what it displays most clearly is the desire of young women to be beautiful, successful and, above all, famous. And it's in dissecting this trope, and taking gentle jabs at the industry that perpetuates it, that Scream Queens is at its most intriguing. In an early episode of Cycle 8 of ANTM, asked to pose as dead crime victims (in a somewhat eerie, and possibly coincidental reiteration of *The Eyes of Laura Mars* (1978)), the contestants of the Tyra Banks' vehicle genuinely surprised their judges by being better at this than at many of the previous challenges. Already objectified into lifeless dolls, this shoot evidently only asked the girls to do something that they do any way – a particularly graphic representation of the theses of Mulvey and Elisabeth Bronfen, that art effectively "kills" the female form into static poses and a loss of subjectivity or agency. By emphasising the role of the final girl over the victim, Scream Queens makes some move towards refusing this objectification, even as it participates in it – while Tyra's tutees are praised for looking attractively dead, Shawnee's lot are encouraged to act in a fashion that might prevent the killer from achieving his blood-thirsty goal.

This is not to say, however, that the show is some kind of neo-feminist juggernaut, reclaiming power for the oppressed masses of slim, epidermically faultless American girls. Nor does it function as a genuinely self-aware critique of the fashion and entertainment industries' attitude towards the fairer sex, or indeed their ruthless elimination of those who don't quite "have the look we were looking for" since it quite clearly takes this aspect of what it does very seriously indeed. That said, I would hesitate to dismiss this out of hand – it is undeniably amusing, and takes a wry attitude towards its own histrionics, and towards those that have come to characterise the genres to which it belongs – both reality television and horror. Neither should we see this as incontrovertible proof that the Western horror movie is so irredeemably in decline that it has descended forever to the level of derivative self-parody for the sake of mindless mass entertainment. Let us not forget that horror has long been accused of precisely both of these things, from Horace Walpole to Wes Craven's *Scream* series, and that, however often its death-knell is sounded, it's always ready to claw its way back out of its own coffin.

So, instead of sniggering with superior derision, maybe we should just see it as a rare opportunity to put ourselves in the same position as these girls, and to imagine ourselves winning a "break-out" role in, say, the second sequence of *The Human Centipede*. We all know the genre back to front – this should be easy, right? We should, in fact, be able to "nail" the part without too much difficulty – certainly better than those vacuous prom-queen types. Right? So, as your imaginary self wails in despair, fear and unbearable pain, I want you to really "bring it," stop "acting" and tap into "that very dark place in your mind," because right now, you're not selling it to me.

Primal Screams The Stone Tape

(BBC, 1972: BFI DVD)

The news that any 'classic' novel, film or television series is to be re-released should always be received with a certain amount of trepidation. After all, too often does the return of some much-feted cult masterwork result in disappointment and dismay. We are too willing to believe in the notion of the 'lost' work of genius and forget that there were often very good reasons why certain books, TV programmes and movies faded into obscurity. This rule proves even more true in the realm of horror and science fiction, where hazy, nostalgia-soaked recollections of late-night readings or viewings are often the only thing that supports someone's belief that a particular work was amazing or terrifying.

The Stone Tape, a BBC sci-fi ghost story first broadcast in 1972, is one example of a television play which has acquired a near-mythic status amongst fans of the supernatural. Fortunately, the DVD release of this drama proves that the high reputation it has enjoyed all this time was more than justified. Written by Nigel Kneale, the creator of *Quatermass*, The Stone Tape is another exercise in the kind of intellectual horror that was Kneale's calling card. Like the Quatermass stories, The Stone Tape demonstrates just how little separates science from superstition and technology from magic and shows how our day to day fears are often indicators of much greater philosophical questions that have haunted humanity since prehistory.

The Stone Tape opens in Taskerlands, a huge 19th Century mansion outside London which has been restored and turned into a research and development centre by major firm Ryan Electrics. Head of operations Peter Brock is instructed by his bosses to come up with a new form of electronic recording and he assembles a team of scientists and technicians, including skilled computer programmer Jill Greeley, and sets them to work on the project.

The construction foreman informs Brock that work on restoring one of the largest rooms has stopped because the builders say that its haunted. Their interest piqued, the scientists venture in and hear the scampering of feet followed by a terrible scream. To their further disbelief Jill claims to have seen the spectral figure of a young maid falling from the top of a flight of steps. Making investigations in the nearby town, the team learns that a maid did die in the house in Victorian times and that even then Taskerlands had a reputation for being haunted.

Brock organises a series of experiments to verify the existence of the ghost. He eventually theorizes that the very fabric of the room has acted as a recording material. The death of the maid has been captured, as if on tape, by the stone walls. Concluding that they have stumbled upon one of the great scientific discoveries, Brock instructs his increasingly fearful fellow scientists to probe the stone and find out how the maid's death became imprinted on its 'memory.' Their activities only result in making the screaming maid finally disappear. Then Jill has the nightmarish realization that their tampering has only wiped the surface recording of the stone, unleashing a much older, more evil and more deadly supernatural force.

Like so much of Nigel Kneale's writing, The Stone Tape impresses because it pushes the limit of the kind of ideas a television drama can explore. Kneale was hired by the BBC simply to write a ghost story for Christmas but, true to form, he saw this as no reason why he should not expand the minds of his audience. The play remains startlingly conceptual, and is challenging enough even for a modern audience. Here is a drama written nearly forty years ago which speculates about what kind of technology will come after the

digital revolution has passed. At the same time, Kneale cleverly deploys enough of the traditional conventions of the ghost story to keep us from getting lost.

On the acting front, Michael Bryant gives an absolutely mesmeric turn as the ruthless Brock and it's our loss that this highly regarded stage actor rarely made film and television appearances. Equally intense and convincing is Jane Asher as Jill Greeley, the only person who identifies the ghost as not just a scientific phenomena but a human spirit trapped in eternity. The dialectic between the aggressive male craving for power and female compassion and understanding provides *The Stone Tape* with its narrative dynamic. Rounding out the cast are many familiar faces from the world of 70's film and television fantasy, including Michael Bates (the prison officer from *A Clockwork Orange*), James Cosmo and Iain Cuthbertson.

The greatest bonus of this release is the commentary provided by Kneale and Kim Newman. Kneale could be trenchant but here he is on effervescent form, recalling the making of this drama with astonishing clarity and affection, even at a distance of almost four decades. Their discussion expands, allowing Kneale to give a fascinating account of his life and art. This takes in everything from his childhood on the Isle of Man (where his mother practised witchcraft), his obsession with the shifting boundary between science and the paranormal, his love of M.R. James and the legacy of his own work. Given that Kneale has since passed away its fantastic to have the candid recollections of one of the true pioneers of sci-fi horror on record.

It would be wrong to give the impression that *The Stone Tape* is flawless. To a modern audience this mostly studio-based production may seem a little static and lifeless. Kneale strove to create conflicted, three-dimensional characters and to use his work to investigate highly sophisticated concepts but even the most ardent of his fans must admit that the script could have done with a little pruning. That said, Hammer studios stalwart Peter Sasdy's (best known for his 1971 Hammer horror hit *Countess Dracula*) direction is proficient, the set design and jarringly atonal electronic score are cool in a groovy 70's way and even the psychedelic blobs of primordial hatred that appear at the dénouement are a step above the usual standard of BBC special effects of that era.

As for the crucial question - is *The Stone Tape* still scary?- the answer is most certainly yes. Like the *Quatermass* stories, *The Stone Tape* suggests that what we fear most is actually something that already resides deep within us. It is a part of our heritage we can hide from but never fully escape. The mask of rationality that civilization wears will ultimately split apart and the darkness of mankind's true nature shall seep through. With its intriguing premise, gnawing sense of unease and stylish execution, *The Stone Tape* is a highpoint to which small-screen sci-fi horror had rarely ascended before and, sadly, has never reached again since.

EDWARD O'HARE

True Blood: Season 2 (HBO, June-Sept 2009/ FX, Feb-May, 2010)

The True Blood, HBO's award-winning, sex-fuelled vampire romance (based on Charlaine Harris' Southern Vampire Mysteries), has recently completed its second season. At the end of season one the town of Bon Temps, Louisiana, had returned to normality with the (fairly anticlimactic) exposure of faux-Cajun Rene as the season's serial killer, while still leaving several plot strands open to development. The discovery of another dead body, this time minus its heart, kicks off season two, however what initially appears to be yet another hunt for a serial killer gets thankfully sidelined as several more interesting plots are developed. The central romance of Sookie (Anna Paquin) and Bill (Stephen Moyer) is complicated by the presence of Eric (Alexander Skarsgård), while several other vampire/human relationships are provocatively played out with all the sex, violence, and humour one has come to expect from the show, which is a much-needed antidote to the teen-friendly and socially/morally conservative Twilight series.

The plot arc of the first half of this season involves the disappearance of Godric (Allan Hyde), a two-thousand-year-old vampire, and the understandable concern of the vampire community as suspicion falls on the Fellowship of the Sun, a fundamentalist Christian anti-vampire organization led by Rev. Newlin. The workings of the Fellowship are explored as Jason Stackhouse (Ryan Kwanten), the handsome but slow-witted brother of Sookie, our heroine, goes on a religious retreat and falls prey to the Fellowship's sanguivoriphobic rhetoric. Having seemingly been contractually obliged to remove his shirt in every episode of season one, Jason's character provided nicely-toned abs but little in the way of character development. This left one wondering what, if anything, he could do in season two. As it turns out, he proves excellent in the Fellowship storyline as he contemplates celibacy and rises in the ranks, becoming one of the elite 'Soldiers of the Sun'. His old character is never far from the surface, however, and the attraction of the Reverend's young, blond wife prove a little too tempting. Similarly, he still provides much of the show's humour, as when later in the series a jealous Andy complains that "women do just throw themselves at you. You don't even have to do anything". Jason indignantly replies: "Actually I do. I work out like a motherfucker and I watch a lot of porn to learn stuff".

It has been noted previously that creator Alan Ball is not always entirely sure what it is that vampires are representing in the show; the hostility towards these conveniently shifting 'others' can be homophobia at one moment and racism the next (see Moira Fowley's review of Season One in Issue #5). Season two is, in some respects, no different although the focus is more concentrated on religious confrontation. This is apparent not only in the Fellowship's naked hatred of vampires, with its often unsubtle parallels to Christian homophobia, but in the Messiah-like figure of Godric. A vampire preaching tolerance and non-violence, who notes that "I am actually older than your Jesus. I wish I could have known him but I missed it", Godric sacrifices himself for the sake of human and vampire kind. This vampire pacifism is then sharply contrasted with the spectacle of a Christian suicide bomber and, throughout the series, the unfolding depravity back in Bon Temps.

It is in Bon Temps that the parallel tale of Maryann (Michelle Forbes) unfolds. Strikingly introduced to the series standing naked in the middle of a road with a large pig by her side, the character of Maryann was always going to be mysterious. Indeed, it is the mystery of her identity that draws together the remaining characters in Bon Temps. Shapeshifter Sam Merlotte (Sam Trammell), owner of the local bar, has a past with her he does not wish to reveal; Sookie's troubled best friend Tara and her new boyfriend Eggs are suspiciously well-treated in her luxurious mansion and become increasingly involved in her

Bacchanalian orgies; and Sookie, before leaving Bon Temps to help find Godric, is attacked by a creature that at first appears to be a Minotaur. While the Maryann plot line concerns most of the secondary characters of the series, it is by far the least interesting idea in the series. To readers of the novels, Maryann's character is another step in the ever-expanding magical world of Bon Temps, of which vampires are simply one element. However, even in a world of vampires, shapeshifters, and other mythical creatures, there is a cut-off point where yet another creature, and in particular one who seems indestructible, is simply tiresome. The revelation of what exactly Maryann is becomes far too drawn out, to the point where it is no longer particularly interesting. Indeed, she suffers from a fate similar to that of Sylar and Peter in NBC's Heroes (thankfully cancelled after four seasons), where the characters ceased to be appealing after acquiring God-like powers by the end of season one (Heroes' memorably hilarious solution was to give Peter amnesia and send him to County Cork!). The only character with the key to Maryann's defeat is Sophie-Anne (Evan Rachel Wood), the bisexual ("I haven't enjoyed sex with men since the Eisenhower administration"), yahtzee-playing Vampire Queen of Louisiana. Her answer, while in keeping with the spirit of the novels, is both confused and vague: "Surely you know that everything that exists imagined itself into existence". While Ball has adhered closely to the plot and characters of the source material, something quite unusual for a US TV show, the inclusion of the Maryann plot line, regardless of the somewhat similar character in the novel, simply doesn't hold the viewer's attention as it is drawn out over the weeks and months of the show.

Despite this, the secondary characters of Bon Temps are continually entertaining. Andy Bellefleur, the disgraced alcoholic police officer, remains the only character in Bon Temps seeing clearly, while the budding romance of Hoyt and the newly-turned teenage vampire, Jessica, is played out across the series. LaFayette (brilliantly played by Nelsan Ellis), the no-nonsense, flamboyantly camp chef at Merlotte's, is considerably chastened in season two and, in a particularly striking early episode, the black chef is captured and chained up in the decidedly Aryan Eric's basement, as punishment for his dealing in the human narcotic 'v', or vampire blood. The trauma of the experience, as he watches a fellow prisoner being gruesomely devoured in front of his eyes, leaves him unfortunately intimidated for the remainder of the series.

Which leaves us, of course, with the main characters of the show – brooding, gentlemanly vampire Bill, into whose violent past we get a welcome glimpse, and the telepathic Southern belle Sookie, whose supernatural powers are further explored. Their exploits weave in and out of the various sub-plots as they initially help with Godric's rescue, (staying at the suitably-named Hotel Carmilla in Texas), before returning to help save their home town once again.

The trip away gives the couple a chance to explore the problems inherent in a vampire/human relationship and the realities of ageing are confronted. A parallel romance between the vampire Isabel and her human lover Hugo highlights the inevitable in Sookie and Bill's relationship. Isabel reveals her sentiments in a conversation with Eric. When asked if she finds "the prospect of him [Hugo] growing old, sickly, crippled somewhat repulsive?", she responds: "No, I find it curious, like a science project". This clinical nature is betrayed later, however, as Isabel admits to still loving Hugo, despite his betrayal of her and her kind. In fact, the series is full of sensitive vampires, very much the trend in vampire portrayals of late (*Twilight*, *The Vampire Diaries*, and so on). Even Eric, who does not shy away from violent murder and deviousness in his designs towards Sookie, has a sensitive side when it comes to his relationship with Godric. Although, as noted earlier, the *True Blood* brand of romance tends to be both thoughtful and challenging without taking itself too seriously.

Sensitive vampires and murderous Christian fundamentalists; sugary romance and Bacchanalian orgies; a serious side but with plenty of humour; *True Blood* has a little something for everyone. There are some problems with the show – its over-reliance on stereotypes and a lack of clarity in its themes are two examples which stand out – but there is plenty to love and it is continually entertaining. Viewers unfamiliar with the novels will surely be waiting expectantly for the resolution of the cliffhanger in the final episode, while fans of Harris will equally be anticipating the approach Ball takes to the third novel's adaptation. Certainly, there will be an exploration of the darker side of Bill, and his and Sookie's relationship will be put to the test, maybe even coming to an end. Although, then again, as Jason puts it: "Sometimes you need to destroy something to save it. That's in the Bible... or the Constitution"

CONOR REID

The Day of the Triffids (BBC, Dec 2009)

The Roots of All Evil

A story involving a global cataclysm, a fight for survival in a world reduced to anarchy, and the rise of genetically modified, flesh-eating mutants might have seemed a peculiar choice for festive entertainment, but nonetheless *The Day of the Triffids* was the BBC's showpiece Christmas drama for 2009. John Wyndham's evergreen tale of killer plants unleashed upon a world population rendered mostly blind has proven one of the hardy perennials of sci-fi horror. Already filmed twice before (as a movie in 1962 and television series in 1981), this flashy two-part version proves that *The Day of the Triffids* is one of those rare works which can tap into the anxieties of each new generation.

First published in 1951, Wyndham's book remains an intensely unsettling read. From the unforgettable opening in which the main character awakes in a mysteriously deserted hospital to the gradual revelation of humanity's nightmarish fate, the novel has an unusual imaginative power which keeps you gripped until the last page. *The Day of the Triffids* is the archetypal domestic disaster novel, or what Brian Aldiss sarcastically described as a 'cosy catastrophe.' It transports you into a world where terrible things transpire right in the heart of comfortable suburbia and leads you see that we are no more than defenceless animals.

What a rereading of *The Day of the Triffids* also reveals is just how little it needs updating. Many of the novel's themes, including genetic engineering and the search for an alternative fuel source, have never been more relevant. This is a testament to the success of Wyndham's personal approach to science-fiction. Wyndham had a deep antipathy for the 'galactic gangsters in space' style of American science-fiction. Instead he created what he termed 'logical fantasies,' no-nonsense explorations of how real scientific developments might affect human life in the future.

The prescience of *The Day of the Triffids* has made screenwriter Patrick Harbinson's job rather easy. The film begins with triffid expert Bill Masen (Dougray Scott) being attacked by one of his own super-plants and taken to hospital in London. Masen works in a laboratory called the 'Orchard' where the triffids are bred and studied. The plants have provided the world with a safe, clean oil which has averted the catastrophe of global warming. When solar flares ignite clouds of plasma surrounding our atmosphere, Masen, his eyes bandaged after his *triffid-work-place related accident*, is one of the few not struck blind.

Across the devastated city Masen finds Jill Playton (Joely Richardson), a television reporter whose vision was saved because she was trapped in the Underground during the solar flare, and together they search for other members of the 'sighted' community. Meanwhile, a misguided environmentalist shuts down the Orchard's security system and allows the triffids to escape. Carnivorous, mobile, and capable of dealing out a fatal sting from 15 feet, they set off in search of their new food source, the millions of helpless blind.

Masen and Playton realize the danger the triffids pose but nobody is interested. The rule of law hangs by a thread and the few remaining government officials are preparing to leave London. Outraged American military officer Capt. Coker (Jason Priestley) is determined not to let them abandon the blind. Coker comes under the sway of a charming psychopath called Torrence (Eddie Izzard). Torrence believes that in this country of the blind he is destined to be king and so he tricks Coker and takes control of his forces.

With Torrence established as a totalitarian leader and millions of triffids descending upon London to feast upon the helpless survivors, Masen and Playton go in search of Masen's father (Brian Cox), the scientist who discovered the triffids, to see if he can help them find a way to destroy them. As the number of victims rises and the triffids take control, will there be anybody left to save?

The greatest strength of this film is its cast. Dougray Scott's highland grimness is ideal for the character of Masen. As Jill Playton, Joely Richardson is the emotional centre of the piece, and her reactions to the unfolding holocaust are thoroughly believable. An intriguing bit of casting is Eddie Izzard as Torrence. He invests the character with an unnerving maniacal quality and is clearly having great fun playing a suave baddie. Also along for the ride are Jason Priestly (YES, JASON PRIESTLY!) as the naïve Coker, Venessa Redgrave as a deranged Mother Superior, and the always reliable Brian Cox as Masen's father.

Director Nick Copus deserves much credit for making this production genuinely scary. Although he muddles the book's brilliant early chapters (these were already realized so effectively in Danny Boyle's 28 Days Later (2002) that he probably felt inclined to try something different) the film has an atmosphere of creeping dread which persists right through to the finish. The triffids themselves are used sparingly but the scenes in which they do appear, set mostly at night, are edge-of-the-seat stuff. In place of the giant stalks of celery and Venus fly-traps of the 60's and 80's versions, these lethal orchid-like weeds have lightning-fast roots for ensnaring their victims, a floral head like a monk's cowl that conceals their deadly sting and emit a blood-curdling shriek when they go into battle.

As nasty as the triffids are, human behaviour was always the most chilling aspect of Wyndham's story. The callous indifference of the authorities to the plight of the blind in this version is all too believable. It also excellently captures the multitude of viewpoints in a global crisis, with some hoping to make the disaster the foundation for a better world and others seeking to exploit it for their own devious ends. Ultimately, *The Day of the Triffids* asks us to contemplate what kind of society may come into existence in the wake of global warming, something few novels or films have so far had the courage to do.

Tense, thrilling and well acted, this version of *The Day of the Triffids* is the best yet because it is the first to engage with all the ideas Wyndham's novel contains and to fully realize his vision of contemporary civilization sent into free-fall. Although it ends with a *deus ex machina* that stretches credulity to breaking point it's otherwise exactly the kind of smart horror drama that we could do with much more of. It even retains Wyndham's original ending, with our heroes deserting Britain to begin a new life on the Isle of Wight. Now that's what some might call a fate worse than death.

NORMAN OSBORNE