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Contents

Mother, Monstrous: Motherhood, Grief, and the Supernatural in Marc-Antoine Charpentier's *Médée*

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It has been argued that the illustrations of the sublime provided by Edmund Burke in *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757) 'have provided something like a reader's guide to the Gothic novel', and that the 'vast cataracts, raging storms, lofty towers, dark nights, ghosts and goblins, serpents, madmen; mountains, precipices, dazzling light; low, tremulous, intermittent sounds, such as moans, sighs or whispers; immense, gloomy buildings; tyranny, incarceration, torture' that he describes provide some of the first images that might appear in one's mind at the mention of the word 'gothic'.[1] Although this is not an exhaustive list of tropes in either case, it is noteworthy that Burke's description might also be considered as a reader's guide to opera. While opera sees 'moans, sighs, and whispers' replaced with ostentatious displays of vocal and instrumental prowess, works within the genre have made copious use of the sublime landscapes, supernatural appearances, intrigue, tales of terror, torment, and predation that served as the technology of early gothic fiction.[2] From its inception in the seventeenth century, opera has been synonymous with the fantastical and grotesque, its depictions of which have since formed the subject of countless aesthetic and critical discussions.[3] Although the origins of the gothic novel and the opera differ significantly, a shared lineage can be found in their use of folklore, fairy-tales, and mythologies. Investigations of early operatic texts reveal prominent intersections with the gothic, and, while not exclusively gothic in themselves, the examination of operatic texts through a gothic lens can provide illuminating insights into the relationships between literary and musical texts.

The operatic 'text' can be somewhat difficult to pin down as an object for critical discussion and enquiry. Comprising a written dramatic text (libretto), musical setting, and often elaborate stage design, machinery, and choreography, in creation and production the opera is a largely collaborative process. While the present study focuses primarily on the

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[1] David B. Morris, 'Gothic Sublimity', *New Literary History*, 16.2 (Winter 1985), 299-319 (pp. 300-01).
[2] Frederick S. Frank, 'Preface' to *Guide to the Gothic: An Annotated Bibliography of Criticism* (London: Scarecrow Press, 1984), pp. ix-xvi (p. x).
[3] Aubrey S. Garlington, '"Le Merveilleux" and Operatic Reform in Eighteenth-Century French Opera', *The Musical Quarterly*, 49.4 (October 1963), 484-97 (p. 484).

notated musical score and libretto of *Médée* – by Marc-Antoine Charpentier and Thomas Corneille respectively – it must be noted that the opera, no less than any other musical or theatrical form, is greater than the sum of its written parts. Having been performed, *Médée* can be conceived of as a historical event and so must also be considered in terms of performance, reception, and the historical context of its creation. Such considerations are of particular import when considering the experiential element of the operatic text, the multimodality of which affords a capacity for the spectacular that defined much of its early history. The creation/evocation of wonder in the audience through the application of music, spectacular costume, and stage design and machinery – most often used for the appearance of supernatural characters or deities – characterises early operatic works. The first performance of Luigi Rossi's *Orfeo* in Paris on 2 March 1647 saw scenery built that included fortresses, forests, and the Gardens of the Sun, with personifications of Victory and the Sun himself descending in flying chariots to sing to rapt audiences.[4] The United Company in London poured between a third and a half of its annual working budget into the first performance of Henry Purcell's *The Fairy Queen* in 1692, which – though a Restoration dramatick opera rather than an opera in the continental sense – had all the scenic trappings of its French and Italian cousins, including but not limited to articulated dragons, swans transforming into fairies, the rising sun and mist, in addition to its resplendent musical performers and dance corps.[5]

The effects created in such works are often referred to as *les merveilleux* (the marvellous), a term traditionally associated with similar appearances in poetic genres. Downing A. Thomas argues that the *tragédie en musique* – an early form of French opera – highlighted the visual *merveilleux* of supernatural appearances and special effects to a greater degree than any contemporary dramatic idiom.[6] Whether the fascination of the early-modern audience with supernatural topoi necessitated the need for spectacle, or the spectacular combination of dance, music, and drama of the opera invited their use is uncertain; however, Charles Perrault argued that opera fulfilled a unique function on the French stage, stating that, '[s]ince comedy was based on truth and since the tragedy was a combination of both truth and some facet of the marvelous, it was necessary that one genre be devoted to the marvelous entirely'.[7]

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[4] Donald Jay Grout, 'Some Forerunners of the Lully Opera', *Music and Letters*, 22.1 (January 1941), 1-25 (p. 8).
[5] Bruce Wood, *Purcell: An Extraordinary Life* (London: ABRSM, 2009), p. 149.
[6] Downing A. Thomas, 'Opera, Dispossession, and the Sublime: The Case of "Armide"', *Theatre Journal*, 49.2 (May 1997), 168-88 (p. 170).
[7] Garlington, p. 485.

The subject of 'fascination and revulsion' to the seventeenth-century French audience, opera occupied an uncanny nexus between old and new, the familiar and the unfamiliar.[8] Adhering to the Aristotelian tenet that the only permissible position for the marvellous is within an epic, early French opera drew heavily from classical mythology and literary traditions, the new operatic *merveilleux* occupying much the same position as its poetic progenitor.[9] Populated by gods, goddesses, Furies, demons, and witches, the operatic stage was one on which objects of fear and awe could run rampant. These beings were depicted in a manner that was in keeping with their classical origins, while simultaneously reflecting the ideologies of the period. Charpentier's *Médée*, which premiered at Théâtre du Palais-Royal on 4 December 1693, sees one such depiction in its titular character. The work sees the Medea myth adapted in its libretto by Thomas Corneille, and presents the notorious sorceress as an operatic anti-heroine.[10] In her 1994 Reith lecture series, Marina Warner describes Medea as having embodied 'extreme female aberration' from the fifth century to present day, her character being continually adapted to reflect the changing images of the 'bad mother' as time has progressed.[11] I suggest in this article that Médée (Medea) as she appears in Charpentier's opera is one such adaptation, and that her maternal failings are intrinsically linked to her engagement with the supernatural, reflecting seventeenth-century beliefs of the sorceress as morally and physically corrupt.

The pages that follow establish Charpentier's Médée as the synthesis of classical and native literary and folkloric traditions, a figure who, while representative of a well-established literary and theatrical tradition, simultaneously embodies many aspects of seventeenth-century occult philosophy. Although the opera is arguably a 'pre-gothic' text, I demonstrate that the depiction of monstrous motherhood in *Médée* displays a high degree of commonality with the 'unnatural mothers' of gothic fiction, and that the dissonant imagery that characterises Médée as such is evident formally and thematically in both libretto and musical text. Finally, I interrogate Médée's liminal position within the opera, and position her alongside contemporary conceptions of the sorceress as a liminal figure. The exploration of Médée's multi-faceted character in this way illustrates the close connections between gothic

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[8] Thomas, p. 168.

[9] Edmond Lemaître, 'Préface', in *Médée: Tragédie en musique*, ed. by Lemaître (Paris: Editions du Centre de la Recherche Scientifique, 1987), pp. vii-xviii (p. vii).

[10] Paulo Russo and Mary Ann Smart, 'Visions of Medea: Musico-Dramatic Transformations of a Myth', *Cambridge Opera Journal*, 6.2 (July 1994), 113-24 (p. 113).

[11] Marina Warner, *Managing Monsters: Six Myths of Our Time* (London: Vintage, 1994), p. 6.

literature and the operatic tradition, and emphasises the valuable insights that can be gained by adopting an interdisciplinary approach to musicological study.

Médée is but one opera that exemplifies the convergence of ancient aesthetics with seventeenth-century beliefs. Refashioning the works of Seneca and Euripides – as his brother Pierre was to do in the 1635 dramatic tragedy of the same name – Thomas Corneille's libretto follows the events surrounding Medea's most notorious act: the murder of her children. Dispossessed on account of her past acts of sorcery, Médée, princess of Colchis, and Jason, leader of the Argonauts and son of the king of Iolcus, take refuge in Corinth. Jason, having previously sworn himself to Médée – with whom he has fathered two sons – pursues an illicit relationship with Créuse, the princess of that land. Issued with the ultimatum to leave Corinth or be returned to her enemies by Créuse's father Créon – who favours the union of Créuse and Jason – Médée resolves to bring forth demons and punish those who have wronged her. Médée poisons a robe that she gifts to Créuse, summoning as she does the denizens of the underworld. After using her powers to drive Créon insane, Médée confronts Créuse and Jason, activating the robe's poisons with her wand, and leaving Créuse to expire in Jason's arms. As Jason swears revenge, Médée appear in a dragon-drawn chariot, declaring that she has slain their children, and exiting as the palace bursts into flames. Evidenced by its long literary and theatrical history, the tale of Medea is one that was familiar to the French audience, and was, as such, one that drew on a tradition of witchcraft or sorcery that was not entirely their own.[12] As a pre-existing literary and mythic figure, Médée can be regarded as something of a stock character or theatrical archetype, rather than as a representation of the sorceress as she may have existed in contemporary belief and popular discourse. However, the construction of Médée in Corneille and Charpentier's work nonetheless reflects sorcery beliefs of early-modern France. I argue, therefore, that Medée can be regarded as a composite figure, representing the synthesis of classical topoi and French superstition.

Magic, and those who practiced it, occupied a nebulous position in the early-modern psyche, and can largely be viewed as the product of two conflicting ideologies of magic: Christian demonology and folk belief. Aleksandra Pfau's 'Ritualised Violence against Sorcerers in Fifteenth-Century France' attests to the complexity of magical discourse within folk belief. She illustrates that, although the practice of magic was decried by church and state, common beliefs in magic defied categorisation into the Christian polarisation of 'good' and 'evil'. Regarded as a force to be wielded by individuals rather than the product of

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[12] Russo and Smart, p. 114.

demonological ties, magic was seen as a commodity, those possessing 'magical' *techne* often becoming 'integral part[s] of the community' as healers.[13] Despite this, the seemingly 'neutral' force might, at the discretion of its wielder, be used to enact malicious magic (*maleficium*), thus identifying those in possession of magical knowledge as suspect. As such, magic could prove to be a double-edged sword, as Pfau's study illustrates, as the sorcerer could be both turned to and turned on by their communities in times of strife. By contrast, the Christian church regarded the actions of sorcerers, enchanters, and witches as the product of demonolatry, and those who performed them in league with the devil.[14]

While aspects of folk belief and the official beliefs of the religious hegemony were sometimes at odds, anxieties surrounding the female reproductive system characterise both. Medea, in all of her schizomythic iterations – including Charpentier's Médée – is a character freighted with cultural significance in relation to attitudes towards maternal instinct and anxiety. The murder of her children, which occurs offstage in Act 5 – presumably after her murder of Créuse in Act 5, Scene V – is more than an act of vengeance against Jason. Reflecting contemporary beliefs regarding witchcraft and reproduction, the murder establishes Médée as an 'antimother', one who, rather than creating life, extinguishes it.[15] This role is one that Médée herself acknowledges, proclaiming as she plots her children's death, 'Ah! Trop barbare mere!' ('Ah! Barbarous mother!) in Act 5, Scene I.[16] The roles of witch and mother were frequently juxtaposed in early-modern discourse, the witch becoming a figure onto which the fear of the female reproductive system and its workings – then perceived differently to our modern understanding of biology – were projected. As Clark Garrett suggests,

> In a world in which men make the rules, female sexuality creates a perpetual dilemma. As the vessels of biological mysteries of menstruation and lactation, as creatures of sexual passion, women are mistrusted, but as mothers, women are nurturers and preservers of society.[17]

Médée's subversion of the traits of motherhood – in committing both infanticide and regicide over the course of the opera, she preserves neither children nor society – becomes the driving

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[13] Aleksandra Pfau, 'Ritualized Violence Against Sorcerers in Fifteenth-Century France', *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft*, 8.1 (2013), 50-71 (p. 67).

[14] Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (London: Penguin Books, 1991), p. 521.

[15] Diane Purkiss, *The Witch in History: Early-Modern and Twentieth-Century Representations* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 99.

[16] Marc-Antoine Charpentier, *Médée: Tragedie Mise en Musique* (Paris: Christopher Ballard, 1893), p. 308. All further references to this text will be indicated via act and scene numbers in the body of the essay.

[17] Clark Garrett, 'Women and Witches: Patterns of Analysis', *Signs*, 3.2 (Winter 1977), 461-70 (p. 466).

force of the opera's narrative, typifying Ruth Bienstock Anolik's observation that 'a suitably evil mother can be quite useful in promoting the deviant Gothic plot'.[18] Diane Purkiss argues that these constructions of the witch as a sexual other were not merely the product of patriarchal ideologies, but also of female reproductive anxieties.[19] With much of Europe still lacking advancements in sanitary technology and management, childbirth was treacherous, infant mortality rates high, and infections such as mastitis common. The imagery associated with such infections – of bleeding, purulent breasts, misshapen bodily orifices, and bloody discharges – permeate tales of witchcraft, and in many cases, serve as the witch's identifying feature. Reports of 'witchmarks' range from descriptions of 'a teat from which her demonic familiar sucked', through hands disfigured from handling poisons, to the deformed mouths gained through diabolical prayer (although in reality it is likely that these marks may have been the product of sexually transmitted infections or similar illnesses).[20]

The deformity of the witch was not merely superficial, but internal. As Purkiss illustrates, sixteenth- and seventeenth-century beliefs that surrounded the female reproductive system depicted the womb, circulatory system, and mammary glands as connected in a far more literal sense than is recognised by our current understanding. Believed to be purified blood, breast milk was the palatable parallel to menstrual excretion, the breasts and womb being the sites of exit. Unable to purify blood into milk, the witch's body was, rather than a source of nourishment for an infant, a source of pollution.[21] As Purkiss puts it,

> Flowing from mother to child, breast-milk integrates the child's sucking mouth into the tidal and alarming flows and ebbs of the maternal body. The vulnerable newborn is fed with a substance whose provenance must be doubtful: the poison bag of the female body.[22]

This mother-child pollution was not limited to that occurring after birth, as 'medical and popular knowledge alike affirmed the power of the mother's thoughts and feelings to shape the child *in utero*', meaning that the physical and mental soundness of the child were dependent on that of the mother.[23] Although the acceptance of accusations of witchcraft or

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[18] Ruth Bienstock Anolik, 'The Missing Mother: The Meanings of Maternal Absence in the Gothic Mode', *Modern Language Studies*, 33.1/2 (Spring-Autumn 2003), 24-43 (p. 28).
[19] Purkiss, p. 97.
[20] Amanda Eubanks Winkler, *O Let Us Howle Some Heavy Note: Music for Witches, the Melancholic, and the Mad on the Seventeenth-Century English Stage* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), p. 20; and Stephanie Irene Spoto, 'Jacobean Witchcraft and Feminine Power', *Pacific Coast Philology*, 45 (2010), 53-70 (p. 59).
[21] Purkiss, p. 134.
[22] Ibid, p. 132.
[23] Ibid, p. 100.

self-fashioning as a witch might have afforded women agency, the prevalence of beliefs regarding bodily pollution and deformity might similarly have had detrimental effects on early-modern mothers, resulting in self-abjection, or the belief that one was monstrous, or the victim of *maleficium*.[24]

In Charpentier's opera, although Médée's children are past infancy, the question of pollution is still a prevalent one. In this case, however, the pollution is perceived by Médée as originating in their father. In Act 5, Scene I she agonises over her plot to commit infanticide, her conflict of interests – as loving mother, or vengeful sorceress – epitomised in the lyric 'c'est mon sang, il est vray, mais c'est le sang d'un traitre' ('It is my blood, it is true, but it is the blood of a traitor'), illustrated in Figure 1. In other words, Médée, although acknowledging her own barbarity and dysfunction as a mother – as discussed above – sees Jason's blood as a greater pollutant, his infidelity a less desirable inheritance than her own ruthlessness. Margarita Georgieva notes that 'gothic children are marked by the sins of their fathers and are supposed to pay for them'. While Georgieva notes that this is resolved in the child's either choosing to follow in their father's footsteps or overcome their inherited sin in a life of virtue, no such resolution exists in *Médée*.[25] As Médée's children do not receive any characterisation of their own – they have no scripted lines, and function primarily to highlight the maternal and paternal roles of Médée and Jason – their very identity in the eyes of the audience is determined by Médée. They can, as a result, be regarded as more of an abstract concept of 'the child' than characters in their own right, passive inhabitants of the world, whose existence and functions are outlined by the adults around them. Depicted as without force or agency of their own, for Médée's children, Georgieva's 'resolution' of paternal sin through self-determination is impossible. As a result, their sin is absolved in a manner similar to instances of child sacrifice within the gothic novel. For Georgieva, '[t]he gothic proposes scenarios in which children are sacrificed in the name of faith (a means to transform polluted conceptions into purified deaths) or given away to the Church as gifts in an attempt to expiate sin'.[26] Médée's acknowledgement of her own failings suggests that the mere expiation of the sin or pollution within her children is not sufficient, and that, to a lesser extent than their father, she herself is a pollutant. Médée's children, as faceless templates for innocence, serve as a mirror for the horrific actions of their mother. As will be explored further below, Médée's murder of her children can be regarded as her abandonment of the mortal plane and

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[24] See Purkiss, p. 145.

[25] Margarita Georgieva, *The Gothic Child* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 94.

[26] Ibid, p. 95.

ascension to divinity. Considered as a 'sacrifice', her act of infanticide may be regarded as one of ceremonial cleansing – of her polluted children, and of herself from her toxicity as a mother.
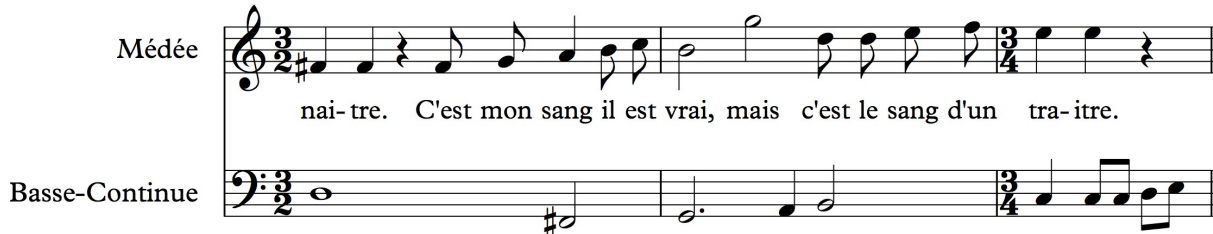
Fig. 1: *Médée*, Act 5, Scene I, bars 40-42.[27]

Despite Médée's perception that Jason's treacherous blood pollutes her children with what Alaya H. Gabriel refers to as 'a paternal disease', it is entirely possible that, to the seventeenth-century audience, the opposite was considered true.[28] While little in the libretto indicates that Médée was perceived as physically grotesque, her actions evoke the image of a cold and calculating murderess, so morally deficient as to rejoice in the torture and murder of Créuse and Créon, and to describe watching the suffering of her children as 'sweet' (Figure 2). In the excerpt illustrated below, which concludes Médée's monologic aria in Act 5, Scene I, the delivery of the line 'can I pay too dearly in causing them to perish, for the sweetness, the sweetness of seeing them suffer?' suggests a manic excitement at the prospect of vengeance, even at the cost of her children's lives. Structurally, the repetition of 'la douceur' suggests a fixation on the idea, which is reinforced in Charpentier's musical setting by the use of rising pitch and the contrapuntal movement between voice and continuo. The repetition of 'la douceur' sees oblique motion between bass and vocal line, with the bass moving from a tenth between d and f" to a ninth between e and f". The effect that this creates at first appears to contradict the word that is being intoned; rather than hearing the 'sweetness' that Médée suggests that she would feel at the suffering of her children, the audience experiences only dissonance. This can be interpreted as a sonic representation of Médée's psychomachia, her intonations betraying an internal conflict or uncertainty as to her own resolve. However, the immediate return to consonance suggests that she has reached a resolution, the sweetness of her devious acts seemingly cemented in thought as it is voiced in the sweetness of sonic

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[27] All musical examples that appear in this article are reductions of the score as it appears in Marc-Antoine Charpentier, *Médée: Tragedie en musique*, ed. by Lemaître (Paris: Editions du Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, 1987).

[28] Ayala H. Gabriel, 'Living with Medea and Thinking after Freud: Greek Drama, Gender, and Concealments', *Cultural Anthropology*, 7.3 (August 1992), 346-73 (p. 364).

consonance, culminating in the perfect resolution of bar 48. Additionally, though momentary, the jarring effect of the dissonance might evoke an embodied response in its listener, inviting, if not quite the jump-scare response of a 'stinger' in a Hollywood soundtrack, then at least an increased focus on the disturbed nature of Médée's machinations.

Fig. 2: *Médée*, Act 5, Scene I, 43-48.

The moral deficiencies of the mother in the case of *Médée* are such as to destabilise her very humanity. Médée's glee expressed at the prospect of murdering her children in the above passage, and the lack of remorse expressed following her completion of the act, are, from the point of view of the Christian binary of good and evil, damning in a literal sense. However, Médée's declaration of her infanticide in the opera's final act can be read in numerous ways. Act 5, Scene VII sees Jason, alone, declare his intent to avenge the dead Créuse, and attempting to conceive a plot, when he is interrupted by his scorned wife (whose appearance heralds the beginning of Scene VIII). Appearing astride a dragon in flight, Médée announces that, in addition to seeking vengeance for Créuse, he must also do so for his sons. Proclaiming that his wish for vengeance shall come to naught, Médée exits the opera in the spectacular fashion described below:

> Médée fend les Airs sur son Dragon & en mesme tempes les Statues & autres ornements du Palais se brisent. On voir sortir des Demons de tous côtez, qui ayant des feux à la main embrasement ce mesme Palais. Ces Demons disparoissent une nuit se forme & cet édifice ne paroist plus que ruine & monstres, après quoy il tombe une pluye de feu.

> Médée cleaves the air on her dragon and at the same time the statues and other ornaments of the Palace disintegrate. Demons appear from all sides carrying fire in

> their hands and set the palace ablaze. The Demons vanish, night falls and the edifice
> is no more than ruins and monsters, after which a hail of fire descends.[29]

Nancy Tuana suggests that, to a greater extent than is the case with any other of her historical iterations, 'the image of Medea which most horrifies the modern reader is that of the mother with the bloody sword'.[30] The bloody sword, or in this case, dagger, is of particular interest, as it implies that the murder of Médée's sons was not wrought by magic, as all other murders and evils enacted by the sorceress over the course of the opera were. By eschewing her supernatural modus operandi, Médée sets the murder of her children apart from those of her enemies.

While this may be regarded as a minor detail, it is nonetheless significant, as Médée's previous misdemeanours are inherently linked to her identification as a sorceress. In addition to Médée's summoning of demonic forces in Act 3, Scene VII – adhering to the early-modern Christian perception of magic practice as demonolatry – her use of poisons in the assassination of Créuse is tied to period definitions of occult practices. While the enactment of magical *maleficium* could take many forms, cultural historian Keith Thomas notes that 'the use of poisons features prominently in discussions of seventeenth-century magical practice, with sorcery being defined in Blagrave's *Astrological Practice of Physick* (1671) as the use of poisons'.[31] In 'Witchcraft, Female Aggression, and Power in the Early-Modern Community', Edward Bever finds that a large number of witchcraft allegations in the period were based on similar use of poisons.[32] As illustrated above, the character of Médée is trapped within a dichotomy, vacillating between sorcery and motherhood, defined perpetually as a 'bad mother' for those acts of evil that manifest in her magical engagements and subsequent moral deformity. As her rejection by the people of Thessaly and Corinth suggests, the position of the sorceress in the operatic world of *Médée* was akin to that of the witch in the early-modern community. Despite occupying a position of both fear and respect on account of her magical *techne*, Médée is nonetheless regarded by those around her as spiritually corrupt, as a result of her magical actions, as Créon's reproaches in Act 2, Scene I illustrate:

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[29] Charpentier, *Médée*, Les Arts Florissants (CS Harmonia Mundi, HMC 901139. 1, 1984), pp. 116-17 (CD booklet).
[30] Nancy Tuana, 'MEDEA: With the Eyes of the Lost Goddess', *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 68.2 (Summer 1985), 253-72 (p. 253).
[31] Thomas, p. 520.
[32] Edward Bever, 'Witchcraft, Female Aggression, and Power in the Early-Modern Community', *Journal of Social History*, 35.4 (Summer 2002), 955-88 (p. 959).

Ignorez-vous qu'un murmure odieux
Vous faites par tout croire coupable.

Do you not know that an odious rumour
Makes people everywhere believe you have committed a crime.

En vain sur ce Hero vous rejettez la haine
Qui ne doit tomber que sur vous.

In vain upon this hero you cast the shame
Which must fall upon you alone.[33]

Additionally, as Ayala H. Gabriel argues, Medea's rejection by Jason renders her 'socially liminal', and of a reduced social status.[34] In engaging with the demons and spirits from whom her magic stems, Médée interacts with that which is not of the mortal world, and she is tainted by association. Despite her human physicality, Médée can be regarded as something other than human. She is, therefore, a wholly liminal figure; neither human nor inhuman, her very existence flies in the face of nature, or in the face of the post-pagan philosophy of moral polarity.

The question of Médée's humanity is therefore intrinsically linked to the murder of her children. On the one hand, the infanticide could be regarded as monstrous, heralding the abandonment of her humanity, and the shedding of her final tie to the mortal realm. Conversely, it could be viewed as her final act of humanity. It has been suggested that Médée's motivation for the murder of her children is, rather than an act of vengeance against Jason, an act of mercy, an attempt to save them from a life of persecution resulting from the actions of their mother.[35] Regardless of the motivation behind it, the manner in which she perpetrates the murder is significant. Prior to this, all acts of *maleficium* by Médée have been horrifying deployments of *les merveilleux*, and have shown the sorceress' capacity for torture. In Act 4, Scene VIII, she summons the spirit of Madness to curse Créon – whose suicide is subsequently announced in Act 5, Scene III. In Act 3, Scene III, having summoned forth Vengeance, Jealousy, and a host of demons, she poisons a robe that she gifts to Créuse. When activated by her wand in Act 5, Scene IV, it causes Créuse an agonising, fiery death, which lasts until the conclusion of Act 5, Scene VI. In choosing instead a mortal weapon for the murder of her children, Médée establishes their final interaction as an intimate one, rather than a detached piece of *maleficium*. In an opera characterised by its employment of *les*

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[33] Charpentier, *Médée*, CD Booklet, pp. 56-59.
[34] Gabriel, p. 352.
[35] Marianne Hopman, 'Revenge and Mythopoesis in Euripides's *Medea*', *Transactions of the American Philological Association*, 138.1 (Spring 2008), 155-83 (p. 175).

merveilleux, Médée's murder of her sons is understated for the simple reason that it is the act of a mortal mother. For this reason, Médée's murder of her children can be read as the symbolic destruction of her maternal self, a surrender to the supernatural anti-mother that her grief has driven her to become.

Medée's surrender of her humanity also calls for a change to the space she occupies. Throughout the opera, Médée has occupied a liminal space within the human realm, defined by her magical abilities. In the opera's final act, however, this positioning changes. As the above stage direction details, Médée appears in the air, astride a dragon. In *Medea, Magic, and Modernity in France: Stages and Histories*, Amy Wygant states of the anti-heroine in the finale of Euripides' *Medea* that 'she appears at the end in the theatrical space reserved for the gods'.[36] The same can be said of Corneille and Charpentier's adaptation. By placing Médée literally above her former husband, the opera shows her to have ascended from the human realm; just as the murders signal the death of her maternal self, here, she is shown relinquishing her ties to the earth and the laws – both physical and moral – that govern it.

In his examination of the Medea myth, Aristide Tessitore describes this process as Medea's becoming a god.[37] While her position as a witch or sorceress is a liminal one, and one that sets her apart from the opera's inhabitants, a knowledge of her mythic origins tells us more of her occupation of the supernatural space, and supports Tessitore's argument. The granddaughter of the sun god Helios, Médée's mythical lineage is such as to imply that she is more than merely human.[38] In Act 4, Scene IV, Médée describes herself thus:

> Au pouvoir de Médée il n'est rien de semblable.
> Elle asservit la terre,
> Elle Commande aux Cieux.
>
> Nothing resembles the power of Médée.
> She subdues the Earth,
> She commands the Heavens.[39]

This indicates an awareness on her part that she occupies a preternatural role in the world that she inhabits. Whether god or sorceress, Médée's placement in the final act of the opera implies that she has been liberated from the bonds of the human world, and from the familial and emotional ties that once held her to it.

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[36] Amy Wygant, *Medea, Magic, and Modernity in France: Stages and Histories, 1553-1797* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2007), p. 4.
[37] Aristide Tessitore, 'Euripide's *Medea* and the Problem of Spiritedness', *The Review of Politics*, 53.4 (Autumn 1991), 587-601 (p. 592).
[38] Tuana, p. 256.
[39] Charpentier, *Médée*, CD booklet, pp. 94-95.

Médée's 'ascension' in the opera's final act can be regarded as yet another parallel to witchcraft discourse and beliefs in the seventeenth century. As I have illustrated, the construction of witchcraft in the early-modern period – a construction which continues to persist to this day – relied heavily upon the mystification of the female body and on depictions of corruption associated with female bodies and bodily processes. Depictions of witches and sorceresses onstage, in popular discourse, and in literature stressed the inversion of those features associated with maternal nourishment and nurturing, as these very features become the source of unknowable destructive power. 'The witch', states Eubanks Winkler, 'could chart her own sexual destiny outside of the traditional procreative family unit', a sentiment that is embodied in *Médée*.[40] Indeed, throughout opera's history, the woman as sorceress or temptress – roles that often go hand in hand – frequently faces punishment for having exerted her power over men; one need only consider Jean-Baptiste Lully's *Atys* (1676), Vincenzo Bellini's *Norma* (1831), or Richard Strauss's *Salome* (1905).[41] By allowing Médée to escape, Charpentier and Corneille avoid moralising responses to her character, and thus grant her agency. While Médée's engagement with sorcery renders her morally and spiritually incompatible with seventeenth-century ideals of motherhood, Médée is, rather than damned, liberated by her actions, permitted an existence outside of civilised society amongst the supernatural, occupying a position similar to that occupied by the witch in the contemporary imagination.

Médée, though not a wholly gothic text, illustrates the parallels that operatic texts often share with gothic literary works, and specifically in relation to manifestations of monstrous motherhood. Although the relationship between the gothic and opera is perhaps most apparent in works from the nineteenth century to the present day – Charles Gounod's *La nonne sanglante* (loosely based on Matthew Lewis' *The Monk*) (1854), Benjamin Britten's *The Turn of the Screw* (1954), Bernard Herrmann's *Wuthering Heights* (1951) and Mark-Anthony Turnage's recent adaptation of *Coraline* (2018) are but a few examples – this examination illustrates some of the insights that can be gained from approaching earlier operatic works through gothic frameworks. In doing so, I hope to promote the further application of interdisciplinary approaches to the analysis of early musico-theatrical forms.

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[40] Winkler, p. 20.
[41] Thomas, p. 174.

'Most foul, strange and unnatural': Refractions of Modernity in Conor McPherson's *The Weir*

Matthew Fogarty

In the foreword to the first volume of his collected-plays series, Conor McPherson recently acknowledged that, as a playwright who came to prominence during the Celtic-Tiger period, he belonged to a new wave of internationally acclaimed Irish dramatists who were considered representative of 'a place where a horrendous past met a glistening future and where tradition evolved'.[1] Gothic scholars will scarcely need reminding that 'horrendous pasts' and 'glistening futures' make for eerie bedfellows; the gothic is, after all, a genre that draws much of its potency from the anomalous conjunctions that bind the future to its past. Indeed, Victor Merriman has cast a suitably suspicious eye over the neoliberal mechanisms that engineered the optimal conditions for these new Irish playwrights to produce their preferred image of a flourishing and vibrant Ireland. He argues that the State's inequitable endowment of arts funding, coupled with soaring rent prices for rehearsal and performance spaces, especially in Dublin, bifurcated 'drama itself into a theatre of social critique, and a theatre of diversionary spectacle'.[2] This ensured that plays seeking to critique contemporary Irish culture were shuffled to the margins, while the more diversionary spectacles continuously reproduced what Merriman calls 'reductive stereotypes of Irishness', which served only to alienate the population of Tiger Ireland from a 'national past in which the correlatives of such figures presumably exist and make sense'.[3]

To illustrate this point, Merriman compares the plays produced by the Dublin-based, fringe theatre company, Calypso Productions, to those written by Marina Carr and Martin McDonagh during the mid-to-late 1990s: he proposes that Calypso's *Hughie on the Wires* (1993), *Trickledown Town* (1994), *The Business of Blood* (1995), *Rosie and Star Wars* (1997), *Féile Fáilte* (1997), *Farawayan* (1998), and *Cell* (1998) all explored the ways in which globalisation affected those living on the margins. By contrast, he sees Carr's *Portia Coughlan* (1996) and *By the Bog of Cats ...* (1998), and McDonagh's *Lennane Trilogy* (1996-97) as simply re-enforcing the prevailing perception that Ireland had suddenly become a

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[1] Conor McPherson, 'Foreword', in *Plays: One* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2014), pp. 1-5 (p. 3).
[2] Victor Merriman, *Because We Are Poor: Irish Theatre in the 1990s* (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2011), p. 209.
[3] Ibid.

thriving, cosmopolitan nation.[4] Christina Wilson has pointed out that Carr's work does not fit neatly into Merriman's equation, undermining its usefulness somewhat; I would argue that the Gate Theatre's 1998 production of *The Weir* also offered a point of critical resistance to this regressive, bifurcated mode of theatre production.[5] This is not to suggest that the Gate's production points to a gap in the coercive socio-political structures that Merriman has identified, but rather that McPherson's play essentially manufactures this gap because it was written while the author was living in England in 1997.[6] The play was first performed at The Royal Court Theatre Upstairs in London and appeared at the Gate Theatre only after it had received much critical acclaim in England. In this way, the staging history of *The Weir* illustrates how Irish plays at that time were often 'authorised', or somehow 'validated', by winning favour first in London, and only then 'returning home'. But this distance also afforded McPherson's work the opportunity to circumvent the neoliberal expectations foisted on Irish theatrical enterprises during the late 1990s, and to smuggle a 'social critique' onto one of Ireland's foremost theatrical stages, beneath the palatable veneer of a play that ostensibly appears to offer little more than a 'diversionary spectacle'.[7]

The Weir is a one-act play, set exclusively in a small bar in rural Ireland, and primarily structured by the sequence of ghost stories that its characters exchange over the course of a single evening. The play was originally commissioned for the Royal Court Theatre in 1997 at the behest of the then artistic director, Stephen Daldry, whose only stipulation was that it must not be another monologue drama – all of the plays McPherson penned prior to *The Weir* were monologue dramas: *Rum and Vodka* (1992), *The Good Thief* (1994), *This Lime Tree Bower* (1995) and *St Nicholas* (1997). Scott T. Cummings has suggested that the play's structural configuration ought to be regarded as 'McPherson's characteristically cheeky response to the call for him to write characters who talk to each other instead of the audience. He has them tell stories.'[8] But McPherson has more recently proposed that the prevalence of the monologue play during the Celtic-Tiger era may have

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[4] Merriman, p.209.

[5] Christina Wilson, 'Review of *Because We Are Poor: Irish Theatre in the 1990s*', *Postcolonial Text*, 6.3 (2011), 1-4 (p. 2). Wilson notes that Carr's oeuvre is perhaps best characterised by its interrogation of received ideas about Irish womanhood. See also Mary Noonan, 'Woman and Scarecrows: Marina Carr's Stage Bodies', in *Perspectives on Contemporary Irish Theatre: Populating the Stage*, ed. by Anne Etienne and Thierry Dubost (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), pp. 59-72; and Karin Maresh, 'Un/Natural Motherhood in Marina Carr's *The Mai*, *Portia Coughlan*, and *By the Bog of Cats ...*', *Theatre History Studies*, 35 (2016), 179-98.

[6] Conor McPherson, 'Afterword – The Weir', in *Modern and Contemporary Irish Drama*, ed. by John P. Harrington (New York: Norton, 2009), pp. 559-63 (p. 559).

[7] Merriman, p. 214.

[8] Scott T. Cummings, 'Homo Fabulator: The Narrative Imperative in Conor McPherson's Plays', in *Theatre Stuff: Critical Essays on Contemporary Irish Theatre*, ed. by Eamonn Jordan (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2000), pp. 303-12 (p. 308).

been a response to the radical cultural shifts that defined this period in Ireland's history. He argues that

> [a]lmost every successful new play that emerged from Ireland at that time had an element of direct storytelling. It was as though the crazy explosion of money and stress was happening too close to us, too fast for us, making it impossible for the mood of the nation to be objectively dramatised in a traditional sense. It could only be expressed in the most subjective way possible because when everything you know is changing, the subjective experience is the only experience.[9]

These reflections suggest that the variations on the classic monologue that are embedded in McPherson's play might well be emblematic of a flailing Irish nation and its desperate endeavour to come to terms with the advance of modernity. These observations appear all the more germane to *The Weir* as each of its quasi-monologues move the audience through the historical phases of modernity in Ireland, until they arrive at the play's contemporaneous cultural context.

The cultural milieu from which *The Weir* emerged was largely dominated by the debates surrounding the impending referendum on the Treaty of Amsterdam, which was formally signed by the foreign ministers of the fifteen member countries of the European Union on 2 October 1997 and ratified in full on 1 May 1999. It is this critical juncture in Ireland's socio-political development that McPherson's play juxtaposes against the equally pivotal point at which the Irish Free State's Executive Council launched the Shannon Electrification Scheme in 1925. Although *The Weir* was partially inspired by an edifice located near the home of McPherson's grandfather in Jamestown, Co. Leitrim, whom the playwright visited during the 1970s, the Jamestown structure was not a hydroelectric dam, nor was it constructed in the twentieth century; in fact, it was built by the Shannon Commissioners in the mid-1840s to make Ireland's largest river more navigable.[10] To reimagine this riparian structure as an extension of the Shannon Electrification Scheme as McPherson does, however, is to recast it as a highly charged emblem of Ireland's modernisation. Prior to the 1925 construction of the Ardnacrusha power plant, located just 2.4 kilometres from the Limerick border in Co. Clare, rural dwellers had only limited access to what was a very expensive supply of electricity, usually produced locally by small

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[9] McPherson, 'Foreword', p. 3.

[10] Andrew Hazucha, 'The Shannon Scheme, Rural Electrification, and Veiled History in McPherson's *The Weir*', *New Hibernia Review*, 17 (2013), 67-80 (p. 78).

generating stations.[11] The national rate of consumption increased to 43 million kWh in 1930, and this figure more than quadrupled to 218 million kWh in 1937.[12] In this context, the hydroelectric power plant that lends McPherson's play its title stands as a testament to the mass illumination that forever transformed the complexion of rural Ireland. But this title also provides the first indication that all of the ghost stories recounted in *The Weir* draw much of their dynamism from a certain exploitation of the conflict that exists between the force of modernity and the ways of life that this force inevitably banishes. To illustrate this point, I begin by demonstrating how the first two of the play's four ghost stories trace the history of modernity in Ireland from the pre-Christian era to the late-nineteenth century. The second section considers the ways in which the play's third and fourth ghost stories speak to comparatively more recent developments in Irish culture, with specific reference to the child sex-abuse cases reported in the mid-to-late 1990s and the initial phase of the Celtic Tiger. The section that follows sets the play's allusions to the impending arrival of 'the Germans' against the concerns expressed by the then British Foreign Secretary, Malcolm Rifkind, prior to the European Parliament's endorsement of the Amsterdam Treaty in 1997. In doing so, I demonstrate overall that the quasi-monological structure of *The Weir* captures the suppressed traces of a haunting that would only fully materialise in the wake of Tiger Ireland.

From Ancient Irish Folklore to Nineteenth-Century Spiritualism

McPherson's penchant for all things phantasmagorical permeates his dramatic oeuvre, manifesting, for example, as a vampire in *St Nicholas* (1997), as an apparition of the co-protagonist's recently deceased wife in *Shinning City* (2004), as the devil in *The Seafarer* (2006), and as a haunted Anglo-Irish landed estate in *The Veil* (2011). In *The Weir*, the first ghost story draws its inspiration from Ireland's fairy folklore. In the context of the play, the tale is designed to function as a genial initiation for Dublin-born newcomer, and the play's only female character, Valerie. To begin, fifty-something year-old garage owner, Jack, recalls the fate of a local woman named Bridie Nealon, whose house was reportedly built on an old fairy road, and who claimed to have heard mysterious knocking at the doors and windows of her home while her daughter, Maura, was still a young girl.[13] Crucially, these incidents

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[11] Lothar Schoen, 'The Irish Free State and the Electricity Industry, 1922-1927', in *The Shannon Scheme and the Electrification of the Free State*, ed. by Andy Bielenberg (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 2002), pp. 28-47 (p. 28).
[12] Brendan Delany, 'McLaughlin, the Genesis of the Shannon Scheme, and the ESB', in Bielenberg, pp. 100-13 (p. 19).
[13] McPherson, 'The Weir', in *Plays: Two* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2004), pp. 9-74 (p. 36). All additional references to this edition will be indicated by the page number in parentheses in the body of the article.

initially occurred prior to the 1951 construction of the local weir, at a time when there was 'no dark like a winter night in the country' (p. 36). Jack later explains that Maura also heard this peculiar knocking sometime around 1910 or 1911, and that the strange noises ceased only after 'a priest came and blessed the doors and windows' (p. 37). These mysterious occurrences can certainly be read as a relatively straightforward reappearance of the past; typically speaking, however, there are dualistic elements at play in Irish gothic fiction, in which the hauntedness traditionally ascribed to the return of the past more often materialises in conjunction with the promise, or indeed threat, of the future. Citing the Irish experience of the Cromwellian Wars and the Glorious Revolution as seventeenth-century precedents, Luke Gibbons has observed that Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* reconstitutes the gothic as a double-edged sword, one hung poised with the potential to strike from both the future and the past.[14] Depending on the specificity of one's religious and political affiliations, modernity itself might be perceived as the ghoulish spectre haunting each of these age-defining cultural moments. From the anonymous *Vertue Rewarded; or, The Irish Princess* (1693) to Brian O'Malley's *The Lodgers* (2017), the ruined abbeys and mouldering landed estates that suffuse Ireland's gothic tradition might initially appear symbolic of some strange and irrepressible past, but these architectonic cadavers are simultaneously emblematic of the peoples and traditions that were forever decimated by the blunt force of modernity.[15]

When *The Weir* is situated in this Irish gothic tradition, the exorcism performed in the Nealon home at the behest of Maura Nealon seems representative of a comparatively more recent cycle in the process of Ireland's modernisation. In banishing these mythological fairies, the priest in Jack's tale personifies the austere brand of religiosity that was implemented by the Irish Catholic Church during the late nineteenth-century Devotional Revolution. This post-famine period was marked by a concentrated effort to eradicate the practice of pre-Christian traditions; in Ireland, Catholicism became a modernising force. But Jack's narrative also accentuates the correlation that exists between the modernising influence of Christianity and the early twentieth-century technological modernity represented by the local hydroelectric plant. When Jack tells his companions that 'Maura never heard the knocking again except one time in the fifties when the weir was going up' (p. 37), the cultural displacement triggered by the Devotional Revolution is aligned with the technological mode of modernisation that was initiated by the Shannon Electrification Scheme in the early-to-mid

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[14] Luke Gibbons, *Gaelic Gothic: Race, Colonization, and Irish Culture* (Galway: Arlen House, 2004), p. 15.
[15] Gibbons, p. 11.

twentieth century. This alignment captures perfectly the duality of Irish gothic, insofar as it recognises the haunting remnants of a comparatively more recent past, while simultaneously conveying the magnitude of the modernising force that triggered their displacement. Although the chronological stratums in Jack's ghost story establish Catholicism as a modernising influence, the Shannon Electrification Scheme is in turn established as a constituent of the mid-twentieth-century modernisation that would bring the Irish people further away from these pagan practices and indeed from the Catholicism that initially displaced these practices. The significance that *The Weir* ascribes to the conflictual correlations that bind these 'Old' and 'New' worlds is prefigured even in the play's opening stage directions, which indicate that the walls of Brendan's bar are adorned with '*some old black and white photographs: a ruined abbey; people posing near a newly erected ESB weir*' (p. 13). But these images further connect the modernity represented by the ESB weir to the nuanced historical narrative codified in the image of the ruined abbey, in which the gothic is at once emblematic of a pre-Cromwellian Ireland and of the modernisation that consigned this Ireland to its demise.

The chronological strata that constitute this first ghost story provide a microcosmic reflection of the circularity that McPherson uses to structure *The Weir* on a macrocosmic level. In the tale that follows, for example, the subject matter transports the audience from the pre-Christian age to a comparatively more recent cultural context. On this occasion, Finbar, a successful local businessman, and the epitome of Tiger-Ireland capitalism, recounts an episode in which a young neighbour, Niamh Walsh, claimed to have summoned up a spirit with a Ouija board (p. 41). Although variations of these 'talking boards' have existed for over two thousand years, the Ouija board was first produced commercially in 1892 and is therefore synonymous with late nineteenth-century spiritualism.[16] Indeed, Finbar's description of Niamh's father seems to acknowledge the Ouija board's relationship to this cultural context as he name-checks one of the period's most famous literary characters, describing the garda in charge of the case as 'fifty-odd and still only a sergeant, so, like, he was no Sherlock Holmes' (p. 40). Holmes's creator, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, was in fact one of the foremost exponents of automatic writing in the late nineteenth century.[17] In the Irish context, spiritualism and occultism are equally synonymous with Yeatsian revivalism, but this sense of historical movement is further amplified by Finbar's description of Father Donal. He tells

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[16] Helen Sword, 'James Merrill, Sylvia Plath, and the Poetics of Ouija', *American Literature*, 66 (1994), 553-72 (p. 555).

[17] J. Godfrey Raupert, *The New Black Magic and the Truth about the Ouija-Board* (New York: The Devin-Adair Company, 1919), p. 3.

us that the priest 'came down and sort of blessed the place a little bit. Like he'd be more Vatican two. There wouldn't be much of all the demons or that kind of carry-on with him' (p. 43). This allusion to 'Vatican two' associates Father Dolan with the more modern and somewhat more progressive brand of Catholicism that emerged after the Second Ecumenical Council of the Vatican, convened by Pope John XXIII in October 1962 and closed by Pope Paul VI in December 1965. The Council's recommendations ushered in a host of sweeping reforms: masses were no longer celebrated in Latin, nor by a priest who stood facing away from the congregation; dietary restrictions were relaxed, as were the dictates regarding appropriate confessional attire for the laity; but perhaps most importantly, the Roman-Catholic Church also abdicated its claim to be the one true church. As Melissa Whyte explains, Vatican II forever altered 'the way the Church understood itself, as its identity went from being a hierarchal authority to a church conceived as the people of God'.[18]

Finbar's account of Father Dolan's half-hearted intervention undermines the sacrosanctity of Ireland's Catholic order, and by doing so he gives voice to the manner in which the Catholic Church's power began to wane in conjunction with the acceleration of technological modernity in Ireland. In the broader context of play, the juxtaposition of the priests in these two initial ghost stories mirrors the expansion of modernity reflected in the cultural chasm that separates Jack's pre-Christian fairies from the late nineteenth-century spiritualism that provides the catalyst for Finbar's tale. But these are only the first steps in a journey that transports the audience through a series of milestones in Ireland's cultural development until they are brought face-to-face with a final poignant snapshot of Tiger Ireland. And, much like the photographs that adorn the walls of Brendan's bar, this journey demonstrates that these seemingly remote and unfamiliar pasts always linger in the background, perpetually inhabiting the future.

Twentieth-Century Spectres

While these initial stories operate at a comfortable distance from the play's contemporary context, the story that follows is infused with the toxic atmosphere of child sex-abuse scandals that hung about Ireland in the mid-to-late 1990s. In this tale, Jim, employed by Jack at the local garage, recalls an episode in which he was asked to dig a grave in one of the nearby communities. While at the graveyard, Jim claims to have been approached by a man who insisted he was digging 'the wrong grave' and instead brought him to 'a new enough

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[18] Melissa Whyte, *Vatican II: A Sociological Analysis of Religious Change* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2007), p. 1.

one. A white one with a picture of a little girl on it' (p. 50). In the end, Jim reveals that he later 'saw a picture of your man whose grave [they'd] dug', that it was 'the spit of your man [he'd] met in the graveyard', and that 'the fella who'd died had had a bit of a reputation for em ... being a pervert' (p. 50). The preceding ghost stories have primed the audience to think about the role performed by the Catholic Church in Ireland's cultural development. Although the abuser in this case was not affiliated with the Catholic Church, this organisation's name became synonymous with child-abuse scandals in Ireland during the mid-1990s.[19] Between 1994 and 1997, Fr Brendan Smyth was convicted on 74 charges of indecent and sexual assault, but this period was also marked by a deluge of abuse allegations against other Catholic priests in Ireland.[20] Set against this socio-historical backdrop, the loaded phraseology that Jim mobilises to describe the events that precipitated his presence at the graveyard establishes a correlation between the horrific phenomena of child sex abuse in Ireland and the Irish Catholic Church. He explains that

> [t]he priest over in Glen was looking for a couple of lads to do a bit of work. And he was down in Carrick in the Arms. He'd come over from Glen, you know? Which was an odd thing anyway. Like what was he doing coming all the way over just to get a couple of young fellas? (pp. 48-49)

It is not a coincidence that the Catholic Church features so prominently in each of the play's first two tales, nor is it insignificant that the figure of the priest appears here at the outset of Jim's narrative. In each of these instances, this prominence is indicative of the privileged position that the Catholic Church has long held in Irish culture and of the central role this organisation has played in moulding the shape of modern Ireland. However, Gibbons has observed a certain irony in the fact that the Catholic Church was charged with 'the task of modernizing Irish society after the famine'.[21] As Terence Brown puts it, the Irish Catholic Church preached 'a sexual morality of severe restrictiveness, denouncing all developments in society that might have threatened a rigid conformism in a strictly enforced sexual code'.[22] This chapter in Ireland's history provides a prime example of the ways in which modernity is invariably infused with discordant, or anti-modern, traces. McPherson's reflections upon this

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[19] Tom Inglis, *Moral Monopoly: The Rise and Fall of the Catholic Church in Modern Ireland* (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 1998), p. 216.

[20] Marie Keenan, *Child Sexual Abuse and the Catholic Church: Gender, Power, and Organizational Power* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 19.

[21] Luke Gibbons, 'Have You No Homes to Go To?: James Joyce and the Politics of Paralysis', in *Semicolonial Joyce*, ed. by Derek Attridge and Marjorie Howes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 150-71 (p. 155).

[22] Terence Brown, *Ireland: A Social and Cultural History: 1922-2002* (London: Harper Collins, 2004), p. 29.

phase of modernity in *The Weir* underscore exactly why the gothic mode is best equipped to illustrate that these modernising forces are always shadowed by some dark residue of the past. The legacy of this rigid sexual conformism is addressed most directly in Jim's tale, where the 'grave-digging' motif takes on a dualistic quality. From a formal perspective, the act of grave-digging mirrors the function performed by the gothic mode itself, as it allows us to sift through the many compacted grains that constitute the past and re-examine that which was established upon these seemingly solid foundations. And in the specific context of Jim's story, this grave-digging also facilitates the re-emergence of a contorted sexuality that festered for an age beneath the wholesome surface of a murky Catholic culture.

When *The Weir* was first produced in 1997, there was a growing sense that some correlation might exist between this 'strictly enforced sexual code' and the volume of child-abuse cases reported in late twentieth-century Ireland.[23] By 1996, the debate around obligatory clerical celibacy had advanced to the point that the then Bishop of Killaloe, Willie Walsh, claimed that celibacy would no longer be required for Catholic priests in the future. Although the article in which the interview was published did not credit the Bishop with drawing a direct correlation between clerical celibacy and child sex abuse in Ireland, it concluded by suggestively attributing the following one-line paragraph to Bishop Walsh: 'He also says it is clear that in the past the Catholic Church had not understood the problem of child sex abuse.'[24] Throughout this period, the majority of Ireland's Catholic clergy maintained that there was no connection between celibacy and the phenomenon of child sex abuse in twentieth-century Ireland. Speaking to RTE's Pat Kenny in June 1995, for example, the then Bishop of Ferns, Dr Brendan Comiskey, described the contemporary cultural climate as follows:

> You would think that this was just a problem for the church. There is not a single profession in Ireland that has not been affected by this. But the notion abroad is that it is a particular problem for priests. It is not, it is less than one per cent. That is still a

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[23] Between 1994 and 1997, the local and national Irish newspapers were awash with articles that addressed the issues of child sex abuse and clerical celibacy under the same headline. On 11 June 1994, for example, the *Irish Independent* published an article in which Peter de Rosa argued that 'the forced link between priesthood and celibacy in the western church has always led to immorality in holy places' (p. 30). On 19 October 1994, the *Irish Press* published a response to RTE Radio's *The Sunday Show* in which Seamus de Barra decried the panellists' treatment of this issue, calling it 'the worst example of anti-Catholic bilious bias [he] ever heard on radio or on television' (p. 18). On 26 November 1994, the *Irish Independent* reported that a spokesman for the National Conference of Priests stated that 'the church needed to discuss whether celibacy should be obligatory or whether it would be better to leave it optional' (p. 4). This is a small sample from the hundreds of such articles that appeared during this time.

[24] 'Celibacy Rule to Go – Bishop', *Irish Independent*, 5 April 1996, p. 1.

serious problem but to scapegoat one element of the community is to avoid accepting this is a very real and terrible problem that the whole society has.[25]

The point is not whether one can categorically prove that a causal link exists between clerical celibacy and child sex abuse in Ireland, nor whether the broader sociological issue that Bishop Comiskey describes might be a dysfunctional by-product of the strict sexual morality relentlessly enforced by the Irish Catholic Church in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, but rather that these correlations were established in the Irish cultural consciousness in the mid-to-late 1990s.

Jim's ghost story can therefore be read as a narrative that emerged from the shadows of the strict code of sexual morality that was first established in Ireland during the Devotional Revolution, much as the play's final ghost story explores the injurious potential of the radical socio-economic changes that swept across Ireland in the 1990s. This final story is told by the newcomer, Valerie, who provides these contextual details:

> I mean. I'm a fairly straight ... down the line ... person. Working. I had a good job at DCU. I had gone back to work after having my daughter, Niamh. My husband teaches, engineering, at DCU. We had Niamh in 1988. And I went back to work when she was five, when she started school. And we'd leave her with Daniel's parents, my husband's parents. (p. 57)

Running from 1988 to 1993, this leave of absence maps onto the five-year period immediately preceding the Celtic-Tiger years.[26] The arrangements made when Niamh began school, with both parents working and Niamh's grandparents sharing the responsibilities of childcare, is a familiar story for many thousands of Irish people who lived and worked during this period of rapid economic expansion.[27] That Niamh and her husband both worked at Dublin City University makes them further exemplars of the modern Irish family unit; DCU first opened in 1980 and was officially recognised as a university in 1989. In addition to

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[25] Ibid.

[26] *On 31 August 1994, the term 'Celtic Tiger' was used for the first time in an MS Newsletter entitled 'The Irish Economy: A Celtic Tiger'. See Gerard McCann, 'The "Celtic Tiger" in Hindsight', Nordic Irish Studies, 12 (2013), 109-25 (p. 111).*

[27] Between 1986 and mid-1998, the number of Irish women in employment rose from 32 per cent to 44 per cent of the population. See Paul Sweeney, *The Celtic Tiger: Ireland's Continuing Economic Miracle* (Dublin: Oak Tree Press, 1999), p. 63. Between 1997 and 2007, the number of women employed in Ireland rose from 539,000 to 890,000. This acceleration was triggered by the State's introduction of tax individualisation for two-income married couples in 1999, which provided both partners with their own tax credit and boosted the benefits for dual-income couples. See 'Childcare Crisis: A Celtic Tiger Hangover', *Sunday Business Post*, 2 June 2013, p. 2.

being Dublin's newest university, the institute's name became synonymous with technological design and innovation in the 1990s.[28]

In Valerie's tale, these technological advances act as a signifier for the phase in Irish modernity personified by Valerie and her husband, Daniel. In this modern configuration of the Irish family unit, the mobile telephone, arguably the most iconic symbol of late twentieth-century technological advance, performs something of an intercessory role, insofar as it mediates communication while family members are temporarily separated by the demands of work and school. This role comes most clearly into focus as Valerie makes the following recommendations to allay her daughter's separation anxiety:

> So I told her after that, […] if she was worried at all during the day to ring me, and I'd come and get her, and there was nothing to worry about. And she knew our number, she was very good at learning numbers off and everything. She knew ours and her Nana's and mine at work. She knew them all. (p. 58)

In Valerie's story, this new medium of telecommunication becomes a vehicle for the spectral element that materialises some months after her daughter dies in a tragic swimming accident. As Valerie explains, the incident was precipitated by a mysterious telephone call:

> The line was very faint. It was like a crossed line. There were voices, but I couldn't hear what they were saying. And then I heard Niamh. She said, 'Mammy?' And I ... just said, you know, 'Yes.' […] And she said ... she wanted me to come and collect her. (p. 59)

Much like the strange knocking described in the play's first quasi-monologue, this phone call captures the duality of Irish gothic insofar as it operates as an ambiguous signifier that contains multiple, irreconcilable meanings. In the most immediate sense, it appears to facilitate the return of Valerie's repressed grief, but here the telephone is also emblematic of the twentieth-century model of mourning that is foisted upon Valerie by her husband and his parents.

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[28] When DCU was first established, the university's president, Dr Daniel O'Hare and his colleagues at DCU's sister university in Limerick wanted their respective institutions to be classified as 'technological universities'. See Michael Foley, 'An Irishman's Diary', *Irish Times*, 13 October 1989, p. 13. Less than a week after the university's inauguration, the then Taoiseach, Charles Haughey, gave a speech at the annual dinner of the Dublin Chamber of Commerce, in which he urged the Chamber to develop a special relationship with this 'new university', which was committed to meeting 'the particular needs of business and industry'. See 'Haughey Warns of External Dangers for Economy', *Irish Times*, 21 October 1989, p. 8. By 1996, O'Hare was warning that 'the possibilities of the information age mean Ireland faces a stark and important choice about its future, and missing the boat could leave us stranded forever in an economic backwater'. See Daniel O'Hare, 'All Children Must be Equipped to Carry us into the Information Age', *Irish Times*, 28 October 1996, p. 14.

In accordance with the Freudian model, mourning can only be deemed successful after the survivor has 'let go' of their lost loved one.[29] In *The Weir*, the ubiquity of this Freudian model in contemporary Western culture becomes apparent as Valerie describes her family's response to this supernatural experience. She tells her audience that 'Daniel's mother got a doctor and I ... slept for a day or two. But it was ... Daniel felt that I ... needed to face up to Niamh being gone. […] He was insisting I get some treatment, and then ... everything would be okay' (p. 61). The implication is that a medical approach, administered initially in the form of sedatives, and subsequently as a programme of psychological treatment, might 'cure' Valerie's mourning in accordance with societal expectations. Indeed, Valerie begins her story by offering a colloquial reference to the label assigned to those who fail to comply with these standards: '[i]t's important to me', she says, 'that I'm not ... bananas' (p. 61). However, psychological theories such as Sigmund Freud's are really a twentieth-century construct, and cultures had coped with bereavement in a myriad of diverse ways throughout the preceding centuries. Even in the mid-twentieth century, some psychoanalysts rejected the grieving process that Freud recommends. For instance, Nicolas Abraham and Mària Török have argued that successful mourning might also be achieved by a process called 'introjection' in which the survivor internalises the loss and uses their lost loved one as the primary support system for their mourning.[30] This is not to suggest that the survivor should entirely deny the reality of the loss, as is the case with the pathological condition Freud calls melancholia.[31] Abraham and Török liken Freudian melancholia to symbolic acts of 'incorporation' in which the subject ingests food and 'fantasizes swallowing (or having swallowed) that which has been lost […] in order not to have to "swallow" the loss'.[32] These dysfunctional flights of fantasy stand in contradistinction to the 'introjection' process, which provides a middle ground between pathological denial and the severity of Freud's 'letting go' by allowing the loss to be channelled through psychological topographies that ultimately expedite acceptance of the loss.[33] The 'introjection' process can therefore facilitate the possibility that the lost loved one might exist on some alternative spiritual plain.

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[29] Sigmund Freud, 'Mourning and Melancholia', in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. by James Strachey, 24 vols (London: Hogarth Press, 1914-1916), XIV, pp. 243-58 (p. 244).

[30] Nicolas Abraham and Mària Török, *The Shell and the Kernel: Renewals of Psychoanalysis*, trans. by Nicolas T. Rand (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), I, p. 128.

[31] Freud, 'Mourning and Melancholia', p. 245.

[32] Abraham and Török, p. 126.

[33] Ibid, p. 128.

Beliefs such as these were common in many pre-secular cultures, much as they were in Ireland prior to the Devotional Revolution. In fact, Bridget English has traced some aspects of the Irish wake tradition to paganism and pointed out that the ritual 'offers the bereaved imaginative possibilities often denied by Western culture, creating a zone of contact in which living and dead, religious and secular, coexist'.[34] Valerie's response to her daughter's death suggests that she might have been better served by a process that allowed for these imaginative possibilities. For example, she tells her companions that 'at the funeral I just thought I could go and lift her out of the coffin and would be the end of all this' (p. 59). And in response to her husband's insistence that she must 'face up to Niamh being gone', Valerie states, 'I just thought he should face up to what happened to me' (p. 60). In this exchange, Valerie and Daniel personify two disparate models of mourning; however, Valerie's recollection exemplifies the doubly harsh aspect of her predicament: she is at once separated from her daughter and from the means by which she might best process this loss. Although Jack later recounts a second tale, in which we learn of a lost love that consigned the teller to thirty years of solitude and loneliness (p. 68), Valerie's is the last traditional ghost story told in *The Weir*. Jack's second story is significant inasmuch as it alerts the audience to the harrowing sense of cultural loss that unifies all of the previous tales, but Valerie's story nonetheless marks the end of a journey that transports the audience from the annals of Celtic Ireland to the dawn of the Celtic Tiger.

The Germans are Coming

For McPherson's audience, however, this is not strictly the end of the journey. Although Brendan does not tell a ghost story, the structure of the play implies that Brendan's is a tale that is simply waiting to be told. Kevin Kerrane has observed that McPherson's text relies on circularity as a key structural principle, as evidenced by the ways in which 'the ending of *The Weir* mirrors its beginning, [when] again we hear the howling wind [and] McPherson's stage directions describe a "slow fade", an inversion of the play's opening'.[35] But this structural circularity is further established by the many allusions to the impending arrival of the Germans that intersperse the characters' quasi-monologues. Before the storytelling begins, for example, Jack muses, '[a]nother week or two now, you'll be seeing the first of the Germans' (p. 22). Likewise, after Jim's story, Brendan tells Valerie of his plans to have the

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[34] Bridget English, *Laying out the Bones: Death and Dying in the Irish Novel* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2017), p. 189.

[35] Kevin Kerrane, 'The Structural Elegance of Conor McPherson's *The Weir*', *New Hibernia Review*, 10 (2006), 105-21 (p. 118).

ladies bathroom 'fixed for the Germans like, but I haven't done it yet' (p. 52). As the play's final moments gravitate towards this mirror image of the text's beginning, it becomes clear that the term 'German' has been used throughout as a generic signifier for the plethora of European nationals that arrive in Carrick every summer. As Eamonn Jordan explains, the irreverence that Brendan and his peers express toward these European visitors conveys 'a sense of a high disregard for outsiders, who seek the faux-authentic feel, believing themselves to be acting like locals'.[36] This antipathy is most lucidly articulated in Brendan's final dismissive utterance: 'Ah I don't know where the fuck they're from' (p. 74). However, the phrase 'the Germans are coming' is laden with the cultural baggage of World Wars I and II, and these connotations were brought to the forefront of the British cultural consciousness while McPherson lived in the UK, prior to the European Parliament's endorsement of the Amsterdam Treaty.

The Amsterdam Treaty was designed to develop the foundation for fiscal unity laid by the Maastricht Treaty in 1992, by asking member states to devolve certain powers to the European Parliament. These powers related to issues concerning the legislation of immigration, the creation of criminal and civil laws, and the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP).[37] In Britain, these proposed amendments raised some concerns about the direction in which the EU was moving, as evidenced by the following excerpt from an article published in *The Times* on 26 March 1997:

> The government gave notice yesterday that it planned to block a new treaty on the future of Europe if other member states pressed ahead with plans to create a defence arm within the EU.
>   Malcolm Rifkind, the Foreign Secretary, thrust Europe to the centre of the election campaign in Rome as he accused his European partners of trying to 'lurch into a federalist direction' every two or three years. In London, a Franco-German proposal to incorporate the Western European Union defence organisation into the EU within the ten years was condemned as a 'betrayal' of agreements that had been carefully crafted over the past year.[38]

In addition to this alarm at the prospect of a militarised Europe, the proposals for shared European policies on the subjects of immigration and the provision of asylum were also condemned by Britain's Foreign Secretary. The article continues,

> Mr Rifkind rejected the fresh proposals put forward by the Dutch presidency for the new treaty to be signed in June in Amsterdam. He said it would mean that

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[36] Jordan, 'Pastoral Exhibits: Narrating Authenticities in Conor McPherson's *The Weir*', *Irish University Review*, 34 (2004), 352-68 (p. 357).
[37] 'Fact Sheet on the European Union: The Maastricht and Amsterdam Treaties' <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/atyourservice/en/displayFtu.html?ftuId=FTU_1.1.3.html> [accessed 16 February 2018].
[38] 'Rifkind Threatens to Block New Europe Treaty', *The Times*, 26 March 1997, p. 2.

immigration and asylum policy could no longer be determined by democratically elected parliaments, and the EU would for the first time be turned into an organisation of 'collective security'. He said the proposals had been tabled as a basis for negotiation, but they were not a basis for agreement.[39]

These same fears were stoked during the recent 'Brexit' campaign – so much so, in fact, that Richard Dearlove, the former head of the British foreign-intelligence service, M16, claimed that Britain's withdrawal from the EU might deter the threat of Isis.[40] And if the 'Brexit' campaign has revealed one single truth, it was that these fears are habitually boiled down to familiar, bitesize headlines, such as 'the Germans are coming', on the front pages of red-top newspapers and various media outlets less reputable than *The Times*.[41] Much like *The Weir*'s engagement with the gothic, these tabloid headlines manipulate familiar cultural signifiers to suffuse the present with an aura of residual menace that looms large in the past.

By revealing that the term 'German' has been used throughout McPherson's play as a euphemism for the impending arrival of unwanted European guests, Brendan offers what is essentially the play's final denouement. Coupled with the manner in which this ending is contrived to point back toward the play's beginning in a fashion that amplifies the structural circularity of McPherson's text, this denouement implies that this European influence might well constitute the next episode in the cyclical expansion of a modernity that *The Weir* traces back to the pre-Christian era. Throughout the play, Brendan's bar appears to be the last vestige of a rural Ireland that is gradually disappearing as the twenty-first century appears on the horizon. As Jordan puts it, the 'pub functions symbolically as a fantasy and community locus and as a narrative space, where inebriation offers a sense of relaxation and gives a certain type of licence'.[42] This communitarian function is stressed even in the opening stage directions, which provide a detailed account of Jack's entrance and the manner in which he casually serves himself in Brendan's absence:

> *He goes behind the counter. [...] He turns and takes a bottle from the shelf, awkwardly prising off the top. He pours it and leaves it on the bar to settle. He turns*

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[39] Ibid.

[40] Jason Burke, 'Post-Brexit Immigration Controls Would do Little to Stop Isis Attacks', *Guardian*, 24 March 2016 <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2016/mar/24/post-brexit-immigration-controls-stop-uk-isis-attcks> [accessed 13 August 2018].

[41] This phrase was actually used as a headline in an *Irish Times* supplement section in September 1996. See Mary Dowey, 'The Germans are Coming', *Irish Times: Weekend Section*, 14 September 1996, p. 10. The phrase was also used as a by-line in *The Times* in May 1997. See Helen Mound, 'Journey of Eastern Delights on Classic Wheels', *The Times: Cars Section*, 17 May 1997, p. 10. It is difficult to access tabloid archives, but the *Daily Mail* certainly used militaristic rhetoric in their coverage of the Amsterdam Treaty. See 'Euro Army Rout as Blair Sticks to his Guns', *Daily Mail*, 18 June 1997, p. 2.

[42] Jordan, 'Pastoral Exhibits', p. 354.

> *to the till which he opens with practiced, if uncertain, ease. He takes a list of prices*
> *from beside the till and holds a pair of spectacles up to his face while he examines it.*
> *He puts money in the till and takes his change.* (p. 13, italics in original)

In this way, Brendan's bar embodies a rural utopian ideal; a place where the consumer-proprietor relationship is still principally mediated by goodwill and trust, to say nothing of Jack's familiarity with the workings of 'the till', which suggests a closeness more readily associated with the 'family home' than with the 'public house'. But there are indications that the globalising sprawl of the Celtic Tiger has already begun to mark the surrounding lands and businesses. In a world where a house now owned by Finbar is still called 'Maura Nealon's House' in memory of the family that originally lived there, the juxtaposed revelation that Jim 'met Finbar Mack down in the Spar' introduces the name of a Dutch retail franchise that punctures this otherwise idyllic rustic scene (p. 16). In the context of the play, Brendan's role is to serve as a pastoral foil to Finbar's personification of Celtic-Tiger values; he is content to leave 'the campsites to Finbar' and prefers to preserve his own piece of the surrounding countryside in all its natural splendour (p. 25). As he explains to Valerie, 'it's a grand spot all along ... for going for a walk or that, all down the cliffs' (p. 25). Crucially, the 'fairy fort' that is home to the supernatural beings at the centre of Jack's ghost story is located on Brendan's land (p. 33), and his reluctance to develop the meadow, or to sell it to appease the Celtic-Tiger aspirations of his sisters (p. 15), speaks to a certain affiliation with Ireland's fading cultural heritage. On the other hand, Finbar actively participates in this modernising process; indeed, when he tells Valerie that, '[y]ou get all the Germans trekking up here in the summer, [u]p from the campsite', Finbar openly acknowledges his involvement in this globalising process.

The impending influence of this modernising force also makes itself felt in McPherson's play at an intertextual level, as the contrasting values personified by Brendan and Finbar are in many important ways prefigured by the central characters in Denis Johnston's 1931 play, *The Moon in the Yellow River*. Set in 1927, Johnston's play dramatises a fictional IRA attempt to blow up a Free-State hydroelectric power plant. The IRA commander, Darrell Blake, acts as a pastoral foil to the modern globalising force embodied by the power plant's German engineer, Herr Tausch. In the kangaroo court martial that brings the second act to its conclusion, Blake expresses his contempt for this expansion of modernity:

> Dearly beloved, the situation is a straightforward one. Our German brother stands indicted before the bar of this court on the gravest of charges. He has outraged the sacred person of our beloved mother – Cathleen ní Houlihan. I say let him be condemned and his works be deodand. In other words, I propose we blow them up.[43]

Blake's bucolic nationalism provides a striking contrast to the modern idealism espoused by his German counterpart, for whom a modernised future is a future wrought by happiness:

> Do not please think that I am preaching the doctrines of material prosperity. […] I see in mind's eye this land of the future – transformed and redeemed by power – from the sordid trivialities of peasant life to something newer and better. Soon you will be a happy nation – free not by magic of empty formulae or by the colour of the coats you wear, but by the inspiration of power – power – power.[44]

For all his enthusiasm to distinguish the plant's technological power from a vulgar materialism, Johnston's Tausch nonetheless echoes the principles espoused by McPherson's Finbar inasmuch as his vision of a modernised Ireland is conceived as an antidote to the 'pre-modern' principles that Brendan safeguards in his field.

In *The Moon in the Yellow River*, the engineer's role is not arbitrarily assigned to a German national. Although the 1925 Shannon Electrification Scheme was originally conceived by a young Irish engineer, Thomas A. McLaughlin, he was employed by the German Siemens-Schuckert engineering company in the early 1920s.[45] Paul Duffy has questioned the motivation behind Siemens-Schuckert's willingness to fund McLaughlin's studies on the potential difficulties that might arise in relation to large-scale regional electrification projects between 1922 and 1925. He writes,

> [i]t is difficult to imagine any company in a post-war economic climate paying a highly qualified engineer to act as a decoration. Siemens obviously viewed Ireland as a possible source of new business and much-needed foreign exchange. Newly independent and poorly developed, the Free State must have appeared ripe for a new business company that badly needed foreign markets. No doubt Siemens also knew of McLaughlin's investigations into Ireland's water-power resources. They may well have known of his friendship, from his student days, with several members of the Free State cabinet.[46]

Duffy's retrospective suspicions were shared by the Institution of Civil Engineers in the 1920s, which did not oppose the electrification scheme in principle, but queried the decision

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[43] Denis Johnston, 'The Moon in the Yellow River', in *The Dramatic Works of Denis Johnston*, 3 vols (Gerrard's Cross: Colin Smyth, 1979), II, pp. 79-162 (p. 133).

[44] Johnston, p. 109.

[45] Albert J. P. McCarthy, 'The Irish National Electrification Scheme', *Geographical Review*, 47 (1957), 539-54 (p. 539).

[46] Paul Duffy, 'The Pre-History of the Shannon Scheme', *History Ireland*, 12 (2004), 34-38 (p. 37).

to award the contract to a German engineering company; there were even protests after the government released the details of the decisive meeting, held on 26 January 1924, and these protests escalated after the international committee that was established to oversee the matter upheld the Siemens appointment.[47] The history of the scheme foreshadows the surreptitious Celtic-Tiger business dealings that became associated with the 'brown envelope' during the economic boom.[48] Alloyed with the nationalist fervour that coloured Irish politics during the Free-State era, the protestations and suspicions that surrounded Siemens's involvement in the 1925 Shannon Electrification Scheme rendered the hydroelectric power plant the ideal symbol for the kind of globalisation that Blake resists in *The Moon in the Yellow River*. But the role that this power plant performs in Johnston's text also renders it the ideal symbol for the accelerated march of globalisation that Brendan resists in *The Weir*. Much like Finbar's touristic manipulation of the local landscape, the 1925 Shannon Electrification Scheme sought to modernise the nation's natural resources for capitalist gains, and it is precisely this late twentieth-century chapter in the tale of Ireland's modernisation that sits suppressed and haunting in the background of *The Weir*.

Conclusion

Patrick Lonergan has described *The Weir* as a play 'dependent for [its] impact on audiences' enjoyment of old-fashioned ghost stories'.[49] This is indeed the quality that creates the ostensible appearance of diversionary spectacle, but *The Weir* also draws a certain dynamism from the gothic's potential to disrupt and subvert. In his analysis of nineteenth-century Irish gothic fiction, Jarlath Killeen points out that the gothic's subversive potential encoded a revolutionary impulse that took aim at realist discourse and the hegemonic principles endorsed by realist fiction.[50] In McPherson's hands, this subversive potential is harnessed to

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[47] Duffy notes that the Irish Centre for Electrical Engineers did raise objections to the use of the Shannon. These objections were led by Sir John Purser Griffith, a leading Welsh-born Irish engineer, and Laurence J. Kettle, the chief electrical engineer for Dublin Corporation, who preferred to use the river Liffey in Co. Dublin as the primary locus for the electrification of Ireland. See Duffy, p. 37.

[48] The term 'brown envelope' became a synecdoche for commercial immorality and political corruption in Tiger Ireland. These issues were already at the forefront of the Irish cultural consciousness prior to 4 November 1997, when the 'Flood Tribunal' was established by Dáil Éireann to investigate matters pertaining to planning permission and land rezoning in Dublin during the 1990s. See Frank McDonald, 'Flood to Preside over Dublin Planning Inquiry', *Irish Times*, 3 November 1997, p. 7. The tribunal even outlived the Celtic Tiger, and by the time it published its final report on 22 March 2012, it had been renamed the 'Mahon Tribunal'. Its findings eventually led to the resignation of then Taoiseach, Bertie Ahern, who failed to 'truthfully account' for a number of cash deposits made to his bank accounts. See Stephen Douglas, 'Mahon Tribunal Findings', *Irish Times*, 23 March 2012, p. 23.

[49] Patrick Lonergan, *Theatre and Globalization: Irish Drama in the Celtic Drama Era* (New York: Palgrave and Macmillan, 2009), p. 107.

[50] Jarlath Killeen, 'Irish Gothic Revisited', *Irish Journal of Gothic and Horror Studies*, 4 (2008), 30-51 (p. 47).

manufacture a critique of the neoliberal phase of modernity that prevailed in Ireland during the Celtic-Tiger era. At the level of content, the play establishes this critique by identifying the various aspects of Irish culture displaced by the blunt force of modernity, and by exploring the various spectral guises in which these aspects later returned. However, this critique of modernity also operates in *The Weir* at the level of form, and the ways in which it does so make McPherson's reflections on the prominence of the monologue play in the 1990s appear all the more apropos to the quasi-monological structure of *The Weir*.

McPherson's contention that this subjective dramatic form became dominant as the Irish populace scrambled to establish a toehold in the rapidly shifting Celtic-Tiger era seems to resonate with the fact that the play's allusion to this phase of modernity appears only as a rather conspicuous absence, which is to say that it appears only in the spectral guise of a story that has yet to unfold around Brendan, who never offers one of his own. This provides a striking contrast to the play's fully articulated narratives, in which Jack sets out the impact made by the advance of modernity, both in pre-Christian Ireland and during the Devotional Revolution; in which Finbar describes the late nineteenth-century spiritualism that was in turn displaced by early twentieth-century modernity; and in which Jim and Valerie give voice to the adverse effects spawned by these cycles of modernity, with specific reference to the child sex-abuse scandals that rocked Ireland in the late twentieth century, and to Valerie's incapacity to mourn her daughter's death in the fashion most befitting her own inclinations.

Although Brendan's narrative is never explicitly articulated in the same way as these quasi-monologues, poststructuralist theorists have established critical frameworks to explore these kinds of textual absences. Roland Barthes, for example, has suggested that a writer's style is in essence the culmination of the many styles and genres that comprise the texts previously read by that author.[51] Crucially, these intertextual relationships allow us to recognise certain meanings that lie buried beneath the surface of a text, much as some familiarity with *The Moon in the Yellow River* offers additional insight into the significance attributed to the hydroelectric power plant and the impending arrival of 'the Germans' in *The Weir*. This significance makes itself felt in a manner akin to those absent presences that Jacques Derrida describes as 'the trace' – that is, a presence which is 'not a presence but is rather the simulacrum of a presence that dislocates, displaces, and refers beyond itself'.[52] In addition to *The Weir*'s intertextual relationship to Johnston's play, however, such a spectral

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[51] Roland Barthes, from 'Writing Degree Zero', in *A Barthes Reader*, ed. by Susan Sontang (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), pp. 31-61 (p. 32).
[52] Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*, trans. by David B. Allison (Evanston: Northwest University Press, 1973), p. 156.

presence is also manifested in the ellipses that punctuate the speech of McPherson's characters whenever something is implied, but remains unsaid, because it is somehow inexplicable or far too difficult to express. Like Jack's second story, these ellipses accentuate the overlaps that bind what is socially or personally uncomfortable to that which is supernatural or anomalous. When Jack explains that 'Maura Nealon's house was built on what you'd call ... that ... road' (p. 37), for instance, the supernatural element – the 'fairy road' – is signified by markings that identify its absent presence. These identifiers appear again when Finbar tells us that Niamh Walsh and her friends 'were after doing the ... Ouija board' (p. 41), and as Jack recalls that the figure who appeared in the graveyard 'had a bit of a reputation for em ... being a pervert' (p. 51). There is a similar process in operation when Valerie describes the mysterious phone call in which her deceased daughter 'said ... She wanted [her mother] to come and collect her' (p. 59) and when Brendan describes his land as 'a grand spot all along ... for going for a walk or that, all down the cliffs' (p. 25). But these absent presences do not appear only in these pivotal moments; in fact, they permeate the text with a regularity that suggests that some unacknowledged presence sits ever present in the background.

Although this spectral presence never quite comes into focus, the structure of the play suggests that this force will soon impact upon the way of life that Brendan personifies. For example, Brendan does not complete the cycle of ghost stories; instead, his final act is to close the communal space that has, throughout the play, fostered existing relationships and facilitated the forging of new bonds. It is also telling that the play's final denouement emphasises the text's circularity just as Brendan's resistance to the globalisation signified by Finbar and the local Spar is conflated with the menace that lies camouflaged beneath the play's allusions to the 'Germans' and the new European order that these figures represent. The impact that this globalising force might make upon the remnants of the gothicised past that Brendan embodies, indeed strives to protect, can only appear as a Derridean trace because, in 1997, this narrative existed only in its unarticulated infancy.

Killeen has more recently acknowledged that Irish gothic fiction has become rejuvenated in the wake of the Celtic-Tiger boom, as 'ghost estates' and 'zombie banks' now punctuate contemporary discourse, in the same way fairy roads and ruined abbeys mark the Irish landscape.[53] In *The Weir*, there is a certain suspicion of the neoliberal doctrines that

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[53] Killeen, 'How Celtic Tiger's Death Led to a Gothic Revival', *Irish Times*, 28 April 2017 <https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/how-celtic-tiger-s-death-led-to-a-gothic-revival-1.3065069> [accessed 27 February 2018].

became the mantras of Tiger Ireland. This suspicion makes itself most immediately felt through McPherson's characterisation of Brendan, but it also manifests on a structural level, as the play foreshadows the malignant forces that would emerge in conjunction with the economic downturn. Two decades on from the first production of *The Weir*, these anomalous forces appear to us now in the fully crystallised forms of austerity, emigration, and negative equity. And while the velocity of the Celtic Tiger might well have rendered it impossible for anyone to determine the shape of its legacy, McPherson's play nonetheless demonstrates that, much like the light generated by the edifice that lends *The Weir* its title, these advances of modernity always refract against the cultural mechanisms that are ultimately displaced, casting shadows that hang about for centuries, like signposts to roads that have long ceased to exist.

John Banville's (Post)modern Reinvention of the Gothic Tale: Boundary, Extimacy, and Disparity in *Eclipse* (2000)

Mehdi Ghassemi

Introduction

One of the most distinctive characteristics of John Banville's oeuvre, especially in his later fiction, is that the familiar frequently exceeds its ordinariness and is transformed into an 'other', or an 'othered' version of itself. In their attempt to represent the world, his narrators grapple with the unfathomability of things, even ordinary things. Their epistemological quests for 'authentic' knowledge often result in reality becoming ever more elusive. In this highly precarious universe, nothing is what it seems to be. Banville foregrounds this feature of his fiction *Eclipse* (2000) in particular, as a dreamlike logic underpins the entirety of the narrative, in which past and present are fluid and memories never stop pouring involuntarily into the present, thereby disrupting the unity of the narrators' perception of the here and now.

This is in line with Banville's definition of art as that which takes 'the commonplace, the quotidian, and transfigure[s] it into something else'.[1] This vision of art echoes that of Henry James, Banville's 'Master', who advocated for 'a close connotation, or close observation, of the real […] the familiar, the inevitable', one that reveals the unfamiliar seated in the familiar, the sinister in everyday life.[2] James's famous ghostly tales, in this sense, are arguably the most conspicuous expression of this vision. Indeed, a defining aspect of James's ghost stories is that the spectral coexists alongside the quotidian and, at times, even converges with it. 'This *meeting* of the actual and the imaginary', writes Martin Scofield, 'is crucial in James's ghost stories' in that '[t]he supernatural always has a bearing on the world of human action, psychology and morality'.[3] What makes stories like 'The Turn of the Screw' (1898) and 'The Jolly Corner' (1908) particularly significant is the way James manages to make the spectral and the everyday reality interpenetrate. 'A good ghost-story', in

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[1] John Banville, quoted in John Kenny, *John Banville* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2009), p. 100.

[2] Henry James, 'Letter to Vernon Lee', 27 April 1890, in *The Letters of Henry James, Volume III: 1883-1895*, ed. by Leon Edel (Cambridge: Harvard University Press), p. 277. Banville has often expressed his admiration for James and has recently written a sequel to James's *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881), entitled *Mrs Osmond* (2018). In a 1997 interview, Banville expressed his view on James's 'art of fiction', claiming that he is a follower of the Jamesian 'line' of fiction writing rather than the Joycean one (Hedwig Schwall, 'An Interview with John Banville', *The European English Messenger*, 6.1 (1997), 13-19).

[3] Martin Scofield, 'Introduction', *Ghost Stories of Henry James* (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions, 2001), pp.vii-xxii (p. ix).

James's own words, 'must be connected at a hundred points with the common objects of life'.[4]

Arguably following in the footsteps of the Master, Banville has also taken an interest in the gothic tale. Although various gothic elements do recur in many of Banville's novels in one way or another, it is arguably in *Eclipse* that a systematic effort to create a gothic effect is visible. Set primarily in a haunted house, the novel features the thespian Alexander Cleave, who grapples with the (in)authenticity of his self on the one hand, and with the unfathomability of the objects of his perception on the other. After experiencing an attack of stage fright that shatters the foundation of his unified sense of self, Cleave returns to his childhood house, hoping to repair his sundered identity. Instead, the haunted house threatens to dislocate his subjective perception further. Here, mirrors reveal uncanny reflections, and dark doorways, corridors, and staircases function as portals to a spectral otherworld. Boundaries prove to be constantly shaky, as everything seems to be linked; objects, places, people, and mythical figures permeate each other. In a word, unity and wholeness give way to porous and multi-layered duality.

Focusing on the role of the boundary in Cleave's perceptions of the spectral, this article examines the way in which Banville reimagines the gothic tradition in contemporary fiction, and assesses the degree to which James's art of the ghostly tale informs the Irish writer's rehabilitation of the gothic as a (post)modern form. To this end, after addressing the function of boundaries in Cleave's narrative, I move on to examine the way in which the breaching of boundaries results in encounters with what Jacques Lacan calls 'the Thing'. I then situate Banville's use of the ghostly tale in a wider context by mobilising 'disparity' as a concept that most aptly captures the writer's postmodern reworking of the traditional ghost story. I therefore argue that Banville reimagines a postmodern version of the gothic novel by emphasising the breaching of boundaries, uncanny encounters, and a subjective experience that lacks unity and stability.

Boundaries

During his stay in the childhood house, Cleave sees two sets of ghosts. One is the ghost of his dead father, who appears 'as real as in life', and who is perceived in minute details that

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[4] James, 'Mary Elizabeth Braddon', *Literary Criticism (Vol. I): Essays on Literature, American Writers, English Writers*, ed. by Leon Edel and Mark Wilson (New York: The Modern Library of America, 1984), pp. 741-46 (p. 742).

enable Cleave to identify the phantom immediately.[5] The other is the ghost of a mysterious woman whose 'head was covered' and whose 'features' he is unable to 'make out' (p. 26). What characterises nearly all of the ghostly apparitions in the novel is that they are fundamentally linked to boundaries and the crossing of boundaries. This is evident on multiple levels. On more than one occasion, the spectral and the mundane seem to overlap as ghostly unreality touches living everyday reality. The narrator, for instance, observes how '[t]he phantoms work their immanent magic' on one of the squatters of the house, Lily (p. 123). Moreover, he notes that 'she reclines in the places where they appear, in their very midst, a grubby and all too actual odalisque' (p. 123). The use of the word 'grubby', considered alongside the emphatic phrase '*all too* actual', is particularly revelatory, implying that Lily's overstated actuality is foregrounded by the spectral presence of the ghosts; she reclines where they appear, as if the spectral frames her material presence. At the same time, 'grubby' suggests infection. In other words, the spectral frames the material, while also polluting and permeating it.

Boundaries between the spectral and the actual are crossed further, in that spectral perceptions are not limited to seeing ghosts. Early in the novel, for instance, Cleave sees what he 'takes to be' his wife 'standing at the window' (p. 3). But his wife later says she was not physically present behind the window; what appears to him through the window is a ghostly version of his real-life wife. Although Cleave acknowledges the factual inexactitude of his perception, he continues to insist on its primacy, telling us, 'I had seen my not-wife not-standing, and looked out at what she had not-seen' (p. 18). By refusing to negate the verb (for example, by saying 'I *hadn't* seen my wife') and instead, performing a triple negation of the predicate, Cleave redefines his relationship with reality. The hallucinatory nature of the apparition, in other words, does not render it insignificant. Instead, by affirming a non-predicate, Cleave's description adds a third element to the opposition real/imaginary, at least on a linguistic level. What he sees is neither real in the sense of being an objective reality, nor does he simply accept it as an imaginary unreal. It is a third element that superimposes itself at the very limit of both real and imaginary. Although it lacks 'objective' materiality, the *not-thing* ('not-wife' that is 'not-standing' and 'not-seen') exists in Cleave's visual field (or, rather, it insists on being seen). Regarding these perceptions, he states, 'I am not so deluded as to not know that these images are the product of my imagination but', he adds, 'I see them, as clear as anything I cannot touch, the sky, clouds, those far blue hills' (p. 55). 'Yet', Cleave

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[5] Banville, *Eclipse* (London: Picador, 2000), p. 44. Further references to this text are given in parentheses in the body of the essay.

says later in the novel, 'everywhere around me there is substance, eminently tangible stuff, the common old world itself, hard and dense and warm to the touch' (p. 124). He therefore seems able to distinguish between two sets of perceptions, one that belongs to the intangible yet visual and one to the tangible material. The (unconventional) affirmation of the non-predicate, together with the use of 'see' and 'touch' in order to distinguish between different sets of phenomena, demonstrates Cleave's linguistic experimentation as he struggles to deal with his perceptual predicament. In this way, his attempt arguably introduces a third category that can correspond with his uncanny perceptions, perceptions that elude the standard boundary between reality and imagination.

Boundaries and the phantoms are also linked in Cleave's spatial representations of the house. In addition to windows, the apparitions in *Eclipse* either take place in, or are seen through, liminal spaces such as doorways and staircases. For instance, he sees the female phantom 'through the kitchen doorway' (p. 46) and the paternal ghost 'standing in the open doorway' (p. 44). Elsewhere, he describes how the 'ghostly figures' that he used to see as a child appeared to him 'on the stairs' (p. 49). This is highly reminiscent of James's ghost stories, in which it windows and staircases similarly function as privileged loci for ghostly apparitions. In 'The Turn of the Screw', for example, Peter Quint's ghost appears to the governess either through a window or at a staircase.[6] Themselves liminal sites where boundaries are crossed, the window and the staircase are, for Banville and James, architectural tropes that accentuate the significance of boundaries and liminality in their visions of the ghostly tale.

In his preface to 'The Turn of the Screw', James speaks of the ghostly as 'an annexed but independent world'.[7] In *Eclipse*, the spectres similarly have 'their own world', but it is one that is subtly linked to the actual, and again, the stairway is a central locus:

> When I speak of them being at the table, or the range, or standing on the stairs, it is not the actual stairs or range or table that I mean. They have their own furniture […]. It looks like the solid stuff among which I move, but it is not the same, or it is the same at another stage of existence. (p. 48)

The way in which the pieces of furniture figure in Alex's description constitutes a chiastic structure between the actual and the virtual – table, range, stairs, and then, stairs, range, table.

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[6] James, 'The Turn of the Screw', in *Ghost Stories*, pp. 175-266 (pp. 195, 216-19). In James's 'Sir Edmund Orme' (1891), moreover, the narrator momentarily takes the figure of Mrs Marden standing behind the window for 'an apparition', and later describes her as a 'flitting presence behind the pane' (in *Ghost Stories*, pp. 67-91 (pp. 74-75)).

[7] James, 'Preface to "The Turn of the Screw"', *Ghost Stories*, pp. 3-10 (p. 5).

The stairs of both sides are the closest in this chiastic structure, as if linking the two realms. Therefore, rather than existing in a relation of contrast, the spectral and the everyday real overlap, albeit minimally. Moreover, this overlap has a direct effect on the actual:

> If the ghostly scene has a chair in it, say, that the [phantom] woman is sitting on, and that occupies the same space as a real chair in the real kitchen, and is superimposed on it, however ill the fit, the result will be that when the scene vanishes the real chair will retain a sort of aura, will blush, almost, in the surprise of being singled out and fixed upon, of being lighted upon, in this fashion. (p. 48)

The superimposition of the spectral on the real produces an extra, an ephemeral addition, which, while it lingers, derails the unity of the narrator's experience. The banality of everyday experience is transformed into strangeness via the inclusion, or, rather, intrusion of a ghostly supplement into perceptual experience. Consequently, the interpenetration of the spectral and the actual changes the fabric of the quotidian and leaves a persistent ghostly touch in Cleave's perception of the world; as he tells us, 'everything was bathed in a faint glow of strangeness, an unearthly radiance' (p. 45).

Within the context of Cleave's perceptions of the spectral supplement, the word 'touch' acquires a significant resonance; namely, he associates the spectral with 'touch' both literally and metaphorically. For instance, he observes that 'the deserted square' has an 'alien air, a touch almost of Transylvania' (p. 25), and the tramp who Cleave meets in the street has 'a touch of umbrage' (p. 105), with 'umbrage' itself being already linked with shadow.[8] More generally, touch is almost never associated with the act of touching matter. Cleave touches not Lydia's actual shoulder but 'the air by Lydia's shoulder' (p. 20). Elsewhere, when the word 'touch' does figure in its most standard meaning, 'laying hand on matter', he either does not quite manage to touch but '*almost* touched his knees' (p. 41, emphasis added), while his kinaesthetic access is barred by a negation: 'I may observe, but not touch' (p. 103) and 'I cannot touch' (p. 55). In a similar vein, 'the interior' of the hotel in which he married Lydia is described as 'many-layered and slightly gummy to the touch, like toffee' (p. 38). What is conjured up here is the way in which the place's interiority is not directly accessible but mediated by a number of layers. According to Mladen Dolar, '[t]actility, touching, the sense of touch, all appear to be the firmest thing there is. What one can touch is, tautologically, the most palpable and the most tangible'.[9] Among all the senses, 'touching is singled out by its

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[8] Transylvania of course is yet another signifier that conjures up a gothic atmosphere, as it famously functions as the setting for Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897).

[9] Mladen Dolar, 'Touching Ground', *Filozofski vestnik*, 29.2 (2008), 79-100 (p. 79).

immediacy, while other senses are subject to a certain deferral in various ways'.[10] For Dolar, what one can touch is perceived as 'closer', 'more real' than objects perceived by the other senses. In touching, the 'spatial distance' between the subject and object is demolished.[11] Cleave's problematic sense of touch, by contrast, alienates him further from material reality. He is deprived of the proximity with the material object that constitutes one's immediate experience of reality. Even though he tries to 'get a grip on things' (p. 28), all he is left with is a faint touch of a shadow. In other words, usual rules do not apply in Cleave's world and are, in fact, turned on their heads.

Even when he does manage to touch something, rather than the simple sensation of touch, the experience yields a weird intimation. He writes, 'I set off up the stairs, feeling the faintly repulsive clamminess of the banister rail under my hand, offering me its dubious intimacy' (p. 115). Together with 'intimacy', the words 'repulsive' and 'dubious' suggest that what the experience discloses is linked with unpleasant, possibly even repressed, family history. This is especially the case given the fact that the house is where Cleave grew up as a child, witnessing all of the inner experiences of the familial. In other words, the experience has to do with the more 'unhomely' aspects of home – in a word, the *Unheimliche*; that is, Freud's famous uncanny.[12] Additionally, the fact that this sensation is experienced on the stairway is especially significant. Insofar as it functions as a privileged site for the ghostly apparition, as we saw earlier, the stairway subtly links the spectral with the uncanny return of the repressed in domestic space. At the same time, since the stairway is a liminal site, it suggests, yet again, (malleable) boundaries as well as the possibility of their breach. Early on in the novel, Cleave hints at the connection between the phantoms and repression: '[t]he suggestion of the familial the phantoms bring with them makes me wonder if they might be the form of a rejected life coming back to claim me' (p. 49). The spatial stairway stages the liminal locus in which the spectral strikes a chord with that repressed, 'rejected' element of his psyche that recurrently come back to haunt or 'claim' him.

Extimacy

Slavoj Žižek elaborates on the relation between the ghostly and the repressed through recourse to Lacanian psychoanalysis. According to Žižek, the intrusion of the spectral into

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[10] Dolar, p. 79.
[11] Ibid.
[12] See Sigmund Freud, 'The "Uncanny"', in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud: An Infantile Neurosis and Other Works*, trans. James Strachey, 24 vols (London: The Hogarth Press, 1953-74), XVII (1955), pp. 217-56.

reality has to do with a fundamental gap in reality itself, a fissure brought about by the ontologically incomplete nature of the Symbolic order.[13] Since the Symbolic order is unable completely to overwrite the Real, reality is never self-contained, self-evident, or whole. In his words, reality 'presents itself via its incomplete, failed symbolization'.[14] 'Spectral apparitions', in turn, 'emerge in the very gap that forever separates reality from the real […]. The spectral gives body to that which escapes (the symbolically structured) reality.'[15] In this sense, Žižek adds, the spectral is the name for that which 'conceals' that part of reality that is 'primordially repressed', 'the irrepresentable [*sic*] X on whose "repression" reality itself is founded'.[16] Lacan's name for this impossible object is 'the Thing'. According to Lacan, the unnamable *T*hing is to be distinguished from *t*hings, which are 'closely linked' with words; hence, they are nameable.[17] A thing is marked by language and related to 'the transition to the symbolic'.[18] By contrast, Gary Farnell comments, the Thing 'is the absolute otherness', 'a phantasmic reference to an unnamable void at the centre of the Real' that lies beyond the Symbolic order. It cannot be represented as such, but can only be 'misrepresented as a series of effects'.[19]

However, the relation between the Thing and a thing is not a clear-cut separation. Rather, the relation between the two is that of *extimacy* – a neologism that Lacan coined in order to explain the paradoxical status of the Thing as that which is both *ext*erior and int*imate*.[20] The impossible Thing has to be excluded, repressed, so that *a thing* can emerge in reality. In other words, for a thing to be representable by language, it has to be 'defined against the impossible reality of the Thing'.[21] However, the fact that the thing is only representable when the Thing is excluded means that the Thing and a thing are fundamentally

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[13] Žižek here is building on Jacques Lacan's famous triadic model, based on the concepts of the Symbolic, Real, and Imaginary. Roughly speaking, the Symbolic is the locus of the signifier, the register that guaranties the possibility of any meaningful signification. The Real, in turn, is that which subsists beyond symbolisation. It is the realm of the impossible, because it is impossible to signify, yet it paradoxically underlies all aspects of our reality. It is the unknown kernel of *jouissance* that needs to be repressed, excluded, so that 'reality' becomes possible. In this sense, in Lacan's terminology, the Real is distinct from reality. The Imaginary, finally, consists of images, which regulate one's sense of self by mediating one's interactions with the self as well as others.
[14] Slavoj Žižek, 'Introduction: The Spectre of Ideology', in *Mapping Ideology* (London: Verso, 1994), pp. 1-33 (p. 21).
[15] Ibid.
[16] Ibid.
[17] Jacques Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book VII*, trans. by Denis Porter (London: Routledge, 2008), p. 54.
[18] Ibid, p. 52.
[19] Gary Farnell, 'The Gothic and the Thing', *Gothic Studies*, 11.1 (2009), 113-23 (p. 113).
[20] Lacan, p. 171.
[21] Farnell, p. 113.

linked together.[22] That is to say, the (impossible) Thing is 'at the very interior of the figure to which it is external'.[23] Extimacy means that negative exclusion marks (Symbolic) reality, permeates it, and becomes inseparable from it. In a word, it haunts it. Therefore, as Farnell points out, the Thing is located inside as well as outside of all Symbolic productions such as art and culture. From a Lacanian perspective, then, Farnell concludes, 'Gothic is the name for the speaking subject's confrontation with intimations of the Thing'.[24] The extimate Thing explains how 'such externalities' in gothic art as 'haunted spaces and decaying properties, with absences at their heart', coincide with the 'subject's deepest and most imperceptible subjectivity'.[25] Gothic fiction stages the subject's encounters with the unrepresentable Thing, ones that activate 'the key processes of *sublimation* and *abjection*'.[26]

In *Eclipse*, everyday objects function in the novel as 'hidden portents' (p. 18), always revealing an 'otherside', an echo from the past or a premonition of the future. They either display 'shades of dried blood' or bear 'traces of an intruder' (p. 18). The 'bentwood chair' is 'resentful-looking' and a 'night table with wormholes' functions as a tempo-spatial wormhole that instantly connects him to the past, thereby disrupting the unity of his experience (p. 18). In this abyssal house, '[s]omething would catch my attention, anything, a cobweb, a damp patch on a wall, a scrap of old newspaper lining a drawer, a discarded paperback, and I would stop and stand gazing at it for a long time, motionless, lost, unthinking' (p. 18). The house functions as a space in which the Real aspect of 'anything' easily comes to the fore, transfixing him so that he is 'motionless'. The use of the negating prefix 'un', especially considered alongside the narrator's triple negation of the predicate discussed earlier, highlights the significance of the primordial negativity that underlies Cleave's universe of the *un*canny, the undead, that which persists in its horrifying negative existence. It is familiar – it is still an object in reality – yet simultaneously bizarre. It is the obverse of thinking and knowing.

Besides the formless ghosts and uncanny objects that appear inside the house, Cleave sees an unknowable animal-like figure on the road: 'I had stopped on instinct before I

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[22] One can reformulate this claim using Lacan's idea of the Real as employed in his later work. Insofar as the Thing is an impossibility, it can be defined as Real. Therefore, in order for an object (a thing) to appear in reality (or the representation of reality), the Real must be excluded from representation, since the Real is traumatic and meaningless, and its inclusion disrupts meaning. However, as Lacan constantly insisted, the Real can never be completely excluded because that which is meant to cancel it, to tame it, namely, the Symbolic, is not complete, not a closed and self-contained system but barred, always lacking *the* signifier to name the Thing.
[23] Farnell, p. 113.
[24] Ibid.
[25] Ibid, pp. 113-14.
[26] Ibid, p. 115, emphasis in original.

registered the thing and sat aghast […] listening to my own blood hammering in my ears […]. What was it? […] some wild unknown thing […] seemingly legless […]. My heart was pounding yet' (p. 5). The 'thing' is unknowable, radically other. It is not of this world in that it does not resemble any animal the narrator has ever met. He is unable to situate it within his Symbolic universe. It represents the limit of meaning and understanding, the point where the narrator's epistemological quest meets its failure. It provokes anxiety since the sole feasible response to this impossibility is horror. The fact that unknowable, uncanny 'things' appear outside the house as well as inside it suggests that the extimate effect of the Thing spills beyond the house. Although domestic spaces are the privileged media for revealing the ghostly Thing, extimate encounters outside the house imply that extimacy is a more fundamental element of Cleave's subjective experience of which the (un)homely spectral apparitions are but one expression.

More specifically, a series of confrontations with peculiar figures outside the house produce Gothic extimacy in Cleave's narrative. Upon his return to the house, Cleave develops the habit of following strangers, including homeless tramps. When he finally comes face to face with one, he remarks that '[d]espite the fellow's fierce appearance there had been something cloyingly intimate in the encounter, something from which my mind's eye insisted on averting its gaze. Rules had been broken, a barrier had been transgressed, an interdiction breached' (p. 45). The tramp evokes for Cleave something nauseatingly familiar, something his conscious self strives to avoid, to repress. The words 'barrier' and 'transgressed' evoke a boundary that is no longer able to safeguard his self-containment. His most intimate sense of selfhood, that which Cleave expects to remain hidden within his own boundaries, coincides with an exteriority; in a word, it becomes extimate. Elsewhere, Cleave speaks of several red-haired figures in his narrative, who are all riddled with mysterious and unsettling gestures reminiscent of the red-haired Peter Quint from James's 'The Turn of the Screw'. During a heavy rainfall, for instance, Cleave sees a boy with red hair on a horse who, 'despite the downpour', appeared 'to be hardly wet at all, as if he were protected within an invisible shell of glass' (p. 112). In addition, Cleave is unsure whether it is a smile or 'a grimace' that he catches from the boy. What fascinates Cleave most about the boy, however, is that the latter is somehow linked to Cleave's past. The boy's 'old-fashioned' belt is similar to the one Cleave 'used to wear myself when I was his age' (p. 112). What is more, the boy, without saying a word, 'went on again, into the lane whence I had come' (p. 112) – that is, he literally heads to where Cleave was before. The narrator later meets a red-haired clown at a circus

who 'looked familiar' (p. 150). The latter reminds Cleave of yet another red-haired man who he used to meet in the street with 'alarming frequency', and who Cleave also 'seemed vaguely to know' (p. 150). As Hedwig Schwall points out, the 'leering, insinuating red-haired' figure is reminiscent of the mischievous red-haired Felix from Banville's previous novel, *Mefisto*, who 'returns with the same appearance' in later novels like '*Athena, Eclipse,* and *Shroud*'.[27] This, according to Hedwig Schwall, demonstrates the 'irrepressible revenant part of the past throughout Banville's oeuvre'.[28] In *Eclipse* specifically, the red-haired figure is linked to some form of repressed knowledge from the past. This is highlighted most tellingly through the red-haired clown's 'knowing smirk' (p. 180).

Furthermore, the very word 'red' seems to occupy a central place in Cleave's psychic scene. The mysterious animal-like figure that Cleave comes across at the beginning of his narrative, for instance, has eyes that are 'unreal neon-red' (p. 4) and he feels 'inexplicably nervous', with his 'heart racing and palms wet' while he is about to enter a 'red-brick house' (p. 91). According to David B. Morris, one way that gothic fiction achieves its effect is via instances of repetition and 'exact facsimiles', which undermine the subject's rational grasp over the world.[29] In every instance in which Cleave meets a red-haired figure, they evoke forbidden or secret knowledge through smirks, smiles, and other insinuating gestures.[30] The figures give the narrator an *intim*ation, an intimate trepidation, but they do not speak. In other words, they represent a liminal extimacy that, while obstructing Cleave's access to the forbidden knowledge that they both represent and possess, occasionally pulsates and gives off a sign, a grimace of the Real, but never (Symbolic) meaning. *Red* appears when Cleave least expects it, when he is not looking directly, when he is least in control. It is a window to the abyss of the extimate Thing that appears only when one is looking awry.

Disparity

Using key signifiers such as 'red', Banville crafts an intricate web of signification that links elements from Cleave's unconscious to objects and persons in everyday reality, thereby situating his fictional universe at the intersection of reality and imagination. At the same time, by subjecting his narrator to constant experiences of gothic extimacy and exposing him to the more invisible (repressed) underpinnings of subjective experience, he creates a world marked

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[27] Hedwig Schwall, '"Mirror on Mirror Mirrored is all the Show": Aspects of the Uncanny in Banville's Work with a Focus on *Eclipse*', *Irish University Review*, 36.1 (2006), 116-33 (p. 119).
[28] Ibid.
[29] David B. Morris, 'Gothic Sublimity', *New Literary History* 16.2 (1985), 299-319 (pp. 303-04),
[30] Banville, *Eclipse*, pp. 112, 150, 180.

by undecidability and intellectual uncertainty. Consequently, objects and people fail to coincide with themselves. Everything is, in other words, marked by a disparity. This is why Cleave wonders whether things are 'representations of themselves' (p. 49), and his mother appears as a 'statue of herself' (p. 59). The gothic, Linda Dryden says, is a 'literature of duality' and, according to Maria Beville, the gothic achieves its effect in 'presenting otherness' – that is to say, 'othered versions' of what is familiar.[31] Cleave himself lacks a unified sense of self. His mirror reflections always reveal 'othered', disparate versions of the self-image, transforming the mirrors into windows opening onto uncanny sites of self-dislocation. Faced with his reflection, for instance, Cleave sees 'someone else, a stranger lurking there, a figure of momentous and inscrutable intent' (p. 186). Elsewhere, the 'shop window' reveals the figure of 'a felon' (p. 88).

The narrator's self is dislocated further still during his autoscopic experiences, to the extent that the self as such splits (is 'cleft', as Banville's telling choice of name for his narrator implies), into both subject – the seer – and object – the seen. As he puts it, 'suddenly everything shifted on to another plane and I was at once there and not there. It was like the state that survivors of heart attacks describe, I seemed to be onstage and at the same time looking down on myself from somewhere up in the flies' (p. 89). It is precisely at this point that the chamber of his consciousness, to borrow James's famous metaphor,[32] is cracked open; his 'I', his conscious self, is separated from the body, leaving the latter on stage, as it were, and weightlessly flying above it. More significantly for our reading, the duality leads to the speaking 'I' itself, his immediate sense of self, becoming spectral. This is arguably where Banville takes the Jamesean tradition of the ghostly tale to a more radical level. A case in example is James's 'The Jolly Corner', which parallels Banville's *Eclipse* in terms of its plot to some extent, in that the narrator returns to his childhood house and confronts his ghostly alter ego. Though the confrontation proves calamitous enough for James's protagonist as the latter temporarily loses consciousness, it is in Banville's *Eclipse* that the very self becomes disjointed, neither here nor there, and is reduced to a ghostly 'I'/eye.

In this sense, Cleave is first and foremost haunted by the spectre of his own dual identity. 'To be haunted by another, by a spectre, is uncanny enough', says Dryden, 'but to be

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[31] Linda Dryden, *The Modern Gothic and Literary Doubles: Stevenson, Wilde, and Wells* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), p. 41; and Maria Beville, *Gothic-Postmodernism: Voicing the Terrors of Postmodernity* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009), pp. 41-42.
[32] James likens subjective experience to a 'kind of huge spider-web of the finest silken threads suspended in the chamber of consciousness' (James, 'The Art of Fiction', in *Partial Portraits* (London: Macmillan &Co., 1888), pp. 386-404 (p. 394)).

haunted by yourself strikes at the foundations of identity'.[33] What ultimately produces the gothic in *Eclipse* is not so much the ghosts that he meets in the haunted house as it is what the spectral apparitions reveal in Cleave's perception as an ~~in~~dividual. That is to say, *Eclipse* is a (post)modern gothic narrative that demonstrates the way in which reality itself and Cleave's subjectivity are never independent from spectrality; his sense of self, like his reality, is not whole, but constantly haunted by a ghostly excess, forever unable to coincide with itself. In a recent book, Žižek introduces 'disparity' as a concept in its own right:

> At its most radical, disparity does not refer just to the gap between parts or spheres of reality, it has to be brought to self-relating and include the disparity of a thing with regard to itself – or to put in another way, the disparity between part of a thing and nothing. A is not just not-B, it is also and primarily not fully A, and B emerges to fill in this gap. It is at this level that we should locate ontological difference: reality is partial, incomplete, inconsistent, and the Supreme Being is the illusion imagined in order to fill in (obfuscate) this lack, this void that makes reality non-all.[34]

James also claimed in his 'Art of Fiction' (1884) that '[e]xperience is never limited, and it is never complete'.[35] But whereas James emphasises the role of imagination (the writer's as well as the reader's) to supplement the missing components of experience, Banville exploits reality's ontological incompleteness in order to articulate the already inherent supplement, the unfathomable, unnamable X that never fully ceases to haunt the very foundation of reality, marking it forever by fissures and inconsistencies. Banville's 'art of fiction', so to speak, constantly exploits these fissures, articulates them, and uses them to produce othered versions of the real.

Schwall demonstrates how, in Banville's *The Infinities* (2009), the elements of the fantastic function as 'the perfect glove for Banville's neo-Symbolist hand', insofar as both fantasy and Symbolist literatures combine 'dream and reality to create effects of the marvelous' and produce allegoric versions of 'emotions, moods and spiritual states'.[36] Schwall calls Banville a 'neo-Symbolist', however, in the sense that, whereas 'Symbolists like Yeats and Rilke still had their moments of belief in unity', for Banville, 'even things which seem one or identical, never really are'.[37] Following Schwall, we can claim that Banville's *Eclipse* is an example of the *neo*-gothic, as he takes the Master's project a step further and postmodernises it. Insofar as the ghostly tale, especially in its Jamesian variation,

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[33] Dryden, p. 41.
[34] Žižek, *Disparities* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), p. 21.
[35] James, 'The Art of Fiction', p. 393.
[36] Schwall, 'An Iridescent Surplus of Style: Features of The Fantastic in Banville's *The Infinities*', *Nordic Irish Studies*, 9 (2010), 89-107 (pp. 89, 98).
[37] Schwall, 'Iridescent', p. 101.

examines the sense of uncertainty between the knowable and the unknowable, the gothic genre is a fruitful medium for Banville's epistemological fiction. Yet he simultaneously enriches the gothic tradition by situating the Jamesian variation of the gothic in a postmodern critical setting.

The Ballerina Body-Horror: Spectatorship, Female Subjectivity and the Abject in Dario Argento's *Suspiria* (1977)

Charlotte Gough

Since Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger's *The Red Shoes* (1948), the female ballerina protagonist, conflated with audio-visual tropes of horror and fantasy, as well as narrative themes of mental and physical trauma, has been a significant, international cinematic trend.[1] This article focuses on *Suspiria* (1977), a supernatural ballet-school murder-mystery, the first film in Dario Argento's 'Three Mothers' witchcraft trilogy, which in turn forms part of his wider engagement with the contentious genre of Italian 'giallo' cinema.[2] *Suspiria* has attracted an extensive body of scholarly criticism, with a predominant focus on the 'female-as-threat', and on the evocation of maternal horror in the characterisation of its killers, as patriarchal manifestations of the 'castration anxiety'.[3] Giallo films in general have provoked this type of commentary since coming into prominence in the 1970s, with the relaxing of Europe's cinematic taboos, and have been branded 'exploitation cinema', 'where artistic merit is sacrificed for sensationalistic display[s] of misogyny and [extreme, bloody] violence'.[4] Indeed, throughout his oeuvre, Argento, often described as the 'Italian Hitchcock', repeatedly positioned the spectator *as* the disembodied, sadistic serial killer behind the camera, a trope made iconic with *Psycho* (1960) and Powell's similarly scopophilic *Peeping Tom* (1960).[5] For Isabel Cristina Pinedo, such sequences privilege sexualised and fetishised violence towards the passive female victim-image through 'the act of showing […] the [female] body in bits and pieces', encouraging the objectification and dehumanisation of women through the 'male gaze' of popular cinema spectatorship.[6]

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[1] *The Red Shoes*, dir by. Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger (General Film Distributors, 1948).

[2] *Suspiria*, dir. by Dario Argento (Produzioni Atlas Consorziate, 1977).

[3] See Jacqueline Reich, 'The Mother of All Horror: Witches, Gender, and the Films of Dario Argento', in *Monsters in the Italian Literary Imagination*, ed. by Keala J. Jewell (Michigan: Wayne State University Press, 2001), pp. 89-106; Mary McDonagh, 'Suspiria and Inferno', in *Broken Mirrors/Broken Minds: The Dark Dreams of Dario Argento* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), pp. 123-58; and Xavier Mendik, *Bodies of Desire and Bodies in Distress: The Golden Age of Italian Cult Cinema, 1970-1985* (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015).

[4] Michael Sevastaskis, *Giallo Cinema and its Folktale Roots: A Critical Study of 10 Films, 1962-1987* (North Carolina: McFarland, 2016), p. 2.

[5] *Psycho*, dir. by Alfred Hitchcock (Paramount Pictures, 1960); and *Peeping Tom*, dir. by Michael Powell (Anglo-Amalgamated Film Distributors, 1960).

[6] Isabel Cristina Pinedo, *Recreational Terror: Women and the Pleasures of Horror Film Viewing* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1997).

Such scholarly, psychoanalytic preoccupation with *male* viewing, however, disregards the vital relationship between *Suspiria*'s horror and its ballet setting, as well as the centralised perspective of its ballerina protagonist. This paper seeks to identify the cultural, gendered, and psychoanalytic discourses from which the focus on the ballerina figure stems, as well as its particular significance within horror and fantasy-film scholarship more broadly. *The Red Shoes*, *The Tales of Hoffmann* (1951), and later, *Black Swan* (2011) (to name the most prominent examples of this trend) all present a prima ballerina whose struggle as a muse figure, under the patriarchal control and bodily expectations of a male *artiste*, has an ultimately tragic end.[7] I am specifically interested, however, in how *Suspiria* offers a powerfully *matriarchal* ballet environment, offering its protagonist ultimate 'Final Girl' status, in contrast to other texts of its kind.[8] I argue that the film's fantastic-horror tropes offer a radical articulation of *female*-centric identity anxieties. Firstly, I explore the potential of the fragmented, female-subjective narrative of its ballerina protagonist to undermine – as well as self-consciously draw attention to – traditional notions of gendered spectatorship through the re-assertion of female physical *presence*. Drawing upon Jungian thought, I then move on to demonstrate how the supernatural in this film is psychosexually representative of the female protagonist's fantastically manifested unconscious, as opposed to presenting a simple, 'sensationalist' serial-murder narrative. Finally, I examine how the film's engagement with non-conventional methods of spectatorship, namely 'abject' body imagery and Laura U. Marks' notion of 'haptic visuality', extends affect *beyond* the image.[9] This further destabilises the theoretical, gendered boundary between subject and object and, consequently, between viewer and film, by encouraging a multi-sensory viewing experience that defies the pleasures of a strictly 'male' gaze and significantly elevates giallo beyond critical dismissals of misogyny.

The Ballerina as Social-Feminine Ideal

The very concept of the female dancer in film exists at the point of conjunction between pervading semiotic and psychoanalytic theories regarding the formation of individual

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[7] *The Tales of Hoffmann*, dir. by Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger (British Lion Film Corporation, 1951); and *Black Swan*, dir. by Darren Aronofsky (Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation, 2011).

[8] Carol J. Clover coined this term, identifying the enduring female archetype in horror film as one who possesses 'the qualities of character that enable her to survive, of all the characters, what has come to seem unsurvivable' (Carol J. Clover, *Men, Women and Chainsaws: Gender and the Modern Horror Film* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1992), p.39).

[9] Laura U. Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000).

selfhood, as well as the gendered opposition between the mind and body. Individual artistic expression and uninhibited bodily movement, typically associated with dance, are directly at odds with the symbolic order that governs Western principles and language. Here, the body, according to Michel Foucault, 'is directly involved in a political field [organised by] power relations', functioning as an image to 'emit signs' and signify cultural identity.[10] Feminist psychoanalytic scholarship has noted that this order is based on the heritage of dualism, one which radically opposes the 'body or material' (female) realm and the 'mental or spiritual' (male) realm that controls it.[11] Using Jacques Lacan's mirror framework, the body is, in such formulations, the distanced *other* whose idealised, 'clean and proper' external object-image, according to Julia Kristeva, is crucial to defining the totality of the subjective self, to ensure control over the inner 'abject' body-*physical* that threatens to disrupt it.[12] This division between the active male-subject and the passive female-object, for Laura Mulvey, is reinforced by the screen-mirror apparatus of popular cinema. The woman's body onscreen is distanced and dehumanised, as per the voyeuristic pleasures of the disembodied 'male gaze', thereby reinforcing gender division and legitimating patriarchal subjective control.[13] The woman-as-image and the woman-as-body – both of which have been historically repressed – are employed to prohibit the very concept of female subjectivity.

These psychoanalytic frameworks thus problematise the female dancer in film, historically denied control of her own image and reduced to the body, while that body must also be used as a controlled instrument to meet the physical and aesthetic requirements of the dancing role and choreography, as well of the audience(s). According to Sondra Horton Fraleigh, 'dance is an aesthetic expression of the body and […] the body is aesthetically constituted by dance. This involves a concern for the aesthetic constitution of the self.'[14] This notion is, arguably, never more apparent than in the figure of the ballerina, as the hegemonic, patriarchal ideologies inherent in classical romantic ballet teachings, roles, and narratives reflect those highlighted in Mulvey's spectatorship model. These ideologies arguably continue to pervade the popular stage, through the gothic, fairy-tale duality between 'virgin' and 'whore', and via inhumanly ethereal female characters such as swans, nymphs, angels,

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[10] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. by Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1979).

[11] Christy Adair, 'Cultured Bodies – The Social Construction of the Body', in *Women and Dance: Sylphs and Sirens* (London: Palgrave, 1992), pp. 24-39.

[12] Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay in Abjection* (New York: Columbia University, 1982), p. 102.

[13] Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', *Screen* 16.4 (1975), 119-30 (p. 6).

[14] Sondra Horton Fraleigh, 'Dance Itself', in *Dance and the Lived Body* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1987), pp. 43-56 (p. 43).

and dolls. As Deirdre Kelly notes, such figures reflect ideas relating to the 'eternal virginity' of ballerinas, and the sense that they are 'inaccessible' and remain 'unravished'.[15]

Such roles demanded absolute bodily control, poise, and precision; the 'straight spine, lifted chest, long neck, erect head, hands and arms held without tension' create the immaculate image of the distanced feminine other.[16] Ballet choreography has its origins in the etiquette of European society. According to Kelly, '"with the fair sex, gentle movements and pretty gestures must be the fairest ornament", wrote the German dancing master Gottfried Taubert in 1717'.[17] These formulations not only feminised the medium as a whole, but also encoded an 'ideal' femininity across Western culture, perpetuating, in Judith Butler's hypothesis, the 'social-construction' of gender in a 'stylised repetition of acts', through the very stylised repetition of ballet choreography.[18] Such ideas also associate the attainment of perfection with the myth of bodily limitlessness and superhuman ability; as Sally Banes observes, 'ballet showcased the dancer's mastery of technique, […] to mask the effort of physical virtuosity, in order to appear suitably imponderable and ethereal'.[19] For Jade Boyd, this creates an unrealistic, and potentially harmful cultural perception of, and detachment from, the body, which is presented 'as a machine [and] an object to be worked into shape, [which can] lead to […] injury when dancers push themselves too hard'.[20] Such regimented and extreme bodily manipulation, to the point of physical punishment, is reflected through the very costume of the ballerina, presenting a quasi-animalistic image of femininity, containing and distorting any hint of flesh, fluidity, or limitation, from the tight leotard and tutu to bind the torso and exaggerate the waist-to-hip ratio, down to the pointe shoes that constrain the movement of the toes and feet into perfect rigidity.

For Douglas Rosenberg, dance in cinema presents an 'impossible' body that is rendered all the more mechanical and corporeally artificial through the filming and editing

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[15] Deirdre Kelly, *Ballerina: Sex, Scandal, and Suffering Behind the Symbol of Perfection* (Vancouver: Greystone Books, 2012), p. 1, quoting from Rayner Heppenstall, 'From "Apology for Dancing", The Sexual Idiom', in *What is Dance?*, ed. by Roger Copeland and Marshall Cohen (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), pp. 267-88 (p. 274).
[16] Kelly, p. 9.
[17] Kelly (p. 7) cites Gottfried Taubert, quoted in Edmund Fairfax, 'The "Fair Sex" and its Style', in *The Styles of Eighteenth Century Ballet* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2003), p. 221.
[18] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 4.
[19] Sally Banes, 'The Romantic Ballet: *La Sylphide, Giselle, Coppelia*', in *Female Bodies on Stage* (London: Routledge, 1998), pp. 12-21 (p. 13).
[20] Jade Boyd, 'Dance, Culture and Popular Film', *Feminist Media Studies*, 4 (2004), 67-83 (p. 69).

process, with its non-sequential simulation of a physical totality beyond human capabilities, in a 'digital construction of corporeal performance'.[21] Rosenberg states that

> [Altered] camera placement, shot composition and visual space [find] the most efficient and aesthetic methods of framing movement. [...] [Production] is not sequential [...] but is rather a simultaneous fabrication of disparate parts [...], that will be reconfigured in the future [...] from preproduction to production to postproduction, additional elements are constructed, added or removed.[22]

This language evokes Mulvey's process of gendered spectatorship, particularly in relation to the aestheticisation and deconstruction of body parts. To frame and screen the dancing body in this conceptualisation is to add a complex, supplementary layer of subject/object interaction in and in relation to film viewing. The process of filmmaking thus inherently fragments and reduces the dancing body, mirroring the ways in which non-fictional dancers' bodies are inserted within regulatory and patriarchal structures by the rigours of ballet as an art form.

Hence the ideological sphere within which the ballerina exists encourages the attainment of a dualistic ideal of (body) image that renounces female physical presence. Ideals, as Susan Bordo observes, of 'whiteness, lightness, and slenderness' continue to abound elsewhere in popular culture, engendering for women psychological detachment through the 'distance and distain for the body and its internal functions'.[23] This can lead to rampant psychological problems – most notably eating disorders and self-harm – through daily consumption of hegemonic images of idealised femininity in magazines, film, and television, particularly for the young, impressionable, and aspirational.[24] This propels ballet and the ballerina, with their traditional 'high-art' associations, into a wider dialogue about female body image and psychoanalysis, illustrating the societal pressures to which young women are already commonly subject. Bordo's argument is especially adaptable to today's society, where social media, celebrity culture, and the plastic surgery and body modification promoted by such platforms, have combined to increase the immediacy and naturalisation of such female images. My intention therefore is not to focus on the ballerina narrative as a 'dance film' – indeed *Suspiria* has very little *dancing* in it. Rather, the ballerina's subjective,

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[21] Douglas Rosenberg, *Screendance: Inscribing the Ephemeral Image* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 44.
[22] Ibid.
[23] Susan Bordo, 'Anorexia Nervosa: Psychopathology as the Crystallisation of Culture', in *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (California: University of California Press, 2003), pp. 139-64 (p. 139).
[24] Ibid, p. 142.

psychological distress – with which the spectator is encouraged to identify – is meaningfully associated with her repressive conditions, as well as her relationship with, and the destruction and punishment of, the body. The ballerina in horror thus demands further analysis in the broader context of – and as a veritable metaphor for – female identity, not least as it has been, and continues to be, historically denied and confined by patriarchal, dualistic ideologies.

The Jungian Ballerina: Role-As-Persona and Body-As-Shadow

The aforementioned systems that engender damage to and detachment from the female body are particularly problematic when we consider that female selfhood has been historically tied *to* the body. As Luce Irigaray argues, 'women [cannot] articulate their [psychological distress,] they suffer [it] directly in their body', unable to produce signifiers that create a distance between the body and self.[25] I argue, however, that the use of subjective horror-fantasy features does in fact allow for such an articulation, especially when one reads the protagonist's fragmented selfhood as potentially representative of the Jungian *unconscious*. The ballerina's psychological instability in *Suspiria* is conflated with her inability to control and define her individual identity away from what Fraleigh refers to as the 'aesthetically constituted' bodily requirements of her ballet role, and of her repressive environment. This, in Jung's conception, goes against the 'proper' development of the psyche and its attainment of individual subjectivity, which is reliant upon the 'individuation process' and appropriate renouncement of the 'persona', the 'persona' being the outward, ideal 'social face' or 'mask' that one projects and performs in public society.[26] This model poses a particular problem for the ballerina, as her value is defined in her performance *as* the persona and thus the performance-of-self. Here, the female subject has been conditioned to reject the distanced subjectivity necessary to define her selfhood against, which means she cannot define her private self separately from the public performance. Lydia Linnehan argues that, when professional identities are based on the performance of their bodies, '[w]e develop the ego in such a way that it becomes identified with the persona […] at the expense of cultivating a relationship and feeling with ourselves […] [as the body] becomes the carrier of myth'.[27] This corresponds to Irigaray's hypothesis that woman 'enjoys a closeness with the other that

[25] Luce Irigaray, 'Women's Exile: An Interview with Luce Irigaray', trans. by Couze Penn, *Ideology and Consciousness*, 1 (May 1977), 62-76 (p. 74).
[26] Anthony Stevens, *Jung: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 63.
[27] Lydia Lennihan, 'The Dark Feminine in Aronofsky's *The Wrestler*', in *Jung and Film II: The Return: Further Post-Jungian Takes on the Moving Image*, ed. by Christopher Hauke and Luke Hockley (London: Routledge, 2011), pp. 243-52 (p. 244).

is so near she cannot possess it any more than she can possess herself'; instead, she 'over-identifies' with it, and the female look demands that she 'become' the ideal image.[28]

To achieve this 'individuation', the 'shadow' – encompassing the repressed dark and unlawful desires of the ego – that manifests in our unconscious dreams must be confronted. This is necessary to create a balance between those 'internal and external worlds' of the conscious and unconscious; doing so makes possible a deeper understanding of 'all aspects' of the self.[29] As the aforementioned dualistic, patriarchal ideologies of ballet, and indeed the male gaze, encourage repression and constraint of the body's – potentially abject – inner physical functions, it is helpful here to employ J. P. Conger's conception of the 'body-as-shadow'. Conger asserts that the body – like the shadow – is that which 'hides beneath clothes often blatantly [expressing] what we consciously deny'.[30] This is a useful concept, as the ballerina's clean and immaculate performing persona denies and restricts the possibility of the heavy, messy, and inherently breakable nature of the body beneath the perfected exterior. This has wider ramifications for *Suspiria*'s ballerina as, in her attempt to fulfil the ballerina ideal, she is presented, through the film's fantastic elements, as unable to control, or even entirely *separated* from the body, a body that constitutes her professional, aspirational identity but that is simultaneously suppressed. The protagonist's fragmented subjectivity is intercut with grotesque murder sequences, which are, I argue, psychoanalytically representative of the ballerina's fears, externally projected onto other victimised female bodies, and are indicative of culturally conditioned female 'alienation' from and distorted perception of the body through horror fantasy. We see this issue articulated again in *Black Swan*, as the protagonist Nina Sayers' psychological fragmentation springs from her desperation to perfect archetypally opposed female roles – the virginal 'White Swan', and the seductive shadow-double 'Black Swan' – in *Swan Lake*. Nina's fantastic subjectivity manifests her own malevolent doubles, literally embodying her split psyche and bodily detachment, unable to distinguish her personal and private identity from the professional and public.

Such 'alienation' bears striking resemblance to what Bordo describes as the psychopathology of eating disorders and body dysmorphia, experiencing the body 'as alien,

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[28] Irigaray, 'The Sex Which is Not One', trans. by Claudia Reeder, in *New French Feminisms*, ed. by Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1980), pp. 99-106 (pp. 104-05).
[29] John Izod, 'The Quest of a Female Hero: *The Silence of the Lambs*', in *Myth, Mind, and the Screen: Understanding the Heroes of Our Time* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 105-23 (p. 105).
[30] J. P. Conger, *Jung and Reich: The Body as Shadow* (California: North Atlantic Books, 2005), p. 107.

as the not-self, the not-me […] as mechanical in its operations as a machine'.[31] Bordo asserts that when '[t]he body is the enemy […] willed control brings about a sense of duality in the organism, [and] of consciousness […] [and] the attempt to subdue the spontaneities of the body […] only succeeds in constituting them as more alien and more powerful'.[32] This 'duality' is articulated in *Suspiria*'s employment of cross-identification between victim and killer, demonstrating how repressed inner functions – presented through the excessive blood spillage and mutilation – create fragmentation between the body and mind. The ballerina, as the archetypal repressed and idealised body, is thus the epitomical foil for the shadow self, which, through the film's fantastic horror features, becomes a fully formed malevolent assertion of repressed bodily fears and desires. The presence of the Jungian archetypes of the 'persona' and 'shadow' allows for the female protagonist to experience, as John Izod has argued, the (traditionally male) active hero's narrative, the 'journey into the underworld' that symbolises the confrontation with the shadow:

> [He] leaves the daylight world of the ego to descend into the dark underworld, the symbolic realm of the unconscious. There he faces extreme danger or defies a monster […] [and] must [then] return to the world. [This process symbolises] his separation from his earlier state of unconsciousness [by] confront[ing] and break[ing] the mould of his unconscious dispositions […] [and finally emerging] renewed from this encounter with his innermost self […] becoming more of his own person.[33]

With *Suspiria*'s representation of a young, adolescent female protagonist on the cusp of maturation, this 'journey' to establish her identity becomes even more significant. The ideals of femininity that surround her, as well as the repression and trauma of her physical body, become, I argue, a metaphor for the fraught process of a woman's attempt – or inability – to develop a singular identity within a sphere that perpetuates an unattainable and collective physical ideal. The psychological fragmentation of the ballerina occurs as the forces surrounding her render her objective distance from the object-ideal unachievable, as she is unable properly to define her individual identity away from the persona she performs as. In turn, the human limitations of her physical body are repressed by these forces in order for her to fulfil the immaculate image-ideal of the 'clean and proper body'; her shadow emerges as the relegated forms of her individual identity struggling to break free.

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[31] Bordo, p. 145.
[32] Ibid, pp. 145-46.
[33] Izod, p. 105.

Broken Mirrors, Broken Minds: Shattering the 'Male Gaze' and the Stage-Screen of Nightmares

Through the ballerina protagonist's shifting subjectivity in *Suspiria*, in a space where fantasy and reality become indistinguishable, the body is at once absent and present to spectatorial proximity through graphic horror spectacle as well as emotional identification. The ballerina's vision, and her vision of herself, is continuously obscured and distorted by the objectifying and dehumanising systems that surround her (systems both in and of the film), thereby revealing the ideologies and cinematic features that manipulate and ultimately destabilise her selfhood. However, it is in the precarious boundary between dreams and the 'real' that the protagonist is in fact able to articulate, and even assert, her anxieties surrounding her increasingly controlled identity. This encourages a similarly fragmented subject position for the spectator, whose spatial relation to the (female) image is constantly in flux, as the present 'reality' – defined dualistically by logic, reason, and control – gives way to the female-centric fantastic. The boundary between the 'internal world' (in Izod's terms) of the protagonist's psyche versus her 'external' surroundings – as well as the boundary between the cinematic frame and its audience – are thus rendered unstable.

Suspiria's young American protagonist, Suzy Bannion, as we are told from the opening narration, 'decided to perfect her ballet studies in the most famous school of dance' in Germany. A series of gruesome murders take place connected with the school and Suzy suspects not only the involvement of her teachers, but that they are a coven of evil witches. The film actively highlights and undermines patriarchal mechanisms, most notably through a subversive *matriarchal* ballet environment, as well as through its Jungian dimensions – specifically, the psychosexual nature of the supernatural imagery that articulates female identity-anxieties.

The opening sequence aligns the spectator with Suzy's fragmented perspective through a series of shot-reverse-shots as she journeys to the ballet school by taxi and, through an obscured, rain-lashed window, sees a student flee into the stormy night. In the next sequence, the spectator is positioned with the unknown student attempting to escape from some fantastic force in the school; the camera is behind her in a wide shot as she examines her reflection in a bathroom mirror. It is then suddenly positioned outside the window, and a strange, rasping breathing is heard; once again positioned behind the victim, we see a black-gloved hand burst through the glass and smash the girl's face against the mirror before she is stabbed repeatedly. This suggests that the victim's self-image is her greatest enemy, in a

visual metaphor of a woman slamming against her own reflection. An extreme close up shows the phallic knife penetrating her oozing, open heart and she is finally suspended by a chord, at the centre of an elaborate wide shot, in an ornate pink and white foyer. Similarly, a later murder sequence within the school shows a frightened young woman attempting to escape – through a high air vent – from the locked room into which the same black-gloved killer is forcing entry. Long-duration shots slowly and agonisingly build tension, as she desperately stacks boxes to reach the vent, and – just as the door handle lifts – successfully makes it into the next room, only to fall into a great mass of barbed wire, which she can only move through by physically torturing her body. The spectator is then interpolated as the killer as the same hands reach out from behind the camera to slash the victim's throat, and blood pours in close up. These sequences present violence towards women as a prolonged aesthetic spectacle, as the spectator shares in both the distress of the victim and the pleasure of the anticipated, gory kill, with the killer as disembodied subject. However, it is later revealed that the killers are in fact *female*; consequently, the deliberate (gendered) stylistics of (traditionally male) violence – strikingly similar to the killers of aforementioned scopophilic slashers – ultimately refute such a reading, and subvert gendered power relations.[34] Through this shifting spectatorial-spatial alignment between victim and murderer, the boundary established in Mulvey's model between (male) subject and (female) object is destabilised.

In keeping with this reversal, the ballet school is governed by older women, Miss Tanner and Madame Le Blanc, and it is the men who are both physically and professionally subordinate to them. As Reich rightly observes, these characters – the young mute boy, the blind pianist, and the facially deformed butler – are 'dependent' on the women.[35] They are all defined by their inability to assert and control their bodies and attain an image-ideal, while the women are strict and gestapo-like ballet teachers in power suits, both embodying and insisting upon a regimental physical style in dance rehearsal. The pianist is (literally) unable to assert his gaze upon the ballerina bodies that his music dictates. The ballet school thus acts as an inversion of the social order which, for Jacqueline Reich, is a metaphor for the masculine threat of castration; she writes, 'what is truly terrifying is the untamed woman, threatening the stability of the patriarchal hegemony'.[36] Reich's argument however ignores the subversive potential of the protagonist's subjectivity as a manifestation of the ballerina's *female* anxieties. I feel it is no accident that the site of torture and mutilation happens to be a

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[34] This twist is seen throughout Argento's oeuvre, for example in *The Bird with the Crystal Plumage*, dir. by Dario Argento (Titanus, 1970).
[35] Reich, p. 92.
[36] Ibid, p. 90.

ballet school, and Suzy's ultimate discovery and destruction of the witches – intercut with the aforementioned grotesque murder scenes – juxtaposes her distorted subjectivity with continual bodily dismemberment, both murderous and balletic. This encourages the spectator to confront their viewing relationship with and to the female image, as we are alternately positioned at a distance from and then identifying with the persecuted ballerina body.

It is especially significant that we first witness Suzy's fragmented perception, and suggestions of the supernatural, at the precise moment that she is encouraged to submit to a ballerina image-ideal. In the rehearsal room, the costumes and wide frame means that male bodies and female bodies become indistinguishable in tight, white and black leotards, all with long hair and tights that visually erase genitalia; a series of immaculate, slender figures lacking any differential identity surround Suzy, leaping and stretching elegantly. She is visually differentiated with her petite stature, unkempt curls, and cardigan tied around her waist, which breaks up her streamlined form; in this scene, she is also distinguished by her 'strong will', refusing Madame's invitation to board at the academy. In the next scene, she walks down a corridor and, through a shot-reverse-shot, we see a strange old woman and pale young boy, both still and staring at Suzy inexplicably and unblinkingly from a doorway, depicted as an uncanny subversion of mother and child. This is accompanied by a tinkling score and by erratic, ominous whispering, as the camera tracks closer, with an ethereal, floating quality, in time with Suzy's footsteps. The old woman holds a triangular object that reflects a blinding white light, as the voices whisper 'witch!'; this momentarily obscures Suzy's – and thus the spectator's – vision, prompting her to become visibly faint and pallid as she steadies herself on the wall. This disturbing confrontation with a quasi-supernatural threat, and Suzy's inability to control her perception, is presented at the very moment when her body is dictated by outside forces through the balletic choreography.

When she returns to ballet class, Miss Tanner calls out the numbered tempo of the steps, tapping out the beat with military precision, using her phallic cane; here, vertical lines dominate the space of the ballet studio, emphasising the repressive, regimented nature of the dancing. Suzy complains that she feels 'a little weak' and we see her face reflected in the studio mirror, as if to signify her split self. Her footing becomes increasingly unsteady as she flails and wobbles languidly, unable to keep to the tempo; the group moves from one side of the room to the other and the dancers are visually cut off at their torso in an objectifying medium shot. Miss Tanner does not, however, permit Suzy to stop, forcing her to keep dancing until she collapses. At this point, a crane shot positions the spectator in an omniscient

position looking down upon her unconscious form, as though Suzy's soul had left her body in that moment; she looks uncannily inhuman, at once corpse-like and doll-like, her legs splayed and spindly. Suzy's obscured perception is therefore conflated with her bodily detachment and dehumanisation when she is ordered to perform as a dancer.

This fragmentation also evokes Tzvetan Todorov's conception of the 'fantastic', which encourages spectators to 'hesitate' over the legitimacy of the images onscreen. As Rosemary Jackson asserts, in the fantastic mode, 'the apparent security of the known and everyday world [becomes] something more strange […] [so that] the status of what is being seen and recorded as "real" is constantly in question'.[37] Here, Suzy's surrender to some 'outside force' coincides with the physical effects of stress and emotional turmoil. Aligning these features with the narrative of bodily mutilation allows for the violence of the disembodied, pleasure-looking gaze to be highlighted on multiple levels in the ballet school. Indeed, these murder sequences were presumably carefully choreographed, as well as staged and shot in grand, colourful locations for maximum visual appeal, much like dance. The concept of Todorovian hesitation is important here as it highlights the *psychological* dimensions of Suzy's visions, presenting how features of the fantastic are able to visually illustrate and centralise Suzy's mental state, reasserting the female subject's interiority away from external body-image repression.

This distorted perception, and instances of the supernatural, are shot through Argento's signature lurid lens, using bright, kaleidoscopic filters of primary colour and highly saturated 'ASA film stock', which produces a visually unreal quality, especially with the film's setting in a red, baroque gothic mansion.[38] In Mary McDonagh's words, this establishes a 'mind-boggling artificiality' and 'opium-dream' state, as well as highlighting the fairy-tale duality between innocent Suzy and the evil witches.[39] Argento stressed that he wanted the school's production design to reflect 'the point-of-view of a child', with high door handles for example, to 'reduce [the actresses to] adolescents', creating a physically oppressive atmosphere of 'primal' fear, such as with the aforementioned barbed-wire room.[40] This idea can be further examined through the application of Izod's Jungian unconscious nightmare-narrative framework of the 'hero's journey'. The potentiality for this reading is emphasised when Suzy is drugged by the school's physician following her fainting spell; shots of her fitful sleep are significantly intercut with shots of her friend Sarah as a fleeing

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[37] Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 34.
[38] Mendik. p. 117.
[39] McDonagh, p. 123.
[40] Alan Jones, *Dario Argento: The Man, the Myths, and the Magic* (Surrey: FAB Press, 2004), p. 81.

murder victim, suggesting a fantastic, subjective projection of Suzy's own unconscious bodily anxieties.

While Patricia MacCormack argues that Suzy has no discernible 'character arc', I propose that she experiences the Jungian 'journey', culminating in the final confrontation with her unconscious 'shadow', in the form of the coven's 'Black Queen' Helena Markos, down the winding corridors of the ballet school and into the dark recesses of her bedroom, a significantly sexual site.[41] This can be seen as acting as a metaphor for her unconscious psychosexual discovery and the gothic return of the repressed, through the red and pink pathways of her brain's inner circuitry, pumping and pulsating with the paranoid, whispering frenzy of Goblin's score. Indeed, Suzy begins the narrative as a signifier of child-like repression, a naïve young girl entering a foreign land, dressed in virginal white in the opening airport sequence. The school, however – with its flashing lights and exotic-flower wall-art – also represents a veritable hothouse of gossip, raging hormones, and sexual maturation. For example, live maggots fall from the ceiling, in a striking image of festering sins and innocence corrupted; we also see Suzy's flirtatious exchange with Madame's nephew, as another student remarks, 'you've caught one. Look at him blushing!'. The ballet school is therefore an inherently fragmented space, expressing both bodily suppression *and* sexual liberation, encouraging Suzy's internal fragmentation, which in turn prompts her to question her identity as a maturing woman.

Suzy lacks an individual identity of her own, defined merely by being 'very pretty', and by her aunt's previous success at the academy. However, suspecting the teachers' involvement in Sarah's mysterious disappearance (and their true identity as witches), she discovers a secret lair by covertly counting out *their* steps, which she retraces to the Directress, Helena Markos' room, ultimately reclaiming through her own ingenuity the dancing regimen that dictated her body. Along the way, from her point of view, we are shown close ups of raw meat chopped in the kitchen, and doors decorated with shapes resembling the lips of a vagina and an ornamental flower, symbols of carnality and, potentially, the loss of virginity. This suggests the appearance of the 'shadow' in *Suspiria*, and once she reaches the room, this is precisely what Suzy sees, in the form of a silhouette behind a gauzy curtain, whose wheezing, bestial snores seem unnaturally separate from the body in their loud, extra-diegetic nature. It is an image of a perverse 'Sleeping Beauty', an archetype traditionally defined as the ultimate image of passivity, and also a prominent character for the prima

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[41] Patricia MacCormack, interviewed in the documentary short, *Fear at 400 Degrees: The Cine-Excess of Suspiria*, dir. by Xavier Mendik (Nouveaux Pictures, 2009).

ballerina on the popular stage. Suzy pulls back the curtain, wielding a spine from a peacock ornament's plumage to stab the sleeping figure, but there is nothing there. Sarah, the previous murder victim, suddenly appears from the doorway in a presumably possessed, dead form; she laughs manically, walking towards Suzy, covered in blood and holding a knife. Suzy stabs the empty space on the bed, on which flashes the outline of some vaguely human shape; we then see a series of grotesque extreme close-up shots of charred, rotted body parts – a croaking mouth, eyes, clawed hands – and finally the phallic object piercing through the strange matter. These shots are intercut with the shrinking, fading projection of the dead Sarah. Suzy then escapes the ballet school, in defiance of the female roles and bodily expectations set forth by the repressive elder generation, through her teachers and aunt, which Markos embodies.

This scene can therefore be read as symbolising Suzy's renouncement of the Jungian persona in Izod's model. She ultimately destroys the definitive image of a dehumanised, passive female body, and in the form of the Directress of the school no less, whose corpse-like, vanishing, and astrally projected appearance erased all traces of her identity, rendering it interchangeable and intangible in its spectrality. Markos can only fully assert her power by using a separate ventriloquised female figure to do her bidding, in a perverse, matriarchal reimagining of the female automaton and the ballet-teacher/student relationship shown, for example, in *The Red Shoes*, where Boris Lermontov, the ballet company's impresario, controls and manipulates his young ingénue, Vicky Page. This patriarchal dynamic is repeated in *Black Swan*, via ballet teacher Thomas Leroy, who treats his dancers as both professionally and sexually disposable.[42]

In *Suspiria*, when the entire coven and the school are destroyed along with Markos, Suzy exits the building as it burns behind her in the final wide shot. Suzy quite literally emerges from an 'underworld', metaphorically 'renewed' as she is drenched by the rain; she smiles blissfully, walking confidently out into the elements, in distinct contrast to her frightened state arriving at the school in the opening storm sequence. It seems that she has successfully achieved 'individuation', having destroyed her 'shadow' and fulfilled the role of Izod's active-*female* hero. In *The Red Shoes* and *Black Swan* respectively, both ballerina protagonists instead die the same tragic death as their respective starring ballet roles, having 'over-identified', as Irigaray stated, and ultimately transformed into the patriarchally

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[42] See for instance, *The Tales of Hoffmann* (1951), the ballet film based on E. T. A. Hoffmann's 'The Sandman' (1816), in which a devious inventor controls his wind-up automaton, 'Olympia', to trick the infatuated male protagonist into thinking it a human woman.

conditioned personas they strive to perfect and perform.[43] This suggests that Suzy's *matriarchal* environment allows her to accomplish what other ballerina protagonists cannot. Furthermore, Markos' demise does not simply act as a misogynistic obliteration of female power, as in Reich's model, as Suzy in fact destroys an archetype associated with *male* oppression: the witch. While Suzy kills a house full of matriarchs, the notion of burning women believed to be witches actually transforms a historical event of patriarchal prejudice and persecution into an assertion of individual female independence and rejection of body-image control. Consequently, *Suspiria*'s feminist resolution remains decidedly ambivalent. Suzy's actions, however, ultimately allow her to self-define her power and potential beyond these female roles, ultimately befitting the individuation resolution in becoming '[her] own person', in Izod's terms.

The ballerina protagonist's subjectivity is therefore encouraged to fragment when expected to fulfil the contradictory values of dance – that is, to express her individual subjectivity yet to do it within the repressive confines of the choreography, as her persona and for an audience. These instances are marked with supernatural ambiguity and distorted perception, through which the shadow emerges. The shadow is rendered transgressive – not because 'the female-look (and by extension her body) [is dangerous and] must be […] destroyed', as Reich posits – but because both have been systematically denied and repressed by pervading patriarchal ideologies.[44] The spectator is drawn into the fragmented mind of the ballerina as her dance, and its potential for individual expression, comes up against the systems that have engendered the persona and its distance as signifier. *Suspiria*'s ending therefore suggests that the search for the female ideal, through performing femininity, is an impossible, damaging endeavour, critiquing the effect of Bordo's prolific 'whiteness, lightness and slenderness' ideology upon the bodies of those who consume it in popular culture more broadly. Furthermore, by making the deaths of Suzy's fellow dancers so spectacularly *bloody*, the myth of the clean, pure totality of the subject is revealed as itself nothing more than a staged illusion, as the human body's ultimate limitations are graphically dramatised. It is therefore necessary to examine the film's body-horror features, which further destabilise the subject/object spectatorship boundary.

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[43] In one scene, *Black Swan*'s Nina is shown literally, and painfully, transforming into a swan. For example, her neck elongates, and her toes web into the rigid, animalistic configuration of a pointe shoe in body-fragmenting close ups.

[44] Reich (p. 90) cites Linda Williams, 'When the Woman Looks', in *The Dread of Difference: Gender and the Horror Film,* ed. by Barry Keith Grant (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996), pp. 15-34.

The Bloody Ballerina: Physical Spectatorship and the Abject

The ballerina's inability to control her own identity, and the emergence of her shadow, is conflated with eruptions and disruptions of the body's inner functions. These eruptions stage an ongoing transgression of the ideal, dualistic, 'clean and proper' subject; as Kristeva states, bodily excess must be 'lost', that is to say repressed and distanced, in order for the body-as-image to be symbolised.[45] Idealised feminine identity is thereby detached from the urges and limitations of the physical, with their fluid, grotesque, and sexual potential. As Emilyn Claid observes, this ideology is reinforced in ballet choreography, encouraging the 'fight against the falling expanse of the flesh':

> [Bodies] destined to be shaped into the ideal […] to appear anatomically gender-less [and] stripped of any identifiable sexual signs: roundness of hips and breasts, dangling dicks and fleshy behinds. The possibility of transformation was essential for entrance [into the prestigious ballet schools] – aspiring to a higher truth of beauty [...].[46]

This 'truth' promotes a singular, slender ideal, as Bordo has noted, where 'the semiotic language is structured to distance and distain the body and its internal functions'.[47] Its various appetites must be controlled and punished accordingly as, in the psychopathology of eating disorders, 'thinness represents a triumph of the will over the body […] associated with "absolute purity, […] [and] transcendence of the flesh"', in order to retain an ideal childlike, virginal impenetrability.[48] In the Jungian framework, the body's repressed development in adolescence simultaneously affects the psyche, stunting the individuation process by performing the ideal body-image persona; this is especially pertinent to young Suzy's 'journey' into maturation.

In much horror-film scholarship, the abject female body – that which must be repressed – is figured as a feature of *male* panic, as a manifestation of an othered threat to the (masculine) subject.[49] I argue instead that abject imagery and engagement with physical spectatorship in *Suspiria* has the ability to dismantle the boundary between subject and object, by drawing attention to the ballerina body as 'reduced to abject matter', as Laura Wilson argues in her work on female subjectivity and the mutilation film. This in turn dismantles the physical boundary between the protagonist's internal and external self. Wilson uses Marks' hypothesis to propose that a film's sound and texture have the ability to extend

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[45] Kristeva, p. 102.

[46] Emilyn Claid, *Yes? No! Maybe...: Seductive Ambiguity in Dance* (London: Routledge 2006), p. 20.

[47] Bordo, p. 139.

[48] Ibid, p. 148.

[49] See, for example, Barbara Creed, 'Kristeva, Femininity, Abjection', in *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 8-15; and Reich.

the spectator's experience *beyond* the image 'through senses other than sight' to 'forcefully and aggressively [generate] a physical response'.[50] She continues,

> Certain sounds have textures that generate a sense of physicality in the listener […] the sound of breathing is haptic because it inspires the sense-memory of air moving through the chest and mouth, and across the skin, thereby pointing to the viewer's own corporeality as a breathing subject.[51]

Here the spectator 'shifts from [a position of] the voyeuristic […] to one that engages with the film through embodiment, thereby calling into question the [traditionally gendered] distinction [and distance] between viewer and film [image]'.[52]

In *Suspiria*, Suzy's fragmented perception coincides with her inability to control her inner bodily functions in her aforementioned first ballet rehearsal; when she flounders and collapses, there is an extreme close up of blood trickling out of her nose. The academy's doctor tells her that 'tiny tears in the ligaments' caused 'haemorrhaging'; thus, Suzy's abjection spills out within the very scenario in which she was instructed to repress it, to keep in time and form with the other ballerinas. She is prescribed red wine, with its sacramental, blood-like connotations, suggesting the school's attempt to regulate her bodily functions *internally,* encouraging a 'transcendence of flesh' through submission to some higher authority, in a gothic subversion of Christian communion. Elsewhere in the film, the most prominent instances of bodily grotesquery are of course in the murder and mutilation sequences, which confront the spectator with uncompromising images of distressed and dismembered female bodies in and around the ballet environment. This reminds the spectator once again of the ballerina body's inherent breakability and fluidity, as well as the subjugated nature of the ballerina's identity, reduced as it has been to the physical. As Wilson observes, 'the mutilated wound image is the self in deterioration; having been attacked by an outside force, penetrated and mutilated it continues to fragment'.[53] In *Black Swan,* besides the audio's general emphasis on physicality through extra-diegetic sounds of bone cracking, skin ripping, and heavy footfalls in rehearsals, drawing attention to the heft and fragile realities of the ballerina body, a central haptic-abject feature of the protagonist's fragmented subjectivity is self-inflicted wounds, in line with Bordo's argument about societal pressures and mental health. The severity of these acts are discovered later, by both Nina and by the aligned

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[50] Laura Wilson, *Spectatorship, Embodiment, and Physicality in the Contemporary Mutilation Film* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p. 61.
[51] Ibid, p. 65.
[52] Ibid, pp. 71-72.
[53] Ibid, p. 49.

spectator, as though committed, beyond her conscious perception, by her aforementioned 'Black Swan' shadow, reflecting both her bodily alienation and the self-punishment associated with abject inner-functions and ballet's physical refinement. This corresponds with Irigaray's assertion that the female subject's psychological fears and fragmentation are experienced *in* the body, which, for Suzy, become externally manifested through the (literally) disintegrating abject bodies of the female murder victims. As elements of Suzy's psyche are projected onto other girls, the image of the self is fragmented further, demonstrating, in Wilson's terms, *Suspiria*'s protagonist physically and mentally 'splitting-up into multiple parts she cannot contain or possess'.[54] These images consequently undermine the spectator's own certainty regarding their own subjective selfhood in relation to the onscreen image, as this self is no longer held at an impenetrable distance. The abject, pulpy wetness of the bleeding wounds, in extreme close up, haptically generates the sense-memory of touching one's own, too-close inner fluids.[55]

There are also notable instances of haptic visuality through the film's audio, particularly with the disembodied representation of the witches during the murders, signalled only by the black-gloved hands and the aforementioned whispering score that periodically hisses 'witch!'. This draws attention to the *lack* of a body image to accompany these whispers, emphasising the film's tendency towards Todorovian 'hesitation' regarding the supernatural. The female threat is thus rendered simultaneously subjective and objective, ubiquitous and invisible, as the sound here seems to come from *within* the paranoid subjectivity of the victim and, by extension, the spectator aligned with them. Wilson observes '[the] invasive nature of sound as it appears to originate from within [...]. [Vision] presents the world at a distance, as outside your body, whereas sound penetrates into your body.'[56] Argento himself identified fear as something felt inside the spectator's body as a '370 degree centigrade body temperature. With *Suspiria* I wanted 400 degrees'; the tagline of the film's promotional material also reads: 'the sound of fear … you'll experience it when you see *Suspiria*'.[57] Here, giallo's ability to cross the subject/object, spectator/film boundary, both visually and audibly, encourages subjective alignment and physical embodiment *with* – rather than being a mere spectacle *of* – the female victim and her body. In addition, the guttural snoring of Markos' silhouette seems to extend beyond the film's diegesis in its otherworldly loudness, which is discordant with Markos' position, at a distance, in the frame, highlighting

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[54] Wilson, p. 69.
[55] Ibid, p. 49.
[56] Ibid, p. 81.
[57] Dario Argento, interviewed in *Fear at 400 Degrees*.

technique that positions her as both corporeal and spectral. Indeed, when Suzy defiantly stabs Markos' *image*, it fully corporealises into the aforementioned charred, fleshy form and can then be destroyed, just as Suzy reclaims her own bodily identity. This suggests that, in doing so, Suzy has exposed, and successfully freed herself from, the ballerina ideal by forcefully solidifying its mortal materiality, thereby refusing the ethereal, impenetrable 'lack' of presence that conventionally defines that ideal.

Conclusion

Suspiria's engagement with both conventional and non-conventional spectatorship, as well as the fragmented subjectivity of its protagonist, ultimately reveals the problematic paradox of dance for the female dancer. Dance entails private movement through a body that exists within wider hegemonic and – traditionally patriarchal – signifying systems that hinder individual expression. This film has the potential to expose the instability of the (male) subject's control over his own fixed 'clean and proper body' promoted on screen, as well as the body of the passive, female image as the object of his gaze. The narrative also acts as metaphor for the ways in which viewing the female body has been constructed and conditioned more broadly, using mutilation to criticise the social conditioning of women's identity development, defined by and reduced to their physical value. Irigaray's argument that women cannot assert subjectivity, and are unable to produce signifiers that define themselves as *separate* from the image, is thus subverted by the ballerina in body-horror. This has the ability to renegotiate and undermine the traditional subject by revealing the limitations of the patriarchal realities that confine and construct the multi-layered performance-narrative of the feminine body.

Rather than the screen adding a supplementary layer of subject/object hierarchy for the dancing body, *Suspiria* allows it to act, not solely as a Lacanian mirror, but rather as a multi-sensory magnifying glass. It shows – through, audio-visual horror-fantasy distortions and haptic slippage between the ballerina and her nightmares, her body and its innards – the multiplicity of spectatorship beyond an unequivocally 'male' gaze. This encourages viewers to alter and confront *their* perceptions by drawing attention to the inescapable reality of their own fragile bodies, and can render them sympathetic to the distinctly female struggle to develop an individual identity outside of a collective, illusory, and ultimately unachievable cultural ideal.

In the Shadow of *Cymraeg*: Machen's 'The White People' and Welsh Coding in the Use of Esoteric and Gothicised Languages

Angela Elisa Schoch/Davidson

To Begin at the Beginning: An Elucidation of Themes and Scope

Arthur Machen's *The Great God Pan*, published in 1894, is a celebrated masterpiece of late-Victorian horror, though it is but one of the formidable terrors envisioned by Machen in his prolific period of the 1890s. Like the dark and shaded lanes of Machen's Celtic landscapes, many of his shorter pieces suffer from critical neglect. While *The Great God Pan* and *The Hill of Dreams* (1907) have been included in thematic studies of the fin de siècle and of body horror, other equally evocative pieces have been largely ignored.[1] 'The White People' (1904), despite its frequent republishing in horror anthologies and the acclaim that it receives from fans of the genre, remains critically unexplored territory. H. P. Lovecraft, who held Machen's work in high esteem, wrote in his essay 'Supernatural Horror in Literature' (1927) that Machen's mastery of 'hidden horror and brooding fright' attained 'an almost incomparable substance and realistic acuteness'. More pointedly, in his discussion of the 'The White People', Lovecraft writes that, though the tale is 'less famous and less complex in plot than *The Great God Pan*', it is 'definitely finer in atmosphere and general artistic value'.[2]

The story, though written in 1899, was not published until 1904. It first appeared in *Horlick's*, a magazine sponsored by the malted-milk manufacturer of the same name, and which was devoted to the publishing of mysteries.[3] Writing with his characteristically self-effacing sense of humour, Machen said of 'The White People' that he did not 'know that the sale of the Malted Milk was unfavourably affected'.[4] The story, detailing the supernatural explorations of a young girl in the countryside, aligns with Machen's personal interest in language and deep knowledge of obscure occult realities. The opacity of the story both inspires confusion and invites interpretation. 'The White People' is a sketch, a rather

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[1] Kelly Hurley, *The Gothic Body: Sexuality, Materialism, and Degeneration at the Fin de Siècle* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 47-49.

[2] H. P. Lovecraft, *Supernatural Horror in Literature* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 1973), pp. 90-91.

[3] In 1900, Machen's close friend and lifelong correspondent, A. E. Waite, became the manager of Horlick's, facilitating the initial publication of many of the short tales that would be compiled in 1906 under the title *House of Souls* (Henry Danielson and Arthur Machen, *Arthur Machen: A Bibliography* (London: Richard Clay & Sons Limited, 1923), p. 36).

[4] Ibid, p. 34.

abbreviated story that alternates between philosophical musings, folklore retellings, and flashes of imagery; Machen himself spoke of the narrative as 'a single stone instead of a whole house' and 'naturally a disappointment'.[5] These 'flashes' of imagery are conveyed through Machen's description of ever-more imaginative landscapes: much of the story of 'The White People' is told through the narration of a young girl writing in her personal journal, known as 'the Green Book'. Thus, large sections of the text are uninterrupted by dialogue and written using the first person 'I', effectively allowing the reader to immerse themselves in the experiences of the young girl as she explores the landscape and its occult properties.

As is frequently noted by critics, Machen often utilises 'Celtic' settings, including the Welsh Valleys and the Roman ruins of his native Caerleon; however, other connections to his Welsh identity have not been properly explored.[6] There has been no thorough attempt to contextualise the 'Aklo letters' and 'Chian language' mentioned by the narrator within the framework of contemporary debates about the status of the Welsh language. As explored here, both Machen's native Welsh and his invented languages pose the same threat to the supremacy of the English language, and to the material, rational world dominated by that common tongue. This essay also examines how Welsh, or *Cymraeg*, has historically been framed as a leading cause of 'moral failings' identified in the Welsh people; this formulation of language as a force capable of leading people astray is highly relevant to a discussion of 'The White People', due to the dangers that *Chian* and *Aklo* seem to present. Though it may initially feel strange to think of language usage in moral terms, a brief focus on mid-Victorian attitudes toward Welsh highlights the possibility of a degenerate, or 'gothicised language'. An additional focus on Machen's 'Welshness', in-text and out, yields vital insights into the often conflicting and contradictory representations of Welsh; in particular, it is worth noting that his place of birth and decidedly English education place his cultural identity in a precarious middle space. As regards 'The White People', this further confuses the reader's ability to interpret the text's cultural allegiances.

Here, I would like to take a moment to clarify the scope of my argument. Many readers will recall that Machen's other short stories, most notably 'The Shining Pyramid' and 'The Red Hand' (both 1895), imply that fairies are pre-Celtic hominids, biological

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[5] Danielson and Machen, p. 37.
[6] Aaron Worth writes that 'Machen was pre-eminently a writer of place – of, first of all, his native Monmouthshire (later he would discovery London, completing the binary landscape of his imagination)' (Aaron Worth and Machen, *The Great God Pan and Other Horror Stories* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), p. xi).

throwbacks to an earlier era. Indeed, other scholars have brilliantly contextualised the influence of contemporary euhemeristic assumptions on Machen's works.[7] The ethnic makeup of Machen's supernatural worlds is not the concern of this essay, and my use of the phrase 'Welsh coding' is not meant to imply an ethnic Celtic identity, but to draw attention to the parallel 'dangers' shared by Machen's invented languages and Victorian characterisations of the Welsh language.

Cultural allegiances, coded in 'The White People' through the division of the spiritual, multi-lingual, 'real' world from the rational, materialistic world of the English, informs the reader's opinion of the young female protagonist's descent into occult language and mysticism. It is also important to note Machen's representation of female agency in the story; a critical focus on his Welshness makes it possible to explore some of the ways in which his identity as a Celt and a Welshman may have influenced this representation. The difficulty in placing Machen's cultural allegiances is particularly fascinating considering the fact that Machen wrote his most well-known tales during the literary period typically referred to as the 'Celtic Dawn'.[8] Machen's lifetime also saw efforts on the part of the English government to suppress the use of *Cymraeg*, as well as a related rise in Welsh nationalism. The tale's use of obscure language, its Celticism, and the return to pagan spirituality intermingle with the introduction of a non-Christian definition of 'evil' within the framing narrative; this alternate definition, focusing not on morality, but on 'unnaturalness' and the 'penetrat[ion] into another and higher sphere', allows for a more nuanced understanding of the female protagonist and her actions within the text.[9]

The first part of this article therefore contextualises both Arthur Machen's cultural identity and 'The White People' within the framework of the period. This framework includes contemporary conversations regarding Welsh identity and language usage, as well as Celtic identity and its intersection with the feminine; these contexts all aid in a fuller understanding of the complexity of Machen's tale and his 'coding' of Celticism. His use of a female protagonist in 'The White People' is especially significant when one considers that detractors of Celtic literature often 'feminised' Celtic creative tendencies as a means of

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[7] Emily Fergus, '"A Wider Reality": Euhemerism and Arthur Machen's "Little People"', *FAUNAS: The Journal of the Friends of Arthur Machen*, 32 (2015), 3-17.

[8] Also referred to as the Irish Literary Renaissance, this period saw an increase in Celtic literary production; in 1906 Maunsel and Company was founded with the express purpose of publishing Irish authors, and three years earlier the Irish National Theatre Company was founded. This period coincided with a swell in Irish nationalism and an increased interest in the preservation of Irish Gaelic.

[9] Machen, 'The White People', in *The Works of Arthur Machen: House Of Souls, The Hill of Dreams, The Three Impostors, and Other Tales of the Sacred and Profane* (San Bernardino: Lowood Press, 2012), pp. 44-63 (p. 46).

denying their merits. In 'The White People', Machen grants a higher spiritual capacity to women; the young female protagonist's nurse exemplifies competence in dealing with occult forces, and it may be that lack of female guidance following the nurse's departure leads to the tragedy at the end of the text, as the girl poisons herself, seemingly overwhelmed by her revelations. The women of Machen's 1890s fiction are often rendered 'unfit' to live in the world after their encounters with occult forces. The reader is usually denied access to the subjectivity of these women and is forced to understand them through male conversation only, rarely glimpsing a complete woman. A similar 'abbreviation' of female characters can be found in *The Great God Pan* (in the case of Helen Vaughn) and in 'The Shining Pyramid' (in the case of Annie Trevor). In the context of Machen's other fictions, 'The White People' stands out as a remarkably female-led narrative: though unnamed, the female protagonist is able to detail her own spiritual explorations by way of her journal writings in the Green Book, which make up the bulk of the text. Though the story of 'The White People' begins and ends with conversation between male companions on the outskirts of London, it is overall less dominated by male commentary than some of his other works.

Precarious Identities: Arthur Machen, Anglicanism, and the 'Celtic Church'

Machen's work has an uneasy place in literary history. Though, by the end of his life, he was seen as a man of letters and undeniably literary, much of his work was published in popular magazines before later compilation. Throughout his career, Machen commented on, and probably contributed to, the idea that his is a 'dubious legacy', despite the fact that many canonical literary authors, such as Charles Dickens, first found their works published in periodical form. We can find an example of Machen's typically self-effacing attitude toward his own work in his preface to 'The Bowmen' (1914), in which he states that '[i]ntroductions [...] belong to the masterpieces and classics of the world, to the great and ancient and accepted things: and I am here introducing a short, small story of my own which appeared in *The Evening News* about ten months ago'.[10] Machen implies that his own writing exists somewhere between popular and literary culture, and past attitudes toward 'genre' fiction have likely contributed to this impression of Machen as a purely 'popular author'.

Scholars have also noted that Machen and his works occupy an unusual space in terms of the religious landscape of Britain in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: he is a radical, yet he is also a traditional Anglo-Catholic. As Nicholas Freeman writes, he was

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[10] Machen, *Terror and Other Writings of Machen* (Ingersoll, ON: Devoted Publishing, 2017), p. 305.

'idiosyncratic and dogmatic'.[11] Machen was deeply opposed to the workings of the contemporary Anglican Church and to the materialism that he saw as detrimental to spiritual fulfilment. He still believed that Christianity had a sort of 'supernatural collateral', that quality that inspires faith and supports its assumption of miracles; however, he also saw the Church of England as incapable of facilitating access to religious wonder. During the 1890s, Machen explored occult magic, notably spending time engaged with the Order of the Golden Dawn, though his involvement with the organisation did not last long.[12] While his interest in exploring the occult did not wane in subsequent decades, he increasingly looked to the realm of the Arthurian in his spiritual quests; it seemed that the combination of Celtic myth and the affinity for the miraculous present in his Anglican upbringing sustained a nearly lifelong passion. Machen 'longed for a spirituality that satisfied his own burning certainties about the presence of wonder all around' him, and explicitly coded the mythology as Welsh.[13] This Celtic 'coding' is a move illustrated by Machen's interest in the Nanteos cup, then held in the National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth; he believed the cup to be a strong candidate for the Holy Grail.[14] Machen carried out extensive correspondence with lifelong friend Waite on the subject of the Graal, or Holy Grail, Machen eventually arriving at the theory that Arthur's knights were actually Celtic saints.[15]

His dabbling in the occult, his investigation of Celtic Christianity, and conservative Anglican Catholic upbringing are all important here, in that they further serve to place him in a precarious position in terms of cultural identity. Within the context of Wales, the Anglicanism that Machen was born into had, by that point, been coded for decades as culturally English, not Welsh. It has been argued that Machen's 'Celtic Church' is actually a

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[11] Nicholas Freeman, 'Arthur Machen: Ecstasy and Epiphany', *Literature and Theology*, 24 (2010), 242-55, (p. 243).

[12] The 'Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn', as it is termed, was devoted to the study and practice of the occult, metaphysics, and the supernatural. Its membership surged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The movement's teachings often focused on making contact with 'the divine spark', that locus of creativity and divine consciousness which motivates artists to achieve their greatest works (see Susan Johnston Graf, *Talking to the Gods: Occultism in the Work of W. B. Yeats, Arthur Machen, Algernon Blackwood, and Dion Fortune* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2015), p. 8). It has been suggested that perhaps Machen's quick disenchantment with Golden-Dawn teachings was a product of the advanced occult knowledge that he already possessed before his induction. He was knowledgeable enough to realise that the secrets being imparted behind the walls of the Isis-Urania Temple were freely available to anyone willing to spend time searching out reading material and researching various libraries. While he enjoyed the spectacle of Golden-Dawn ritual, he did not care for the gatekeeping practiced by elder members (ibid, pp. 59-60).

[13] Freeman, pp. 244-48.

[14] Machen, Roger Dobson, Godfrey Brangham, and R. A. Gilbert, *Selected Letters: The Private Writings of the Master of the Macabre* (Northamptonshire: Aquarian Press, 1988), pp. 40-41.

[15] In his introduction to Waite's 'The Hidden Church of the Holy Grail', Machen writes, 'I am of the opinion that the story is of Celtic origin, and that the knights are Celtic saints in armour'. Machen and Waite spent endless hours in the British Museum researching the Grail legend (Freeman, pp. 47-48).

tired myth initially created during the Reformation to justify the presence of an Anglican Church independent of Rome. In this formation, the 'Celtic Church' actually justifies Machen's Anglicanism through its tying of his faith to his native land; it also offers 'unbroken sacramental continuity'.[16] Yet Anglicanism in the mid-late Victorian period became hopelessly entwined with one of the biggest insults the Welsh people had ever publicly endured.

Blue Books: The Gothicisation of the Welsh Language

Anglicanism is infamously associated with the *Brad y Llyfrau Gleision*, or 'the Treason of the Blue Books'.[17] The term 'Blue Books' refers to 'The Report of the Commissioners of Inquiry into the State of Education in Wales', published in 1847. The damning report, released during the aftermath of the Rebecca Riots of the 1840s,[18] often repeated the common prejudices held by Anglican clergy operating in areas with strong nonconformist and Methodist leanings.[19] The language used in the reports has often been seen as 'colonial prejudice at its most blatant'.[20] Among other claims, the report published the letter of an Anglican Reverend operating in Troed-yr-aur, who claimed that the evening meetings of Welsh nonconformists were just opportunities for illicit sex between youths, who were said to remain overnight in the haylofts.[21] The reports, and the connection to Anglicanism, had a galvanising effect on Welsh nonconformists, who now had proof that Anglican clergy did not have Welsh interests at heart. The Anglican Church began to be presented as 'an alien institution, contemptuous of the Welsh people, their language, culture and religion'.[22] Machen, growing up the son of an Anglican vicar, may have suffered from the challenge of navigating disparate religious and cultural identities. The contents of the 1847 Education Report 'gothicised' the Welsh, as

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[16] Ignatius, 'Arthur Machen, Anglicanism, and the Legend of the "Celtic" Church', *FAUNAS: The Journal of the Friends of Arthur Machen*, 31 (2015), 3-19 (p. 16-17).

[17] H. G. Williams, 'Nation State versus National Identity: State and Inspectorate in Mid-Victorian Wales', *History of Education Quarterly*, 40 (2000), 145-68 (p. 145).

[18] The Rebecca Riots are often seen as the impetus for the creation of the report, specifically because the use of the Welsh language often impeded the ability of English forces to quell the disturbances (see Jane Aaron, *Welsh Gothic* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2013), p. 51). The response of local farmers to unfair taxation involved agricultural workers dressed as women, or 'Rebeccas', in traditional Welsh dress, smashing toll gates, the physical manifestation of tolls and taxation during the economically challenging time. While destroying toll booths, often one or more of the Rebeccas recited Genesis 24:60: 'And they blessed Rebekah and said unto her, Thou *art* our sister, be thou *the mother* of thousands of millions, and let thy seed possess the gate of those which hate them.'

[19] Wales had undergone a Methodist Revival in the eighteenth century; Methodism continues to be the faith most associated with Welsh identity to this day.

[20] Janet Davies, *The Welsh Language: A History* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2014), p. 66.

[21] Davies, p. 66.

[22] Williams, p. 152.

scholar Jane Aaron explains in her ground-breaking study, *Welsh Gothic*. Gothicisation is, for Aaron, a process by which people who are considered backward, unreasonable, and uncivilised are rendered 'other', as a way to distance them from the dominant culture. To gothicise a people is to create a power imbalance through a fiction that paints the dominant group in a positive light by contrast with the gothicised minority; the depiction of those who are gothicised may change based on the needs of the dominant group.[23] For instance, a minority group in possession of significant natural resources may become a target; once a group is transformed into 'the other', maltreating them becomes far easier for the larger society to justify. 'Gothicisation', in its literary form, is the mode by which literary villains are created, be they the witches of Nathaniel Hawthorne's 'Young Goodman Brown' (1835) or the African natives of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899). An understanding of this social-cultural process as a way to justify both physical and cultural violence is crucial; it goes beyond the literary. The rhetoric of the 1847 report portrays the Welsh people as dark, primordial figures labouring underground; the mines of the South-Wales Valleys become a metaphor for the intellectual darkness in which their attachment to *Cymraeg* leaves them:

> The Welsh language is a vast drawback to Wales and a manifold barrier to the moral progress and communal prosperity of the people. Because of their language the mass of the Welsh people are inferior to the English in every branch of practical knowledge and skill […]. [The Welshman's] language keeps him under the hatches [...] he is left to live in an underworld of his own and the march of society goes completely over his head.[24]

The Commissioner's Report, it should be noted, coded the evils caused by lack of access to English in moral, rather than practical, terms. The legacy of the 'Blue Books' in late nineteenth-century Wales is, I argue, key to understanding Machen's fictional use of 'foreign' and obscure language; this is most apparent within 'The White People', due to the text's coding of language usage in terms of boundary crossing and sin. The 1847 reports, as well as the 1861 'Revised Code', prompted much of the nationalist sentiment and the joining of Welsh nonconformists with the remains of the Welsh antiquarian movement; it also resulted in the resurgence of Bardic culture, which led to the first National Eisteddfod in Aberdare in 1861, two years before the birth of Arthur Machen.[25] The *eisteddfod*, now a yearly

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[23] Aaron, pp. 50-51.

[24] This is a direct quotation from the 1847 Commissioner's Report; Aaron extensively analyses the phrasing of the report in her study (ibid, p. 52).

[25] This code, while not explicitly prohibiting Welsh-language use in schools, changed the way in which the government paid for education and was a huge detriment to the language. Under the new system, a capitation grant of 12 shillings was paid for each child every year to their school of attendance; however, up to two thirds of that sum could be withdrawn should the child fail to satisfy inspectors in their performance in maths and English reading and writing. Basically, a teacher's livelihood became predicated on their students learning

celebration of Welsh culture, language, and artistic output, has its roots in an event first held in the twelfth century by Rhys ap Gruffudd in Cardigan.[26]

Complications to Welsh Identity: The Ambiguity of Machen's Monmouthshire

If mid-Victorian arguments concerning the negative influence of *Cymraeg* had been valid, Machen would still have been protected, having been born in Monmouthshire. Along with Radnorshire, Monmouthshire was one of the Welsh counties in which native-language use had lost ground early on. While Welsh had remained the primary, and in some cases, sole language up until the 1860s through much of Wales, in Monmouthshire the percentages were much lower, though concrete data is not available until the late nineteenth century.[27] The census of 1891, the first systematic attempt to quantify Welsh-language usage, found that within the county of Monmouthshire only fifteen percent of respondents over the age of two spoke Welsh; furthermore, this statistic is skewed by the high percentage of speakers in the district of Bedwellty. In the district of Newport, which contains Machen's beloved Caerleon, the 1891 census reported less than twelve percent Welsh fluency.[28] Monmouthshire had already found itself in a unique position after the 1536 Act of Union. The Act, passed during the reign of Henry VIII, incorporated Wales into England's legal system; it also positioned English as the language of the courts of Wales, and prohibited any person who spoke Welsh from holding public office of any kind.[29] Oddly, when Wales was incorporated through the Act of Union, Monmouthshire was put under the legal jurisdiction of Westminster, rather than the newly formed Court of Great Session in Wales; this led to its slowly being seen as an English county by many, though culturally and linguistically it was no less Welsh than any other Western county in the sixteenth century.[30] Despite this, Machen never did become fluent in Welsh, though he did learn French, having undergone a fairly traditional English

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English, giving them a pecuniary interest in discouraging Welsh-language use in schools. Though not uniformly enforced, some teachers took up the practice of the retributive 'Welsh Not' system; this promoted students 'tattling' on each other for being caught speaking Welsh, with the passing on of a wooden marker or paddle to the offending child. Those who ended up with the marker, often carved with the initials 'W. N.' for 'Welsh Not', at the end of the day, were paddled (Davies, p. 75).

[26] Ibid, p. 44.

[27] Welsh monoglots were not unusual in the late-Victorian period in Wales, particularly in the North and in Southern mining communities, as large concentrations of people from smaller villages came to the mining communities for the promise of work (ibid, p. 20).

[28] J. E. Southall, *The Welsh Language Census of 1891, with Coloured Map of the 52 Registration Districts into which Wales is Divided* (Newport, Monmouthshire: John E. Southall, 1895), p. 8 <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uiug.30112000597200> [accessed 2 September 2018].

[29] Davies, pp. 33-34.

[30] The confusion continues until the Local Government Act of 1972, which clarifies Monmouthshire's status as a county of Wales.

education.[31] This is not surprising, considering the fact that educational advancement and English-language use were inextricably connected in this period.[32]

Despite his lack of Welsh-language fluency, scholars have noted that Machen was deeply steeped in Welsh hagiography, history, and legend; few Welsh authors have used their heritage to as great an advantage.[33] The technical confusion regarding Machen's birthplace, his Anglicanism, and his lack of Welsh fluency have led some to question, even deride, his claim to Welsh identity. His critics have referred to him as a Welsh writer who would have preferred to be English and who felt that he was contaminated by Welshness.[34] This is despite the fact that he consistently referred to himself as 'a native of Gwent' and attributed much of his success as an author to his place of origin.[35] Nonetheless, Machen's literary life often took him out of the Welsh countryside in which he sets much of his work written in the 1890s. He left for London in 1883, and many authors tend to refer to him as an exile.[36] This is not surprising, as he had been known to voice similar sentiments; writing in his *Autobiography*, Machen states that his idea of comfort was defined by the whitewashed Welsh farmhouse, rather than the plush hotels of London. He even went so far as to portray himself as 'an Israelite exiled'.[37] Indeed, critical attention should be turned to the city of London, which is often referenced in his works, to illuminate Machen's nuanced relationship with his place of exile. The argument can be made that Machen's contact with English culture was detrimental to his written representations of Wales, especially if we look at works like 'The Shining Pyramid', in which Croesyceiliog is infested with dark entities who kidnap village girls for the purpose of sacrifice. However, it can likewise be argued that he gained the ability to write from English and Welsh perspectives simultaneously.[38] He was therefore able to navigate the tensions between Welsh and English identity and language; no matter their own relation to

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[31] In reviewing the findings of the 1891 Census, a strong divide in fluency between the West and East in Wales emerges; there is a similar divide currently, though it runs North and South, with the North having much higher language fluency and continuity. In 1891, the Census recorded that 54.5 percent of the Welsh population over two years old spoke Welsh. However, this is rather skewed; Radnorshire, a county in Mid-West Wales, had the lowest percentage of speakers at 6 percent, while the county of Cardiganshire in the East was found to have a 95 percent Welsh-speaking population (Davies, pp. 81-82).

[32] Ibid, p. 76.

[33] Mark Valentine, *Arthur Machen* (Bridgend: Seren, 1995), p. 138.

[34] Aaron, p. 71.

[35] In his autobiography, he states his belief that anything that he had thus far accomplished in literature was due to his being born in the heart of Gwent: 'As soon as I saw anything I saw Twyn Barlwm, that mystic tumulus, the memorial of the people that dwelt in that region before the Celts left the Land of Summer' (Machen, *The Autobiography of Arthur Machen* (London: Garnstone Press, 1974), pp. 17-18).

[36] Freeman, p. 248.

[37] Machen, *The Autobiography of Arthur Machen*, p. 21.

[38] Aaron, p. 76.

the native language, all Welsh writers are affected by these tensions precisely because *Cymareg* has always been a political battleground.[39]

The 1890s saw an increase in Celtic literary production, though the general tendency is to focus on Irish writing due to the prominence of high-profile figures like Irish poet W. B. Yeats, along with George Moore and George Bernard Shaw. The period, known alternately as the 'Celtic Dawn', or the 'Irish Literary Revival' or 'Renaissance', saw Irish writers networking with self-identified 'Celtic' authors, creating a sense of community and appreciation that coincided with a swell in both Irish and Welsh nationalist feeling. Those working in this period found themselves consciously or unconsciously working against the destructive attitudes of literary critics who had, for decades by this point, belittled the abilities of their non-English British contemporaries. These detractors, interestingly, often devalued Celtic production through a 'feminisation' of the Celts and their creative tendencies. For example, Matthew Arnold's *On the Study of Celtic Literature* (1867) was particularly damaging, informed as it was by very little knowledge of Celtic history or anthropology; it praises the Welsh in one measure while belittling their works in the next, often using patronising language. Arnold, oddly enough, uses terms like 'Celt-Hater' and 'Celt-Lover' to describe the detractors and champions of Celtic literature; despite his often patronising language and linguistic discrimination, he seems to think of himself as the latter.[40]

Linguistic discrimination, specifically the English coding of the Welsh language as degenerate and dangerous, is important in examining language use in 'The White People'. In the Education Report of 1847, Commissioner Lingen referred to 'the manifold evils inseparable from an ignorance of English'. He expressed the beliefs of many who derided the continuance of the Welsh language as a hindrance to the spread of English culture in Wales. This spread, and the resulting homogeneity, was desirable to many; Lingen echoes this sentiment: 'through no other medium than a common language can ideas become common'.[41] Beyond that, such ideological stances assume that the spread of English culture would have the 'civilising' effect necessary to combat the moral degeneracy mentioned elsewhere in the report. Machen's 'The White People' does seem to point to the danger of involvement with 'obscure', minority languages; in light of this, it is tempting to ask whether he might be deferring to the assumptions made by people like Commissioner Lingen and Matthew Arnold. This may be an overly simplistic response; while Machen often writes through the

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[39] David Lloyd, 'Welsh Writing in English', *World Literature Today*, 66 (1992), 435-38 (p. 436).
[40] Matthew Arnold, 'On the Study of Celtic Literature', in *Celtic Literature*, pp. 1-152 (London: Smith, Elder, & Co., 1905), pp. 26-33.
[41] Quoted in Williams, p. 152.

perspective of characters that represent the material world of 'London', it can't be said that these men represent Machen's exact worldview.

'The White People' is particularly interesting in that it features three distinct worldviews as regards obscure language. The young female protagonist interacts directly with occult linguistics and, page for page, her perspective dominates the text. Cotgrave, a character in the opening and closing sections of the text, is introduced to Ambrose through a mutual friend: he represents the material world of London within the text; unsurprisingly, there are many aspects of the girl's tale that he 'do[es] not grasp at all'.[42] Ambrose, a hermit who guides the opening and closing sections of 'The White People' and introduces Cotgrave to the Green Book and the girl's story, acts as a literal intermediary; tellingly, he also lives on the outskirts of London, on a high hill from which the city, that 'awful spectacle', can be seen (p. 48). The three responses to obscure language and the occult practice attached to it, as showcased in Machen's tale, provide a sense of complexity that seems absent from other Machen narratives, especially those dominated by the Southern English, or London, view of reality. I would argue that the story's openness to heterogeneity of tongues and religious practice makes 'The White People' read as less 'horrific' than other stories that Machen wrote using similar subject matter.

The 'Truer' Reality: Language, Materialism, and Male Loss

Machen's use of language in 'The White People' is therefore very much open to interpretation – there is very little specificity as to its exact application in calling forth the occult, nor is there any elaboration on linguistic matters. Communicating by way of a series of notebooks, the young author of the Green Book deliberately keeps information from others, including us, the readers; though she doesn't expect an audience, she leaves the Green Book relatively unsecured, unlike other books which contain more dangerous secrets. Some secrets she 'must not write down': these, are apparently even more dangerous (p. 48). The reader is left with many questions. For instance, it is by no means clear which of Machen's invented languages is primary in her exploration of occult magic and the faery realm. She writes that she knows the *Chian* language, as well as the *Aklo* letters, which may be some sort of cipher or runic system (p. 48). This also suggests that there may be different classes of faeries speaking different languages or dialects. Tellingly, she learns the *Xu* language as a baby. She remembers seeing the little white faces of the faeries around her cradle; they spoke

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[42] Machen, 'The White People', in *The Works of Arthur Machen*, pp. 44-63 (p. 62). All further references to this story are placed in parentheses in the body of the essay.

to her and she learned their language through these interactions, though she remembers little of *Xu* now (p. 49).

This sense of the 'lost' language of youth, or language learned in the home, is important in understanding the connection between Machen's invented languages and *Cymraeg*. In the aftermath of the 1847 Education Report, and even into the mid-twentieth century, children felt the pressure of English linguistic supremacy. Welsh was often looked upon as a dead-end language, and school children seeking academic and professional advancement were expected to shed their home language in favour of English, as English, in many ways, represented the possibility of material success.[43] Because language is mentioned in passing, through the journaling of the female protagonist who is the narrative focus of 'The White People', it is therefore more important to understand the function of Machen's invented languages, than to attempt to sort out the linguistic cosmology of the world. There are many hints within the text that all of these languages, pictograms, and codes are ways by which the young girl accesses a 'truer' reality than that which is offered through the English language. English, the text seems to imply, opens material, not spiritual, doors.

In the beginning of her narrative in the Green Book, the girl writes that, about a year previously, she had discovered 'the real names of the days and months' (p. 48). These, she writes, are among the secrets that must be kept hidden in other notebooks. The extreme need to keep this knowledge secret hints at the devastation of revelation yet to come. If something as seemingly straightforward as seasonal nomenclature is beyond the knowledge of the human race, a thing to be secreted away, it is apparent that humanity is completely out of touch with this higher 'reality'. The girl is also able to call up Alala, an entity whose nature is never elaborated on. She does this only when completely alone, in her room or in some isolated wood, with her eyes and mouth shut; it requires only the faintest whisper from the girl to make Alala come. Once Alala is present, the reader is not privy to the nature of the girl's interaction with the being. As this suggests, language, as portrayed in 'The White People', embodies a secret truth, and the shadow of the Welsh language looms large in 'The White People', not because Machen's invented languages are linguistically coded as Welsh, but because of the similar threat they pose to the hegemonic domination of the English language, the language of materiality and socio-economic status.

Despite their occult power, however, it is by no means clear whether Machen represents obscure languages as innately horrid. The everyday world of material concerns is

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[43] This conflict was dramatised in Emyr Humphreys' 1958 novel, *A Toy Epic* (Emyr Humphreys, *A Toy Epic* (Bridgend: Seren, 2012)).

depicted here as fundamentally disconnected from that which is 'real'; this 'true reality' is so far beyond human understanding that there is horror in it. Pulling back the curtain reveals too much for the human mind to comprehend without consequence; in this case, consequences present themselves through the young protagonist's suicide. Despite Ambrose's interest in the girl's story, and his own study of alchemy, he believes that 'it is no doubt better for the great mass of people to dismiss it [the occult/faery realm] as a dream' (p. 62).[44]

Notably, before the girl hints at this second reality, Ambrose the hermit has already alluded to it in the first section of the narrative of 'The White People'. Machen's tale is told in three parts; the first and third revolve around the conversation between Ambrose and Cotgrave, concerning the horror of the 'profoundly unnatural', during which Ambrose introduces the Green Book to Cotgrave. The young girl's writings in the Green Book make up the second and largest section of 'The White People'. Speaking of the profoundly unnatural, Ambrose claims that people feel it when they are in its presence, or that 'we should if we were natural: children and women feel this horror you speak of, even animals experience it. But with most of us convention and civilization and education have blinded and deafened and obscured the natural reason' (p. 46). As mentioned earlier, the young narrator first became aware of the other world, that of 'the White People', as a baby when she was visited by them and taught the *Xu* language. The fact that she only barely remembers the language implies that humanity 'blunts' itself, and that each individual loses their abilities to sense 'true reality' through contact with the modern, materialist world. Children and babies, who have yet to be 'formed' by society through their interactions at school, have an openness that still allows them to sense and learn naturalistically; the baby girl learns *Xu* not through books or lessons, but through listening and gurgled attempts at conversation. Somewhat paradoxically, in the story, women, who remain within the home, completely avoid the 'tampering' of society, as a result of the very restrictions and conventions that society places on them. Natural faculties capable of sensing evil, and accessing a truer reality, are therefore all negatively affected by humanity's extensive interactions with the world of societal expectations and business. As discussed above, Machen had a personal distaste for materialism, which he blamed in part for the spiritual ineffectuality of the modern Anglican

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[44] The consequences of revealing too much have been explored elsewhere in Machen's work. In referring to the Welsh protagonist Lucian's habits in *The Hill of Dreams*, Aaron notes that 'healthy English boys cannot bear such decaden[ce]'; Aaron also comments on the fact that the spiritual dabblings of Helen in *The Great God Pan* are not that different from Lucian's, but, because Helen's actions are viewed through an English lens, they turn horrible; it is the destabilising threat that Helen poses to the nineteenth-century upper-class London view of the feminine that makes her monstrous (Aaron, p. 76).

Church.[45] Thus, it is not surprising that, within the narrative space of the story, this personal conviction makes its presence known. Machen's separation of gendered spaces works to make us aware of the division of materialism and spirituality. Through male eyes that have lost touch with non-material concerns, spirituality may indeed become gothicised, the realm of the 'other'.

Compartmentalised Narratives: The Gendering of Space and Language

As this suggests, 'The White People' effects an almost complete spatial and narrative separation of male and female characters within the two primary narratives: Ambrose, Cotgrave, and their mutual male friend frame the narrative of the young female protagonist, who is never named; their commentary bookends but never overlaps with her experience, establishing the men as authority figures whose commentary have an outsized influence on our reading, despite their temporal and experiential distance from the Green Book. In any case, the use of 'frame narratives' serves a very specific function. Stories that use a hybrid form of narrative transmission, such as 'The White People', appear to connect varied voices into a unified whole; however, the often disparate nature of these voices also creates a competition among narrators.[46] Framing narratives equally serve as a means to comment on encapsulated narratives, as evidenced by Ambrose's opening and closing remarks in Machen's tale. 'The White People' begins as Ambrose is in the process of explaining his philosophical viewpoints, which seem at first fairly radical, to a new acquaintance, Cotgrave. These views are actually largely in keeping with Catholic sensibilities, offering in essence an echoing of the Fall; like Eve in her attempt to eat from the Tree of Knowledge, the unnamed female protagonist also attempts 'to gain the ecstasy and knowledge that pertain alone to angels'.[47] Machen's connection to the hermit first becomes apparent when Cotgrave enquires about the hermit's religious affiliation, to which Ambrose replies that he is a member of the 'persecuted Anglican church' (p. 46). This connection is also apparent in Ambrose's conflation of the knight Sir Galahad with St Paul (p. 47). This mirrors strongly the author's own spiritual and intellectual explorations of the Grail myths and Celtic Christianity.[48]

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[45] Freeman, pp. 244-48.

[46] Bernard Duyfhuizen, *Narratives of Transmission* (Vancouver: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1992), p. 123.

[47] Susan Jennifer Navarette, *The Shape of Fear: Horror and the Fin-de-Siècle Culture of Decadence* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2015), p. 181.

[48] Machen even went so far as to develop his own theories concerning the correspondence of Arthurian knights with their appropriate saints. He also researched connections in the surrounding legends of St David, patron saint of Wales, with Joseph of Arimathea, the first steward of the Grail (Machen et al, *Selected Letters*, p. 42).

It is therefore not difficult to 'read' Arthur Machen in the character of Ambrose. This reading of Ambrose as a sort of Machen-surrogate gives Ambrose's philosophical musings more authority within the scope of the text. It also colours how we understand Ambrose's judgement of the girl's self-destruction at the end of the text. However, we must not forget that Ambrose is an intentional construction to guide our reading, and we should be wary of over-stating his connection to Machen lest we assume his philosophical musings are indicative of the ultimate meaning of the text. It is arguably more useful to think of Ambrose as an intermediary between the spiritual and material worlds. Like Machen, Ambrose guides the narrative, introducing the reading audience and Cotgrave, a visitor from London, to the Green Book, which Ambrose procured after the death of its female writer. Ambrose hands the notebook to Cotgrave with the instruction that Cotgrave read it to further his understanding of their conversation: this directive to read kicks off the girl's narrative (p. 48).

While the framing narrative is wholly male, the girl's narrative, as noted earlier, is almost completely devoid of male characters, and those that are present are inactive. The girl's mother is dead by the time the protagonist begins writing in the Green Book, though she was present for part of the girl's childhood. Her absence is one of the first markers of the gothic in the story. Where there are gothic heroines, there is also a preponderance of dead mothers littering the fictional landscape.[49] This is often a narrative necessity, as mothers 'oppose[s] the narrative need for deviance and instability' that is central to gothic storytelling.[50] While mothers (ideally) benefit society by creating stability in the home, they do not benefit the creation of a dark and deviant tale.[51] With that stabilising influence gone, the young protagonist of 'The White People' is left to the care of her father and nurse. The girl's nurse, central to her occult explorations, represents a form of womanhood that stands even further apart from convention and the materialism of the civilised world, due to her status as one of the underclass. The nurse's access to the 'deeper reality' at the heart of 'The White People' is likely increased by this separation; however, the girl's narration makes it clear that her nurse has also learned about occult ritual from her great-grandmother, a fellow practitioner (pp. 55, 57).

The nurse serves as a kind of surrogate mother, though we are left questioning whether or not she exerts the stabilising effect of a 'natural' mother. In this formulation,

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[49] Ruth Bienstock Anolik, 'The Missing Mother: The Meanings of Maternal Absence in the Gothic Mode', *Modern Language Studies*, 33 (2003), 24-43 (p. 25).
[50] Ibid, p. 27.
[51] Anolik also theorises the 'Missing Mother' as a literalisation of the woman's legal death under the system of *coverture* (ibid, p. 26).

'stability' is defined by a sense of the girl's physical and mental well-being; it cannot be defined through homemaking. In fact, the nurse directly challenges the stability of the home. One of the magical acts she performs, and teaches to the girl, is the ability to turn a house upside down without anyone realising: all the home's material objects, such as china and chairs, are up-ended, causing fear and chaos (p. 60). This opposition to home and hearth, represented by the symbolic act of home-wrecking, is further emphasised by the nurse's insistence on imparting 'secrets' outdoors; '[w]alls have ears', she claims (p. 60). No harm comes to the girl while under the nurse's tutelage, but it is important to note that the nurse disappears when the girl is about thirteen or fourteen, two years before the writing of the Green Book (p. 60). This may imply that the nurse did in fact have a stabilising influence, guiding the girl through interactions with the faery world in a way that was controlled and safe. However, this remains ambiguous, precisely because the piecemeal nature of the girl's narrative disallows concrete knowledge. While Ambrose assumes that the girl's trespass into forbidden knowledge accounts for her tragic end, it is entirely possible that, had the nurse remained, safe interaction with the world of 'the White People' may have been possible.

While the girl's nurse is deeply involved in her life, her father is represented as an absentee. We know very little about him, materially speaking, but his identity is key to understanding the way that Machen codes spaces as feminine or masculine, a distinction which maps out the division between the spiritual and material worlds of the Welsh (or *Chian* or *Aklo*) and English, respectively. Upon telling her father one of her nurse's stories, about a little ghost, he becomes enraged, insisting 'it was not true at all, and that only common, ignorant people believed in such rubbish' (p. 59). According to the girl's father, the mystical world of the nurse is associated with that which is 'common', lowly, and illogical. The nurse's beliefs, and her sharing of these stories and beliefs, is seen by the father as an attempt to contaminate the girl. Rather than calmly informing the girl that the story is just a fairy- or folktale, her father reacts violently, erupting with classist anger. The nurse, with her folktales and the secrecy provided by the linguistic difference that she embodies, is characterised as backward, much the way the Welsh are characterised in the 1847 Education Report. After her father's outburst, the nurse and the girl's interactions are kept secret forevermore, and her father is shut out of their female-dominated space. The only other thing we learn about the girl's father is related to us by Ambrose at the end of Machen's story. He was known to Ambrose, who describes him as a lawyer 'who thought of nothing but deeds and leases'; the news of his daughter's death, unsurprisingly, therefore comes as a huge surprise to him.

Being absent, and 'always [leaving] her very much to herself' (p. 63), he had no knowledge of the girl's esoteric wanderings or of any personal issues that might have driven her to poison herself. In fact, his daughter is a relative stranger to him.

Beyond that, the girl and her father literally speak different languages; they operate in different worlds, precluding a common understanding. The girl, who spends her hours speaking the languages of the faeries, is a universe away from her father's world, dominated by law and legal language; despite their common knowledge of English, the girl doesn't engage with her father or his material preoccupations. His sole concern for 'deeds and leases' is code for the 'convention and civilization and education' that Ambrose derides as blunting man's natural faculties (p. 46). Her father's insistence on keeping folktales away from his daughter comes from the same sense of the practical, which divides the world between that which is important, and that which is frivolous. As I've been arguing, this coding of 'the practical' often runs along lines defined by gender and culture. The lawyer's arguments against folktales are similar to those used against Welsh-language speakers in the Victorian period. Matthew Arnold, in his essay on Celtic literature, noted that anything of importance, or anything the world would care to hear, would need to be spoken in the proper language – English.[52] The Welsh language, like the folktale, is 'common' and vulgar; both are incapable of saying anything worthy of being heard. This division of the world into practical and non-practical, and the coding of these differences as both gendered and cultural (via the vehicle of the folktale), serves as a method for disregarding certain experiences.

Different forms of knowledge are positioned as just as irrelevant and disposable. The irony of 'The White People' is the fact that these 'discardable' and frivolous forms of learning, specifically linguistic and folkloric, actually constitute the 'truer reality' posited by the framed narrative. It is human disengagement from this other world that makes its comprehension sublimely horrible. For those who have built their lives on material concerns, contemplating the possibility that their lives are founded on illusion is indeed a horrifying prospect. It is this perspective, written into largely male, largely London-born characters, that informs the gothicisation of the occult in many of Machen's stories from the 1890s. 'The White People' is exceptional precisely because the majority of the narrative is written through the eyes of a female participant in occult activities who has actively shunned the

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[52] Arnold's desire for linguistic homogeneity drove him to say that the Cornish people were better off for the loss of their language. Speaking of the presupposed extinction of Cornish, Welsh, and other Celtic tongues, Arnold states that 'it is a necessity of what is called modern civilisation, and modern civilisation is a real, legitimate force; the change must come, and its accomplishment is a mere affair of time' (Arnold, p. 10).

material. Even though the girl comes to no good in the end, the text as a whole demonstrates a sympathy toward her efforts.

Bishopsgyte: Machen's Auto-didactism and 'Secret' Language

It is also useful here to note that Machen had a strong interest in educating himself, introducing an illuminating distinction between conventional education and the auto-didacticism that characterises his own language learning, as well as that of story's female protagonist. In researching the letters of Machen, particularly those written to Waite, it becomes quickly apparent that Machen was particularly interested in languages beyond the knowledge of the average learner, those that were a less-common feature of organised education. His enthusiasm can be seen throughout his life, whether through his fiction or through his personal correspondence. In a 1907 letter to Waite, he speaks of 'Shelta', the language of those known as the Irish Travellers. In particular, he notes the 'secrecy' of the language as a positive attribute; he revels in having overheard a 'secret Gaelic language' in so banal a place as Euston Road.[53]

This interest in language is both intellectual and personal. In a 1927 letter, Machen expresses his pride to Waite on finding out that his son preferred the study of Hebrew over physics.[54] Having learned French during his fairly traditional English education, Machen himself spent time in the 1880s and 1890s translating French texts as a way to survive financially in London.[55] Significantly for my argument here, despite Machen's fluency in French, he never romanticises that language; it is never spoken of in the same terms as those he dabbles in for his own intellectual curiosity. Throughout his fiction, personal correspondence, and other writings, certain languages, such as Welsh and Hebrew, hold a mystery that French never embodies for him. In his autobiography, Machen writes that he was at one point knowledgeable enough in Hebrew characters to read the Yiddish signage that littered the walls of London's East End. 'I remember', he writes in his autobiography, 'being much amused when I had deciphered a most mystic, reverend-looking word and found it read "Bishopsgyte"'.[56] As this suggests, language is often represented by Machen as a 'cipher' that encodes deeper mystical knowledge – thus the irony about his 'discovery' of 'Bishopsgyte'. This motif, in which relatively obscure forms of language (specifically

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[53] Machen, *Selected Letters*, p. 43.
[54] The letter refers to his son, Arthur Hilary Blaize Machen (ibid, p. 48).
[55] These include the *The Heptameron* in 1886, *The Fortunate Lovers* in 1887, and *The Memoirs of Jacques Casanova* in 1894 (Machen, *Arthur Machen: A Bibliography*, pp. 5-6, 9-10, 23).
[56] Ibid, p. 41.

pictograms) unlock 'truths', is used to horrific effect in 'The Shining Pyramid', and with irony in 'The Red Hand'. This motif is carried forward into 'The White People', where language is used to 'unlock' that which is 'real'. Auto-didacticism is valued as the higher pursuit in both Machen's own life and in 'The White People'. French, English, and the legal language of the protagonist's father are tools used to navigate the material world, unlike *Cymraeg*, *Chian*, Hebrew, and the *Aklo* letters, which are capable of navigating deeper, spiritual realities.

For Better or Worse: Intersection of Celticism and the Feminine

In 'The White People', as noted above, there is a conflation of femininity with esoteric learning, Celticism, and language, set against a male backdrop defined by materialism, convention, and practical English values. There is also a latent attention within the text to what we would now think of as feminist concerns. In many ways, Machen's characterisation of the female protagonist is more in line thematically with a female-written gothic tale, though painting Machen as a feminist in modern terms would be a stretch in light of his other works. In gothic writing, the shortcomings of male authors' conception of the feminine are often apparent by the level of constraint exercised upon the female characters. In male-written gothic tales, women are frequently hopelessly incarcerated or emotionally and physically maltreated; the female body is often abused and constrained. One tangible example of this gothic convention is visible in Charles Maturin's novel *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820); the character of Isadora, restored to the human world after having grown up isolated on an island after a shipwreck, finds her life and person controlled intermittently by a series of male family members, by her husband (the titular Melmoth), and finally by the Inquisitors who imprison her and her child.[57] Edina Szalay argues that gothic tales written by women, on the other hand, tend to portray women in control of their lives and possessed of significant powers of reasoning.[58] Sybil, of Louisa May Alcott's short tale 'A Whisper in the Dark' (1877), is typical of the female-authored gothic heroine.[59] However, the nameless female heroine of 'The White People' is possessed of a level of agency unusual for male-authored gothic works. What is more, the girl and her nurse form a female society of two, engaging in homosocial bonding that does not require the interaction and approval of men;

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[57] Charles Maturin, *Melmoth the Wanderer* (Mineola: Dover Editions, 2017).
[58] Edina Szalay, 'Gothic Fantasy and Female "Bildung" in Four North-American Women Novels', *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies*, 6.2 (2000), 183-96 (p. 148).
[59] Louisa May Alcott, 'A Whisper in the Dark', in *American Gothic from Salem Witchcraft to H. P. Lovecraft: An Anthology*, ed. by Charles L. Crow, 2nd edn (West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), pp. 170-93.

indeed, the female protagonist, after realising that her father cannot or will not engage with her interests, completely closes the circle, cementing the 'femaleness' of the rest of her narrative.[60] The closure of the circle constitutes a denial of the material realm that her father represents as well as a strong statement of the importance of her esoteric explorations.

It is worth noting here that the intersection of Celticism and the feminine has taken strange turns, especially in the nineteenth century; while feminine energy has been a source of power in Welsh nationalist circles, the linking of Celtic identity and feminine stereotypes has been instrumental in dismissing Celtic literary production. Early nineteenth-century French theorist Ernest Renan referred to the Celts as 'a feminine race'.[61] In Arnold's *On The Study of Celtic Literature*, he derides the Celts for their innate sentimentality, which he sees as an ever-readiness 'to react against the despotism of fact'.[62] The Celtic rebellion against fact, Arnold asserts, has hobbled them in the world of politics and business. He compares the Celts to the 'Latin races' by citing a shared love of company and bright colours, implying an innate frivolity within the Celtic temperament by tying it to attributes associated with femininity and racial 'others'.[63] Nowhere in Arnold's assessment of Welsh or Celtic participation in public spheres, or lack thereof, as he would argue, does he acknowledge the difficulties posed by the complete hegemonic domination of the English language over those institutions.[64] We should also note that Arnold often quotes the aforementioned Renan as an authority when referring to the femininity of the Celts; he states that Renan, 'with his eyes fixed squarely on the Bretons and the Welsh, is struck by the timidity, the shyness, the delicacy of the Celtic nature, its preference for a retired life, its embarrassment at having to deal with the great world'.[65] The description is reminiscent of many passages found in Coventry Patmore's poem 'The Angel in the House' (1862), in which the poet idealises the perfect wife.[66] Current conceptions of race, national origin, and culture make Arnold's arguments seem very simplistic, despite their influence at the time; his broad brushstrokes delegitimise cultures through the use of caricature. The demeaning of cultures through feminine metaphors is always harmful to both, as it assumes extremely limited ranges of behaviour.

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[60] Lois Tyson, 'Lesbian, Gay, and Queer Criticism', in *Critical Theory Today: A User-Friendly Guide*, 3rd edn (London: Routledge, 2015), pp. 302-42 (pp. 310-13).

[61] Ed Madden, *Tiresian Poetics: Modernism, Sexuality, Voice, 1888-2001* (Vancouver: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2008), p. 197.

[62] Arnold, p. 102.

[63] Ibid, p. 105.

[64] In Wales, the legal domination of the English language had been written into law since the aforementioned 1535 Act of Union.

[65] Arnold, p. 100.

[66] Coventry Patmore, *The Angel in the House*, ed. by Henry Morley (London: Cassell & Company, 1891), p. 28 <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/4099/4099-h/4099-h.htm> [accessed 2 September 2018].

These presumed limitations stand in stark contrast to Machen's text: his female protagonist finds herself happening upon forms of language and learning that thrust her into new worlds of experience unimaginable to the average man.

Beyond these limiting associations, which are innately racist and sexist, there has long been the perception in popular lore that Celtic cultures have historically afforded women more agency than other cultures. Often these claims hearken back to strong matriarchal figures like Boudicca; however, it is very difficult to determine the accuracy of the claims concerning historical Celtic feminism. Indeed, there is a human tendency to 'back-project', romanticising the past and aligning a historical periods' values with current ones.[67] Nevertheless, in the period in which Machen was writing, some examples can be identified. The early period of Welsh nationalism, which began with the founding of *Cymru Fydd*, saw the rare alignment of nationalism and feminist discourse.[68] Women's rights, notably, were even written into the Constitution of the *Cymru Fydd* movement in 1895. The movement, which focused on self-government for Wales, was unusual in that feminist and nationalist issues were not initially viewed as being at odds. Historically, scholars have recognised that many nationalist movements expect feminism to take a secondary role to the nationalist cause.[69] The joining of Welsh nationalist and feminist concerns came about in part due to the rhetorical strategies used by the writers of the 1847 Education Report to shame the Welsh. Areas of the report focusing on the moral degeneracy of the Welsh population often place blame with the nation's women; they are figured in that text as 'failed moral guardians of the nation'.[70] The report also quotes a letter from an Anglican clergyman who claimed that most of the Welsh women who he performed wedding ceremonies for were already 'in the family way'.[71] This rhetorical strategy, another damaging way to conflate Celtic and female identity, brought about a need to defend both Welsh women and wider Welsh culture from slander. Thus, the joining of Welsh feminist and nationalist concerns was effectively forced by the mutual slandering of both. Interestingly enough, this focus on Welsh women also led to discussions concerning the role that women played in language transmission: while it would be erroneous to assume that Welsh women were more devoted to the vitality of the language,

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[67] Juliette Wood, 'Perceptions of the Past in Welsh Folklore Studies', *Folklore*, 108 (1997), 93-102 (p. 94).

[68] Welsh for 'Young Wales'.

[69] Kirsti Bohata, 'En-Gendering a New Wales: Nationalism, Feminism, and Empire in the Fin de Siècle', in *Postcolonialism Revisited: Writing Wales in English* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2009), pp. 59-79 (pp. 60-61).

[70] Ibid, p. 62.

[71] In fact, the clergyman in question also stated that he offered to refund the marriage fee for any couple whose child was born after nine months of marriage. According to the Reverend, only one couple had been able to accept his offer in six years (Davies, p. 66).

their role in the home, away from the world of commerce, meant that women were more likely to be Welsh monoglots.[72]

The Female Agent?: Issues in Framed Narration

As all of this suggests, questions about female agency are impossible to avoid in reading the conclusion of 'The White People', not least due to the perplexing suicide of the young girl. We are left to wonder if her death represents an indictment of the girl's descent into obscure occult forces. The framing narrative, in which Ambrose the Hermit comments on the girl's actions, does not take a moral stance on her deeds, though he believes that she did the right thing in ending her life, stating, 'no, there was not a word to be said against her in the ordinary sense' (p. 63). His refusal of moral judgement, of course, is largely due to the fact that Ambrose's initial argument does not frame good and evil in moral terms at all. His argument concerns overreach, trespass, and a crossing of the boundaries set by the nature of one's essential being. As noted earlier, Ambrose is also a surrogate character constructed by Machen as an intermediary between worlds; he is meant to guide our reading of the girl's narrative, which is at times chaotic. However, this sense of narrative weight given to Ambrose's commentary is problematic: it raises the issue of the male gaze. Does Ambrose hold power over the girl's narrative? Does he hold 'the power to name things, the power to explain the world and so to rule the world'?[73] Arguments could be made in either direction due to the text's inherent ambiguity; however, it is important to note that, in the beginning of the tale, Ambrose hands Cotgrave the Green Book as a means to confer authority on his own philosophical system of good and evil.

It may be troublesome that Ambrose uses the girl's story to prove the validity of his own philosophy; the girl is not alive to protest misinterpretations of her narrative. It is also probable that she would not want her experiences used as exemplary of 'true evil'. On the other hand, Ambrose's belief in the authority of her narrative, dominated as it is by foreign languages, folklore, esoteric magic, and female homosociality, shows that he is more in sync with sensibilities coded as female, imaginative, and Celtic, than with male sensibilities represented by the practicality, cultural conformity, and legal interests of the girl's father. Ambrose effectively exists 'in between', though he lives just outside of London, that 'awful spectacle' (p. 48) and the centre of the English world. Machen has described London in much

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[72] It was also believed that the language of the mother, or 'Angel in the Hearth', determined the language used in the household (Davies, p. 67).

[73] Tyson, 'Feminist Criticism', in *Critical Theory Today*, pp. 79-128 (p. 97).

the same way in other writing; in *The Hill of Dreams*, a novel considered by critics to be his most autobiographical work, his protagonist refers to London as 'one grey temple of an awful rite'.[74] Machen, and his surrogate, Ambrose, therefore align themselves with the occult forces of the young girl against the backdrop of English society.

Given that Ambrose does not indict the girl for her trespasses, how is the reader meant to view her act of suicide at the end of the tale? One way to contextualise the girl's suicide is by understanding the narrative models applied to transcendental horror literature. The imaginative nature of 'The White People', and the girl's acquisition of knowledge beyond traditional understanding, certainly places the story within that realm. John Clute's model for understanding the plot arcs of transcendental horror theorises horror narrative as progressing by 'seasons' or stages.[75] In this model, the last stage of transcendental horror narrative produces an ending to the story, as the world revealed by the text is no longer 'storyable'. There is no way to continue the narrative because the revelation is beyond human understanding. This accounts for the often abrupt endings of transcendental horror stories, such as those by Lovecraft. This 'abruptness' is built into the storytelling medium through which the girl narrates her story – the Green Book. The nature of journaling is such that the writer has agency over what, and how much of the story is told. The girl is careful what she reveals to readers of the Green Book; as she puts it, 'I have a great many other books of secrets I have written, hidden in a safe place, and I am going to write here many of the old secrets and some new ones; but there are some I shall not put down at all' (p. 48). She asserts her authorial agency through her decision to keep certain information within her own private domain.

Conclusion: Forced Endings and the 'Unstoryable'

Additionally, her decision to stop writing in the Green Book forces an end. We find out through Ambrose that there is a sequel; however, she chose to stop writing in what she considered her less guarded notebook. We can only guess at the continuation of her story and

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[74] Freeman, p. 242; and Machen, 'The Hill of Dreams', in *The Works of Arthur Machen*, pp. 200-77 (p. 256).

[75] The four stages of Clute's model are as follows: the first stage, 'Sighting', allows the protagonist and audience to glimpse the terrors to come; the 'Thickening' realises many of the portents of the 'Sighting'. The third stage, 'Revel', sees 'the field of the world [...] reversed', and includes the manifestation of terrifying truths; the last stage, the 'Aftermath', is detailed above (Gary K. Wolfe and Amelia Beamer, 'Peter Straub And Transcendental Horror', *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*, 18.2 (2008), 217-31, (p. 218)). Notably, the first stage, 'Sighting', is related to Freud's idea of the uncanny; the terrors are often portrayed as feeling vaguely familiar. The opening of the girl's tale in 'The White People' illustrates this; she writes that she had early interaction with the faery element, even going so far as to remember them singing in strange tongues above her bed.

her occult practice; perhaps the secrets were too profound, or perhaps, like Clute's 'Aftermath' stage, she saw the narrative as becoming 'unstoryable' due to the force and strangeness of her revelations. We should also note that it is a part of gothic convention, especially in the fin de siècle, to assert that some things are too horrible to be spoken of.[76] This seems to inform Machen's narrative choices: he disallows readerly knowledge, while also making it clear that there is much more to the girl's story than we are being told. The narrative we are privy to is censored and compartmentalised. While the girl means to stop the narrative, through her cessation of the Green Book, we discover the truth of her suicide through the intervention of Ambrose. He forces a narrative continuation of sorts through this intervention, but he cannot provide enough information to give the reader a sense of 'closure'. This lack of closure is compounded by a lack of a clear message about the nature of 'good' and 'evil', which is interesting, considering the fact that Ambrose initially introduces the Green Book to Cotgrave as a way to illustrate his notion of good and evil. While Ambrose tells us that he later found and smashed the Roman idol that was instrumental in the girl's explorations, he never condemns the girl for her desire to explore other realms or to engage with other languages, just as he never condemns her choice to end her own life. If we think about the girl's suicide as an adjacent act to her discontinuation of narrative in the Green Book, perhaps there is agency to be found even amid profound horror.

'The White People' is a tale interested in the confluence of Welsh and female identity against a backdrop of materialism and cultural homogeneity dominated by the English language. Ambrose's interest in defining true evil belies the effect of Machen's story, which is to confuse rigid attempts at definition. This leaves the reading audience with questions about the 'ideal reality' in which humanity is meant to live; the text suggests that it may be too late to return completely to the naturalistic, spiritual world dominated by other tongues. Machen presents two worlds, yet seems to indicate the dangers of both, as the text navigates the complications presented by linguistic hegemony, cultural and gender identities, and non-standard spirituality. Machen, in writing 'The White People', indicates a greater fascination with navigating those complications, those two worlds, than in choosing wholly to indict either. As a Welshman engaged with the profoundly English world of the London literati, he was no stranger to negotiating dual identities. 'The White People' stands apart from much of Machen's 1890s fiction because of the multiplicity of voices that guide the text. This narrative style forces the reader to navigate complications, rather than providing easy

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[76] Hurley, p. 38.

answers. This layering of complications, I argue, is where the joy of the text lies, and indeed what makes 'The White People' such a joy to reread.

Here, I end my narrative, not with a poisoning, but with the cessation of a sentence.

BOOK REVIEWS: LITERARY AND CULTURAL CRITICISM

Jessica Gildersleeve, *Don't Look Now*
(England: Auteur Publishing, 2017)

Jessica Gildersleeve's book *Don't Look Now* is an enlightening and provocative treatment of Nicolas Roeg's 1973 film of the same name, providing an elucidating account of the film and its place in the horror genre. Gildersleeve argues that Roeg's *Don't Look Now* 'depends utterly on the narrative of trauma – on the horror of unknowing, of seeing too late, and of the failures of paternal authority and responsibility' (p. 7). Compared with other horror offerings of the 1970s, Roeg's film, Gildersleeve writes, 'is notable for its restraint' and 'highly aesthetic style' (p. 12), 'more artistic and high culture in its aims' (p. 13); following Noël Carroll, she goes on to describe the film as 'art-horror' (p. 16). The book proposes that *Don't Look Now* marks a departure from the more explicit depictions of violence and monstrosity that characterise the horror genre more broadly, and in particular popular films such as *The Exorcist*, which was released the same year.

Although Roeg's film did not garner the same attention as *The Exorcist*, Gildersleeve claims that it 'offers up a different kind of horror than most other films of the period'. She argues that it represents 'a hinge between literature and film of the 1970s, and [highlights] the ways in which the "women's ghost story" or "uncanny story" turns the horror film into a cultural commentary on the failures of the modern family' (p. 8). The book successfully demonstrates how horror, anxiety, and family dynamics are entangled in Roeg's film, particularly how 'the patriarchal figure [...] is under threat, not only by alternative forms of knowledge [...] but by the erasure of the child, the locus of the family's futurity and the law of primogeniture', as well as by 'the failure of patriarchal emotional knowledge and a fundamental misreading of the locus of threat' (p. 19). Essentially, the book argues that the horror of the film revolves around anxieties about the law and paternal authority coming under attack, resulting in John's (Donald Sutherland) failure to interpret the numerous threats that his character faces throughout the film. For example, the opening scene of the film introduces John's trauma by way of parallel action; the sequence depicts John lost in his work while his daughter plays near a lake on their property into which she eventually falls and drowns. This is the first instance of John missing a sign of danger. Later on in the film, John witnesses a mannequin being pulled from a Venice waterway, an image that functions as a

kind of premonition of John's wife Laura's (Julie Christie) death by way of drowning. In the latter scene, John's propensity to miss signs of danger is again evident, while the motif of drowning is repeated from the opening scene. Here, *Don't Look Now* comments on the repetition of trauma through a series of missed encounters with signs of danger, providing commentary on the failures of paternal authority in the film. By focusing the narrative around the trope of the family in crisis in the aftermath of the death of a child, and indexing the 'cultural disruptions' of the era, *Don't Look Now*, Gildersleeve argues, comments on 'the traumatic undermining of certainty and authority and the law' (p. 15).

Gildersleeve also discusses the correspondences between psychoanalysis and horror cinema in general, highlighting the intimate relationship between the two by indicating how *Don't Look Now* 'extends the psychoanalytic discourse' (p. 14). The book reconfigures 'the relationship between horror films, psychoanalysis and the cultural concerns in Britain during the 1970s', as well as illustrating the many ways in which Roeg's film comments on affect theory (p. 15). For Gildersleeve, the film 'plays out the horror of the unconscious', while depicting 'the horrific stasis of anxiety' (p. 15). In this way, *Don't Look Now* situates the film in the 'context of poststructuralism and affect theory' (p. 15), commenting on the ethical, cultural, and social implications of the film in terms of the emotions engendered by the film's horror elements.

To this end, Chapter One situates the film within 'the context of 1970s critical theory, such as deconstruction and reader response theory'. Gildersleeve claims that, although the narrative arc is more conventional than some of Roeg's other films, such as *The Man Who Fell From Earth* (1976) and *Bad Timing* (1980), *Don't Look Now* 'is hardly a conventional narrative in any other sense' (p. 23). One of the more audacious claims of the entire book is found in this chapter, namely that 'the viewer of *Don't Look Now* must combine [the film's tropes] with the discourses of late twentieth-century critical theory in order to comment on the function of emotion, for both character and viewer, in contemporary horror narratives' (p. 23). Although it is somewhat unclear why the viewer 'must' follow this injunction, it is difficult to disagree with the author's deft triangulation between affect, spectatorship, and narrative. Gildersleeve notes that, although the critical reception of the film was mixed, audiences recognised the film's psychological underpinnings, particularly its 'continual, mounting anxiety', which set it apart from 'the corporeal horror of *The Exorcist*' and other body horror films (p. 24). As Gildersleeve persuasively demonstrates, the affective registers

of the film – trauma and anxiety – provoke a 'critical re-evaluation of the psychoanalysis of cinematic fear', hinging upon the 'critical theory of trauma' (p. 28).

Chapters Two and Three unpack the film's engagement with psychic phenomena and practices, exploring the 'anxiety or dread of traumatic clairvoyance' and the 'logic of mourning' that drive the narrative forward (pp. 30-31). Derrida's notion of *destinerrance* is employed here to examine the trauma of misreading and the perpetually deferred arrival of meaning through the visual, temporal, and spatial forms contributing both to John's 'patriarchal hysteria', and to his ultimate demise (p. 51). Gildersleeve attributes John's brutal death at the end of the film to his misreadings of the site, image, and temporality of threat, turning to the Freudian notion of the death drive (*Todestrieb*) to make sense of John's multiple misreadings (p. 53).[1]

The book's fourth chapter examines how the different settings in the film 'evoke the horror of different kinds of disruption', focusing on the country home and garden of the film's opening sequence, the hotel and ruined church in Venice, and the overall function of Venice itself as a 'liminal and labyrinthine space' (p. 57). Analysing the unique presence of the female characters in the film, like the strange sisters Heather (Hilary Mason) and Wendy (Clelia Matania), Gildersleeve writes that the film's '*dérélict* women form a horizontal relation, a new community, which reacts against John, [the] symbol of the patriarchal values which make them *dérélict* in the first place' (p. 70). The book's conclusion provides a compelling account of gender and space, as the *dérélict* spaces of the film are connected to the film's *dérélict* women, proving to be a high point of the book, and providing a much-needed reflection our often-spontaneous acquiescence to patriarchal norms governing society and space (p. 71).

Gildersleeve's *Don't Look Now* features an impressive amalgam of theoretical, critical, and cultural elements, offering a refreshing commentary on Roeg's classic film and the often-underappreciated application of psychoanalytic theory. In many ways, Gildersleeve's *Don't Look Now* is reminiscent of the psychoanalytic film theory that emerged in the late 1960s and 1970s. Although for some readers – especially subscribers of the Lacanian variety of psychoanalytic film theory espoused by Todd McGowan and Joan Copjec – *Don't Look Now* may read as a dated account of psychoanalytic concepts, Gildersleeve nonetheless offers a pertinent and valuable rereading with which to reconsider the

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[1] It is perhaps worth noting that *Don't Look Now* employs the more parochial reading of *Todestrieb* as the drive toward death and self-destruction, and not the more recent definition espoused by Slavoj Žižek as the piece of the drive that refuses to die, marking stubborn persistence even after death (see Slavoj Žižek, *Less than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (London: Verso, 2012), pp. 131-32.)

intersections between horror, affect, and psychoanalytic theory. The reader should not be fooled by the brevity and concision with which this text is written; despite being just under ninety pages, Gildersleeve efficiently and effectively teases out the psychological subtleties of Roeg's difficult work, providing a much-needed reassessment of the film, the horror genre, and the critical tradition of cinema studies as a whole.

Anthony Ballas

Plant Horror: Approaches to the Monstrous Vegetal in Fiction and Film, ed. by Dawn
Keetley and Angela Tenga
(New York: Palgrave, 2016)

Dawn Keetley and Angela Tenga's edited collection *Plant Horror: Approaches to the Monstrous Vegetal in Fiction and Film* accounts for and analyses the representation of monstrous and horrifying plant life across a range of modern literary and filmic texts. Investigating our anxieties about plant agency in the genres of science fiction and horror, it reads examples of monstrous vegetation as reminders of our generalised immortality and our ultimate return to nature. The volume comprises an introduction and thirteen essays, which combine to offer perceptive and nuanced insights into various literary and filmic manifestations of what they see as our innate dread of the 'wildness of vegetal nature' – of its 'untameability, its pointless excess, its uncontrollable growth' (p. 1).

The introductory chapter sets out six theses explaining why plants are so horrifying, echoing Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's 1996 essay on Monster Culture, which establishes seven theses on the monster. It is not useful to list all six theses here, but it suffices to say that each engages with aspects of plant life that linger on the verge of otherness. Embodying what the editors argue is an 'absolute alterity', plants are invisible, unknowable, purposeless, enact vengeful agency, and are an uncanny reminder of the organic and finite nature of humanity. Echoing Randy Laist, this introductory and explanatory chapter claims that '[p]lants "transect ontological boundaries" and challenge "our basic assumptions about what it means to be a living thing"' (p. 25). With this claim, the chapter lays the foundation for the critical perspectives that follow, each of which discusses, to some degree, how plant life registers a sense of the monstrous and of otherness in literary and filmic texts and contexts.

While the introduction is certainly compelling and sets out a controversial argument that is current, and that challenges our accepted definitions of the monstrous, it is unusual that it does not endeavour to establish the purpose of the book or to provide a rationale for its component chapters. In fact, it completely avoids chapter summaries or commenting on what might be the methodology or structure that shapes the collection. As such, it is difficult to ascertain the connection between the chapters that follow, or to glean their combined contribution to the field of research, beyond offering individual analyses of a selection of horror texts with plant monsters. As a result, while the individual chapters are certainly informative, well researched, and engaging (including the introduction itself), the collection

is not as conceptually robust as it could be, and the chapters seem to diverge from one another, somewhat diminishing the overall impact of the work.

The book therefore does not offer any definitive theories or arguments beyond the six theses, but it does provide some fascinating insights into plant monstrosity, which are sure to prompt further research and criticism in this emerging area. The introductory chapter presents a thought-provoking overview of plant horror in a range of historical and cultural contexts, including a discussion of 'Green Man' iconography and symbolism, and its assimilation into the art and architecture of Christianity. Originally occupying a somewhat uneasy position as part of the standard Christian narrative of good versus evil, the Green Man found a more complete rendering as a monstrous persona in literary form in the story of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, a story that the editors read as representing the 'perennial and terrifying ability of vegetal life to swallow, engulf, overrun, and outlive humans' (p. 5). Editor Angela Tenga's essay, 'Seeds of Horror: Sacrifice and Supremacy in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *The Wicker Man*, and *Children of the Corn*', elaborates on this discussion while drawing connections with *The Wicker Man* (1973) and *Children of the Corn* (1984), claiming that 'visions of vegetal menace' in horror texts reflect larger anxieties within the cultures that produced them, in particular anxieties about climate change and the decline of the environment. With a focus on the motif of sacrifice and the ultimate return of the human body to nature, Tenga explores how a range of texts erodes the dichotomy between plant and animal life, reminding us that 'as we ingest the vegetal world, so it will eventually digest us' (p. 70).

The volume continues with a series of chapters that cover a range of topics from homuncular plants in Harry Potter to the monstrous vegetal in contemporary representations of the Amazon. Among these, Graham Matthews' Chapter Six, 'What We Think About When We Think About Triffids: The Monstrous Vegetal in Post-War British Science Fiction', presents a shift in focus. This study initiates a run of three chapters on science fiction that analyse sentient plants, which, for Matthews, 'expose and challenge the limits of anthropocentric thought' (p. 111). Matthews contends that the post-apocalyptic scenario set out in John Wyndham's 1951 novel *The Day of the Triffids* establishes a context in which thinking plants take on a new horrifying quality of being both mobile and sentient, which in turn upsets the metaphysical boundaries between plant and human, problematising the very notion of classification itself.

Acknowledging the importance of the horrifying triffid as a representation of absolute alterity, Gary Farnell, in Chapter Ten 'What Do Plants Want?', continues the discussion of plant agency, contextualising it within a post-WWII framework and in relation to the question of what impact war has had on our natural environment. Farnell's chapter examines plants in history, with a focus on 'killer plant narratives from the 1950s and after' (p. 180). Where Matthews discussed the concept of the *thinking* plant, Farnell approaches the *talking* plant 'as a reflex of Cold War imaginings' (p. 180), noting the triffids' association with totalitarianism in the novel. Importantly, Farnell notes that, in entering the frame of language, the invasive plants in Wyndam's story become creatures of desire, marking the short step 'from Big Brother to big "Other"' (p. 181). With reference to Michael Marder's 'philosophy of vegetal life', and his 'vegetal anti-metaphysics', Farnell draws our attention to the cultural and political emphasis placed on environmental issues since the late twentieth century, and the move from plant horror to plant sympathy in texts like *The Little Shop of Horrors* (1960) and M. Night Shyamalan's *The Happening* (2008). A useful and compelling argument is presented in Farnell's identification of a distinct shift in the approach of Western cultures toward a sympathetic view of the environment. This, Farnell argues, seems to have led to a new literary and cultural frame, in which literature and philosophy finally ask the vital question, 'what do plants want?'

By investigating the cultural breaks that underpin changing representations of monstrous vegetation in literature, film, and culture, the volume opens up a new and thought-provoking area of research on monstrosity. The final chapter in the collection, Matthew Hall's 'The Sense of the Monster Plant', speaks significantly to this investigative approach to the cultural contexts which produce Plant Horror, as does the ninth chapter in the collection, 'Sartre and the Roots of Plant Horror', by Randy Laist. Hall's consideration of the source of plant horror leads to a discussion of the theory of the 'abject carnival', a hybrid of Julia Kristeva's abjection and Mikhail Bakhtin's carnival, which, he argues, 'are really two sides of the self-same semiotic system', working, through chaos and inversion, to establish the limits of our known world.[1] In plant-horror texts such as *The Day of the Triffids*, the carnival dimensions of the plant invasion result in the suspension and inversion of hierarchies and cultural limits. Plants rule over humankind. However, they are also abject, threatening the stability of self, and prompting the expulsion of repressed natural facets of our being. In this

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[1] Laist is quoting here from M. C. Vicks, *The Postmodern Oranus: Carnival and Abjection in Victor Pelevins' Homo Zapiens*, which argues that the abject and the carnival are linked in their disruption of systems of hierarchy and exclusion and in their threat to the rigid social structures which define our social and cultural realities (MA Thesis submitted to the University of Colorado, 2007).

way, they force us to rethink our domination of nature and to contemplate our repressed and intimate connection to it.

As mentioned earlier, the volume is not divided into sections and each chapter seems a stand-alone piece of work. There is, however, a distinct move toward the theoretical as the collection progresses – the latter chapters incorporating continental philosophy, queer theory, and ecocriticism – and Hall's chapter provides a fitting conclusion to the discussion offered in the earlier essays by exploring, in some depth, the otherness of the sentient plant from an interdisciplinary perspective. While the chapters would benefit from the support of a framework, in the form of introductory commentary from the editors and sections that link chapters together thematically or theoretically, taken as a collection of research, the volume does work. Each chapter differs significantly from the others, offering an engaging read and a multiplicity of perspectives, and is bound to initiate vigorous discussions of plant agency in literature and culture. With its focus on horror, it is a valuable contribution to ongoing discussions of the monstrous in literature, film, and culture, coming at a critical time when our positive and reciprocal relationship with the natural environment is more tenuous than ever.

Maria Beville

Gustavo Subero, *Gender and Sexuality in Latin American Horror Cinema:*
Embodiments of Evil
(London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016)

Gustavo Subero's 2016 book *Gender and Sexuality in Latin American Horror Cinema:*
Embodiments of Evil is a stimulating work that forces the reader to approach it cautiously due
to the dense, multifaceted, and erudite nature of its arguments, which centre on the
intersections between 'sexual and gender identities' and between 'gendered bodies and socio-
sexual paradigms' (p. vii). The text includes a preface, five chapters, a filmography of ninety-
five films, a bibliography, and an index.

In the preface, '*Santa Sangre* and the Politics of Gender and Sexuality in Latin
American Horror Cinema', Subero explains how he is using Latin-American horror films to
question the stability of gender identity and the socio-sexual roles that are traditionally
associated with men and women in Latin America (p. viii). Horror films are indeed suitable
testing grounds for his investigation, due to their vastly complex and contradictory portrayals
of gender, and Latin-American horror films in particular are apt, due to South America's
continually evolving views on the 'fixity' of gender identity. Here, Subero analyses
Alejandro Jodorowosky's 1989 film *Santa Sangre*, a 'seminal film of the Latin American
canon' (p. ix) that challenges the socio-sexual norms and expectations of Latin-American
society and culture. *Santa Sangre* presents a world in which the controlling powers that
manage and regulate the socio-sexual facets of life have decayed. Unlike numerous horror
films that may be interpreted as ending well because of their return to normalcy, *Santa*
Sangre ends badly because the film's characters were never 'normal' in the first place –
perhaps a reflection of what lies beneath expected Latin-American socio-sexual norms.[1]
Subero is quite convincing in his suggestion that *Santa Sangre* is utterly dystopic and offers a
different paradigm for an examination of filmic horror and the Latin-America psyche. His
analysis of the film is comprehensive and demonstrates the thorough approach that the author
takes throughout the rest of the book.

It should be noted that Subero bases some of his analyses on the terminology
developed by Evelyn Stevens and Jane F. Collier, most notably 'machismo' and

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[1] Although Subero does not mention films such William Friedkin's 1973 *The Exorcist* and James Wan's 2013
The Conjuring and its 2016 sequel, these films tend to re-establish the original state of the victims and their
families – in the former, Regan is no longer possessed, but at the cost of Fr Karras's death, and in the latter
films, the families are freed from the attacks of the evil presences. Films that do not return to normalcy include
Rob Zombie's 2012 *The Lords of Salem*, Robert Egger's 2015 *The Witch*, and Ari Aster's 2018 *Hereditary*.

'marianismo'.[2] Subero defines machismo as a 'template and driving force of all male sexuality in Latin America […] based on the externalisation of hypermasculine behaviour and the conscious avoidance of any feminine traits that could call into question the *hombría* of a macho man' (p. 150).[3] Marianismo, meanwhile, is a 'hybrid, complex and idealised notion of femininity' offered 'through a series of beliefs about women's spiritual and moral superiority to men that have served to legitimise their subordinate, domestic and social roles' (p. 111). In other words, although women may be considered in this culture to be superior in moral and spiritual terms, they still are burdened with domestic and social duties and responsibilities that in all spheres are secondary or subordinate to those of men. One of the achievements of *Santa Sangre* is a complete displacement of this machismo/marianismo paradigm.

Chapter One, 'Challenging Patriarchy in the Gothic Horror Mexican Cinema', is essentially divided into three sections. Firstly, Subero provides an overview of a number of gothic films (from the 1930s to the 1960s) that are uniquely Mexican in nature and that are identified usually as belonging to the 'Mexican Golden Age of Horror'. Secondly, the films are analysed as characterising the struggle between Mexico's 'aboriginal ancestry and its post-colonial past' (p. 5). Lastly, Subero explores and analyses the presence of mariana identity in these selected films. In this last section, he considers the movie stereotypes/folkloric figures of La Malinche, La Llorona, and La Bruja, among others, questioning how and if they fit into the development or negation of mariana identity, and whether they offer an alternative to this identity 'as the sole form of female subjectivity accepted within Mexican culture' (p. 38). Once again, Subero is very detailed in his analysis and relies heavily on the work of other scholars in this field to support his suggestions. There is nothing controversial in the author's review and analysis of the films or some of their female characters; Subero clearly frames his argument and supplies enough data to convince the reader of the function of the 'female' and her roles in these films.

Chapter Two, 'Zé de Caixão and the Queering of Monstrosity in Brazil', shifts the focus to the Zé de Caixão character that appears in the well-known Brazilian *Zé de Caixão* cult-horror series by José Mojica Morin. 'Coffin Joe' (as he is known in English), Subero writes, is 'the most horrific, monstrous and anti-normative character ever to emerge from the Brazilian horror film canon' (p. 39). The character is so monstrous, his deeds so repugnant,

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[2] See Evelyn Stevens, 'Marianismo: The Other Face of Machismo in Latin America', in *Female and Male in Latin America*, ed. by A. Pescatello (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1973), pp. 89-102; and Jane F. Collier, 'From Mary to Modern Woman: The Material Basis of Marianismo and its Transformation in a Spanish Village', *American Ethnologist*, 13.1 (1986), 100-07.

[3] *Hombría* may be defined as 'manliness' or 'manhood'.

his character so depraved and subversive that few were willing to play the role, and Mojica Morin would end up being Zé de Caixão in all three movies. Subero argues, in a lengthy and detailed evaluation of the films, that the 'anti-normative' nature of Zé de Caixão and the character's desire to find the 'perfect woman to bear his offspring and continue his blood line' (p. 40) were truly shocking for what is widely accepted as Brazil's first horror film. Subero returns to the book's overall focus on gender and sexuality by declaring that Zé de Caixão is thoroughly macho but still queer in nature, and that we must consider his queer machismo and the transgression of the parameters that define traditional, hegemonic, normative, and non-normative behaviours if we are fully to comprehend the socio-sexual dynamics in the horror series.[4] Subero presents his theories and suggestions strongly and persuasively and makes a compelling case for a close, or at least clos*er*, examination of the blurring of the gender identities found in this trilogy, which was so ground-breaking for Brazilian cinema. Subero's work on the Zé de Caixão phenomenon is fresh and innovative, and will likely serve as the foundation for future research on Mojica Morin and his films.

Chapter Three, 'Monstrous Machos: Horror and the Crisis of Latin American Masculinity', continues the investigation of machismo/*hombría* that can be understood to be part of what constitutes the male monster figure, which in Latin-American horror films 'also operates as the embodiment of the primal uncanny, as he [the monster] regulates and utilises machismo as a male force' (p. 75). Subero credibly argues that the macho/monster can create terror, 'chastise and objectify women', 'use excessive force to overpower others', and 'kill indiscriminately' (p. 76). Using Jorge Michel Grau's 2010 film *Somos lo que Hay*, Subero notes that this macho/monster permutation found throughout the Latin-American continent ceases to exist when both male protagonists in the film die, as they do in Grau's film. The film is partially centred on a journey of queer self-discovery for one of the male protagonists, Alfredo, who is challenged by and challenges the machismo of his brother Julián. Alfredo's realisation causes his transformation into an embodiment of queer masculinity, which allows him to serve as the patriarch of his family and which is conflated with the monstrous and cannibalistic acts that he and his family perform. Subero notes that the new, monstrous Alfredo dismantles machismo 'as the only socially accepted male force within Mexican

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[4] In the subchapter titled 'Towards a Conceptualisation of Queer Machismo in Latin America', Subero examines the terms for 'new' types of masculinity that are '(re)surfacing' in Latin America (p. 41). These types are understood as the externalisation of specific behaviors that most 'people would associate with a very specific identity that is deemed "intrinsically natural"' (p. 42). Of special importance is the author's observation that 'queerness' is supposed to challenge both 'normative and non-normative identities that may not even be directly related to gender and sexuality' (p. 45).

society, because it obliterates the notion of monsters as intrinsically feminine […] or quintessentially homosexual and queer' (p. 90).

Jaime Osorio Marquez' *El Páramo* (2010) is also used in this chapter to refer to the dissolution of machismo, but only in arenas in which homosocial behaviour is accepted, as long as it does not cross over into overtly homosexual behaviour. Subero suggests the latent, hidden, or inner queer macho monstrosity in this film makes itself known in some of the soldiers who can no longer repress the homosexual desires that are normally concealed within expected homosocial attitudes and activities. Interestingly, the catalyst for the appearance of the macho monster is the presence of the only female character in the film (who can be seen as the monstrous feminine). According to Subero, she is introduced to counter the shift away from the homosocial to the homosexual. Subero presents a clear and compelling argument for his interpretation of the female character, and in his interpretation of the film as including clear markers that aim to absolve the soldiers from any obvious transgressions between the homosocial and homosexual.

In Chapter Four, 'Bloody Femininities: The Horrors of Marianismo and Maternity in Recent Latin American Cinema', two of the analyses (of Pablo Illanes' *Baby Shower* (2011) and Adrián García Bogliano's *Habitaciones para Turistas* (2004)) again return to marianismo as an idealised notion of femininity. In both films, the female characters have committed anti-marianista acts such as engaging in sex outside of marriage, rebuffing the protection of their male partners, and contemplating or having abortions. Subero's in-depth exploration of the films unambiguously establishes that all of these deeds can be interpreted as undermining patriarchal authority and domination: the women are punished because they do not value the mariana requirements of 'abnegation and servitude towards men' (p. 116).

Subero's analyses of gender and sexuality in horror film end with the last chapter, 'Bromance, Homosociality and the Crisis of Masculinity in the Latin American Zombie Movie', which centres on zombie movies without heterosexual couples as the main protagonists. In the *Plaga Zombie* trilogy by Pablo Parés and Hernán Saéz (1997; 2001; 2011) we once again see Subero's homosocial-homosexual paradigm at work, here in the form of a 'bond between seemingly heterosexual male characters' that operates 'at the border of hetero- and homosexuality'. It is 'tested, retested', and usually 'constitutes a turning point within the narrative' (p. 150). Alejandro Brugués' 2011 *Juan de los Muertos* similarly uses the zombie apocalypse as the 'perfect smokescreen' for the 'bromance and homosocial

anxieties' that are central to the film. Although both films test the fluidity of gender and sexual norms, the films do not cross these norms in any remarkable or permanent manner.

Gender and Sexuality is a valuable work of scholarship. Subero builds successfully upon the work of many other scholars throughout his text; his interpretations are constructed well and are easily followed; and his line of argumentation does not stray from the main goal of his book, which is to examine gender identity and socio-sexual roles in Latin-American horror films. There is, however, one minor flaw in the text. Subero often tends to repeat the same propositions and arguments in different chapters, which makes it seem as if the chapters were written not as part of a cohesive book but as several individual and separate scholarly essays. Yet overall, Subero makes a persuasive case. This book will appeal to anyone interested in the film-horror genre, gender and sexuality, and particularly to readers interested in these subjects within a Latin-American context.

Edmund Cueva

Ecogothic in Nineteenth-Century American Literature, ed. by Dawn Keetley and
Matthew Wynn Sivils
(New York: Routledge, 2018)

Ecogothic in Nineteenth-Century American Literature, Dawn Keetley and Matthew Wynn
Sivils's 2018 collection, provides a space in which to examine human interaction with the
American landscape in the long nineteenth century, at a time of huge environmental change
due to colonialism, over-consumption of natural resources, plantation slavery, and
industrialisation. In their introduction, Keetley and Sivils state that

> Thus far, then, critics have established the ecogothic as (1) a repository of deep
> unease, fear, and even contempt as humans confront the natural world; (2) a literary
> mode that uses an implacable external 'wilderness' to call attention to the crisis in
> practices of representation; and (3) a terrain in which the contours of the body are
> mapped, contours that increasingly stray beyond the bounds of what might be
> considered properly 'human'. (p. 4)

Using these definitions as starting points, then, the editors go on to explore the main ways in
which they propose to expand the landscape of ecogothic criticism. These three main areas –
ecogothic time and space, the racial ecogothic, and the non-human ecogothic – are also
touched upon, if more informally than in the introduction, throughout the collection's
fourteen chapters. *Ecogothic in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* proposes to build
upon the work of critics such as Simon C. Estok, William Hughes, and Andrew Smith, to
determine to what extent ecocriticism can further challenge the already-blurring boundaries
between humans and nature in American literature.

While the collection examines many of the mainstays of nineteenth-century gothic
literature, including Edgar Allan Poe, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Harriet Beecher Stowe, it
also focuses on lesser-known gothic authors such as Leonora Sansay and Charles Chesnutt.
One of the collection's running themes is an exploration of antebellum anti-slavery literature
that, following Teresa Goddu's influential work *Gothic America* (1997), has been
increasingly recognised as a core element in American gothic. This interrogation of the racial
gothic includes Jericho Williams's examination of various antebellum slavery narratives,
'Ghoulish Hinterlands: Ecogothic Confrontations in American Slave Narratives', which
highlights the differences between nature in transcendentalist writing and slavery narratives.
Perhaps most interesting of all is Williams's reading of Solomon Northup's narrative *Twelve
Years a Slave* (1853), a reading which highlights the nuances and singularities of an often-
overlooked text. In '"The Earth Was Groaning and Shaking": Landscapes of Slavery in *The*

History of Mary Prince', Amanda Stuckey shows how literal surface readings – such as those focusing on the fractured and volatile volcanic literary landscape of nineteenth-century Bermuda and the Caribbean – can lead to new conceptions of slavery, by focusing on tactile experience. This argument ties in particularly well with Keetley and Sivil's discussion of how the ecogothic explores 'the direct physical connection between slaves, the land upon which they toil, and the fruits of their labor' (p. 8).

The versatile nature of American ecogothic, which is found throughout the collection, often invites the reader and critic to recognise environmental issues in new and unexpected places. In '"The Birth-Mark", "Rappaccini's Daughter", and the Ecogothic', Lesley Ginsberg, building upon Smith and Hughes, argues that, despite the tonal differences found in these stories, 'nature in these tales is clearly "a space of crisis" linked to larger concerns about the status of humans in nature, a crisis refracted through gothic extremes of power and abjection' (p. 115).[1] Ginsberg successfully demonstrates how ecogothic readings of the environment permit critics to make connections between seemingly disparate texts. Other chapters challenge the ability of humans to read their environments: 'Failures to Signify: Poe's Uncanny Animal Others', Kate Huber's chapter, is an examination of Poe's 'The Black Cat' (1843) and 'The Raven' (1845), illustrating the limits and dangers of anthropomorphising pets and animals, a recognisable failing of Poe's narrators. While Huber's reading is often persuasive, there is no recognition of how animals and pets have often been used as racial signifiers in American literature, an aspect that may have added further dimension to her discussion.

Following on from the editors' argument that the non-human turn in ecogothic discourse 'disputes both human exceptionalism and the hegemony of social constructivism' (p. 11), the collection reflects on the literary Earth as a place that is only occasionally hospitable to humanity. On a macro scale, Lisa M. Vetere writes, in '"A Heap of Ruins": The Horrors of Deforestation in Leonora Sansay's *Secret History*', that '[j]ust as the gothic mode explores the return of the historically and psychologically repressed, so too does ecogothic provide a theoretical lens through which to see how Earth itself has a traumatic past haunting its present' (p. 38). Conversely, Cari M. Carpenter, in her chapter entitled 'Bleeding Feet and Failing Knees: The Ecogothic in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *Chasing Ice*', discusses how the ecogothic landscape has, on the micro level, 'a relationship with the materiality of the human body'. Quoting from Nancy Tuana, she posits that the influence of oxygen on the human

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[1] Andrew Smith and William Hughes, 'Introduction: Defining the EcoGothic', in *EcoGothic*, ed. by Smith and Hughes (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), pp.1-14 (p. 3).

frame leads to a gothic invocation in which the boundaries separating the self and the outside world are rendered porous.[2] The ecogothic can quite literally be found in the air we breathe (pp. 147-48).

Such readings come together in Tom Hillard's chapter '"Perverse Nature": Anxieties of Animality and Environment in Charles Brockden Brown's *Edgar Huntly*'. Hillard explores how the eponymous protagonist's 'strongest desires to maintain a grip on his Enlightenment-era sense of independent selfhood and agency crumble as he realises that the boundaries between the human and more-than-human world are penetrable and unstable – and may be entirely social construction' (p. 23). These chapters successfully argue for a non-human rereading of American gothic texts, in which the most basic of environmental assumptions is deconstructed.

One of the more surprising aspects of the collection is its depiction of nineteenth-century extinction. As demonstrated comprehensively by Jennifer Schell, in 'Ecogothic Extinction Fiction: The Extermination of the Alaskan Mammoth', extinction was a source of much rumination and shame throughout the period, something which is further illustrated in Jimmy L. Bryan Jr's examination of Buffalo hauntings in '"Give Me My Skin": William J. Snelling's "A Night in the Woods" (1836) and the Gothic Accusation Against Buffalo Extinction'. These chapters convincingly highlight how ecogothic strategies were employed throughout the nineteenth century to deal with the guilt of human-induced wholesale destruction of animal life.

Addressing a wide range of issues but exploring the same basic tenets of ecocriticism and American gothic studies, each chapter in *Ecogothic in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* represents a potential way forward for the study of this still relatively nascent field. There is certainly plenty of potential for further collections on subjects such as Sivils's 'vegetable gothic', Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock's 'hyperobjects', Michael Fuchs's human/animal boundaries, or the use of the elemental powers of fire and water in Poe's work, as explored by Liz Hutter. Ideally, and recognising the multiplicities involved, this will lead to a widening of our understanding of ecogothicism. Refreshingly, there also appears to be a willingness to engage in respectful debate: Estok, Hillard, and Sivils as leading names in the field are regularly cited and occasionally challenged. It's also interesting to note the collection's movement away from Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962). Other than Keetley and Sivils's introduction, which identifies Carson's text as 'instrumental in the emergence of

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[2] Nancy Tuana, "Viscous Porosity: Witnessing Katrina," in *Material Feminisms*, ed. by Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), pp.188-213 (p. 198).

the modern environmentalist movement' (p. 2), there is no mention of *Silent Spring*. Maybe this a sign that American ecogothic, in moving away from one of its (if not *the*) anchor text, is moving into its next phase of development.

Indeed, throughout the collection there is significant scope for future exploration of the American ecogothic. Keetley and Sivils's books is therefore well placed to fulfil its aim of becoming

> part of a much longer critical project, one in which we continue to challenge and reconsider the ways fear, guilt, trauma, the uncanny, and the grotesque factor into our understanding of how the spectral presence of the nonhuman haunts America's literary mind. (p. 17)

One of the next challenges of ecogothic criticism to be addressed in future collections is the daunting task of trying to identify what is *not* ecogothic, a challenge which is made all the more daunting by the blurring of boundaries inherent in the discipline itself.

Sarah Cullen

Monsters in the Classroom: Essays on Teaching What Scares Us, ed. by Adam Golub and
Heather Hayton
(Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2017)

How do we teach monsters when the world we live in grows increasingly scarier? This question lingered in my mind as I was designing my own course on monsters for 1st year French students, in the context of the Vigipirate period that followed the terrorist attacks of 2015 and 2016.[1] The society we live in seems to be developing a 'Gothic condition', which David Punter describes as 'one in which no excess, no transgression […] that can occur to the dark imagination can fail to find its equivalent in the "real world"'.[2] This raises the question of how to invite monsters into the classroom while still preserving it as a safe place.

Monsters in the Classroom: Essays on Teaching What Scares Us successfully provides the answer, through twelve thought-provoking essays by experienced instructors who explore a range of methodologies and approaches to teaching monsters to college students, and even to high-school students. The essays have been organised under three general thematic areas that establish what the collection sees as the core functions of monsters: 'Teaching Difference: *The Monster Appears*', 'Transforming Space: *The Monster Roams*', and 'Disrupting Systems: *The Monster Attacks*'. As W. Scott Poole highlights in his foreword, 'monsters matter in making sense of human strivings and failings, […] they are primary sources of personal and collective horrors, and […] they live at the intersection of politics, history, desire, and meaning' (p. 7). Therefore, to fully understand the message conveyed by the monster, we need to examine it through an interdisciplinary lens, without overlooking the context in which it appears.

Almost all of the instructors contributing to this book report students' notable interest in enrolling in a course on monsters. Moreover, as the editors point out, in 2013, 65,000 people worldwide attended the interdisciplinary MOOC 'Society, Science, Survival: Lessons from AMC's *The Walking Dead*' offered by the University of California, Irvine (p. 9). However, instructors do not simply teach courses about monsters because of their increasing popularity, but because the monstrous provides 'a highly effective vehicle for teaching cultural analysis, fostering a critical imagination, [and] making interdisciplinary connections' (p. 12). In other words, analysing the monster entails the examination of preconceptions, anxieties, and desires that our culture abjects, or rather, rejects.

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[1] <http://www.gouvernement.fr/vigipirate> [accessed 27 April 2018].
[2] David Punter, *The Gothic Condition: Terror, History, and the Psyche* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2016), p. 3.

In his essay 'Teaching Monsters from Medieval to Modern: *Embracing the Abnormal*', Asa Simon Mittman outlines his investment in teaching classes on monsters as a tool for questioning and queering categories as 'constructs underpinning our culture' (p. 20), since the monster simultaneously defines and uncovers norms that in turn define what it means to be human. By engaging his students in listing key terms connected to Patricia MacCormack's seminal essay 'Posthuman Teratology', Mittman challenges them to identify some of the binaries and concepts (such as '(Dis)ability', '(in)organic', and '(Ab)normal') that stand at the basis of social mechanisms (p. 26). This exercise (as well as the picture provided of the whiteboard containing the key terms) illustrates how Mittman used the monster as a starting point to encourage students' critical thinking. In his classes, the monstrous brought to the surface the binaries that structure 'our "Western traditions"', which, in turn, 'are the primary ingredients used to construct monsters' (p. 26). Mittman takes the idea of the 'monster as embodiment of difference' even further by arguing that 'if we ourselves are not examples of a legitimate "norm", we cannot unthinkingly and reflexively reject others for failing to be like us' (p. 30). Developing students' empathy and acceptance of difference in others is probably one of the strongest arguments for inviting monsters into the classroom. This will hopefully prevent hate crimes such as the unprovoked attack on a goth couple in Lancashire in 2007, who were supposedly attacked because 'they looked different. In the eyes of their attackers [a group of teenagers], they were "freaks" or "moshers"'.[3] The couple was seriously injured, and one of them, Sophie Lancaster, died; the behaviour of the attackers was referred to by the judge as 'degrad[ing] humanity itself'.[4]

Another compelling contribution is Pamela Bedore's 'Gender, Sexuality and Rhetorical Vulnerabilities in Monster Literature and Pedagogy', which describes her capstone course that focuses on well-known monsters (zombies, vampires, werewolves, and Octavia Butler's Oankali) in order to foster 'discussions of sex, gender, power, and knowledge construction' (p. 36). Among other approaches to monsters, her course (a detailed outline of which is given in the appendix) asks her students to consider the web of connections between the characters in Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897). Bedore also encourages a feminist reading of Mina as 'Dracula's fiercest and most effective opponent' (p. 39) precisely due to her liminality. This chapter usefully examines metaphors of the monstrous beyond those found in

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[3] Simon Usborne, 'Robert Maltby on the Murder of His Girlfriend Sophie Lancaster: "The Goth Thing Was an Oversimplification"', *The Guardian*, 15 June 2017 <http://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2017/jun/15/robert-maltby-on-the-of-his-girlfriend-sophie-lancaster-the-goth-thing-was-an-oversimplification> [accessed 30 April 2018].

[4] Ibid.

literary and cinematic examples, and regards the process of writing itself as a monstrous process of (pro)creation. Jessica Elbert Decker also uses feminist critical theory in one of the three courses outlined in her contribution 'Monsters as Subversive Imagination'. Decker's courses analyse texts and films dealing with monstrosity from a philosophical vantage point, and prompt her students to focus on ethical problems as well as the construction of identity. In addition, Decker explores the promises and anxieties brought about by the rapid development of technology, challenging students to examine artificial intelligence through either optimistic or pessimistic lenses. This course effectively transcends the border between the classroom space and the virtual as students actively contribute with examples through forum-post assignments in the course's Facebook group.

Elsewhere in the collection, Nancy Hightower's essay 'Creating Visual Rhetoric and the Monstrous' explores grotesque monsters that elude our power of understanding precisely because they cannot be 'named and categorized' (p. 58). Hightower relies on examples from paintings and engravings (from Hieronymus Bosch's *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (1503-15) to Goya's *Caprichos* (1799) and Patricia Piccinini's sculptures (2002-04)) that challenge students' power of explaining or describing these monsters. The assignment for this course is particularly innovative; students are required to 'create their version of the monstrous grotesque to question a hypocrisy in which *they* participate' (p. 62), and to explain their creation in a short piece of writing. The photos provided in the appendix are fascinating depictions of students' engagement with the monstrous on a personal, often cathartic level.

The second part of the book, 'Transforming Space: *The Monster Roams*', opens with Adam Golub's essay 'Locating Monsters: Space, Place, and Monstrous Geographies', which proposes four modes of understanding 'geographies when teaching monsters in the classroom: 1) monsters and the imagined communities, 2) monsters and nature, 3) monsters and the built environment, and 4) monsters and political geography' (p. 92). Golub develops these approaches by referring to various monsters; for example, he employs Dracula to engage with the sense of community and its 'others', and King Kong as a representative of the dichotomy 'between the so-called civilized and [nature seen as] primitive' (p. 96). The built environment (an umbrella term under which Golub includes specific places like the mall, the house, and the school, but curiously not the city as a whole) is discussed in relation to Richard Matheson's *I am Legend* (1954), with a focus on the idea that the protagonist Robert Neville is 'homebound' (p. 100) and othered, as the vampires have reconfigured the 'suburban community' (p. 99). Lastly, Godzilla is used to compare and contrast the American

and the Japanese points of view regarding nuclear-bomb testing and its catastrophic effects. As Golub demonstrates, in order to fully understand Godzilla, we must contextualise these texts and examine the geo-political origins of this monster.

Like Golub, Bernice M. Murphy also draws students' attention to the importance of the historical and cultural context for understanding a 'text's depiction of monstrosity' (p. 118). In her 'White Settlers and Wendigos', Murphy discusses using M. Night Shyamalan's *The Village* (2004) to encourage students to explore how the community of the 'presumably "civilized" European settler' (p. 119) is built on the negotiation of boundaries with its 'others', namely the creatures in the woods, read as standing in for 'savage', but ultimately not-so-frightening 'Indians'. Murphy also addresses a range of cinematic iterations of this trope, including Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining* (1980), Larry Fessenden's *The Last Winter* (2006), Jim Mickle's *We Are What We Are* (2013), and the TV series *Hannibal* (2012-15), demonstrating how the figure of the Wendigo is employed to emphasise that it is 'the white man, rather than the Indian, who is seized by outrageous appetites, be they for human flesh, land, or […] the natural resources contained within the wilderness itself' (p. 122).

Two thought-provoking approaches to teaching the monstrous as explorations of space and place are presented in Kyle William Bishop's 'Meeting the Monster through Experimental Study-Abroad Pedagogy' and Phil Smith's 'Using Zombies to Teach Theatre Students'. Although it requires a considerable amount of preparation and obviously a budget, Bishop gives the example of what is probably the dream of every instructor based outside the UK: organising a guided tour to visit the iconic locations that feature in Stoker's *Dracula*. It is predicted that such an immersive trip would have a positive pedagogical impact on students, as 'content becomes augmented by context' (p. 134). Meanwhile, Smith's account invites theatre students to take the place of the zombie and 'enact the binary of repression and return' (p. 147) by creating improvisations, without any prearranged scenario or any direct communication among the performers. Interestingly, the students involved reported a high level of immersion, a 'sense of freedom' (p. 151), and a nonverbal identification with the other members of the group, judging the exercise very useful for their future theatre performances.

The third part of this collection focuses on the monster's power to disrupt systems of belief, of community, and institutional systems such as high school. In his 'Studying Gods and Monsters', Joshua Paddison bridges the gap between the monstrous and the religious by approaching monsters as 'religious manifestations in the sense that they help people construct

existential meaning' (p. 162). Paddison's course not only challenges students to interrogate how American conceptions of the monstrous have changed throughout history, but also to explore the 'mysterium tremendum' ('a radically other mystery that brings on a stupefying combination of fascination and terror, wonder and dread').[5]

Brian Sweeney's contribution provides a critique of the American Common Core and its requirement that high-school students attain a 'College Readiness' that is inherently limiting and not at all consistent with the realities of college-level teaching. Sweeney designs a course the methodology of which is based on Wendy Doniger's 'macromyth' – the potential 'to see different individual, cultural, and historical responses to the same questions' (p. 199). In doing so, he explores iterations of the Medea myth (which features a monstrous mother committing infanticide) by focusing on the differences that lead to the application of monstrosity as a label. Here, Sweeney demonstrates how the monster can be introduced to the high-school classroom without necessarily teaching the critical material, but rather including it as a methodological tool.

Charlotte Eubanks provides a fascinating perspective on the monstrous and hybrid essence of learning a foreign language, particularly one with totally 'other' (for English speakers) symbols such as Japanese, while also addressing students' first-hand feeling of otherness in Japan. Similarly, Heather Richardson Hayton prompts her students to confront otherness in a simulated zombie apocalypse. Hayton's enactment of a zombie crisis, which the 'human' group of first-year university students needs to overcome, is a truly compelling exercise. It uncovers the (mis)function of a (relatively new) community when faced with the threat of consumption and contamination by the undead. The so-called zombie attack challenges university values (that implicitly serve here to symbolise humanity's values) and reveals tensions surrounding authority, gender inequality, the problem of those within the group turning upon each other.

As Jeffery Jerome Cohen's *Monster Theory: Reading Culture* informs almost all the courses presented by the instructors in this collection, it is only fitting that Cohen provides a fascinating afterword that echoes the seminal 'Monster Culture (Seven Theses)'. This afterword ties together the past two decades, during which time Monster Studies has developed rapidly, as well as presenting seven theses relating to the idea of the 'Monster Classroom'. 'Thesis VII: The Monster Stands at the Threshold of Belonging' is particularly interesting because it locates the monster as an interdisciplinary tool that 'invites a student to

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[5] Timothy Kandler Beal, *Religion and Its Monsters* (New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 7.

frame critically their own cultural moment, as well as perhaps the long histories behind that moment's formation' (p. 234). If monsters populate and are reproduced in numerous novels, films, and videogames, bringing them into classroom discussions provides students with a better understanding of what ideas relating to thresholds and belonging entail.

The volume as a whole would have been greatly enriched by the inclusion of contributions on how the monster enters European or even Asian classrooms, as this collection consists of essays and course descriptions mainly from American universities, colleges, and high school, with the notable exceptions of Bernice M. Murphy's account of the courses she teaches in Ireland, and Phil Smith's theatre course in the UK. This reservation aside, *Monsters in the Classroom* is a well-edited and thought-provoking collection that features interdisciplinary approaches to using the monstrous as a pedagogical tool for discussing aspects of gender, race, sexuality, otherness, and other preconceptions that underpin our culture. Most of these essays provide detailed appendixes of course syllabi, which will surely be of interest to instructors seeking to re-vamp their courses, but also to teaching assistants who are struggling with the amount of theoretical material to include in the courses they design. Overall, the exploration of the monster's condition in this collection should help develop not only students' critical thinking and their representation of identity formation, but also their empathy, the very quality that, as suggested in Decker's essay, defines us as humans.

Laura Davidel

***Scottish Gothic: An Edinburgh Companion*, ed. by Carol Margaret Davison and Monica Germanà**
(Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017)

Discussing Scottish literature in 1919, G. Gregory Smith alighted upon the near-unpronounceable, unspellable notion of 'Caledonian Antisyzygy' to sum up the binaries, dualities, and contradictions typically battling for dominance in the Scottish psyche. The literature of the Scottish gothic is, accordingly, replete with uncanny doublings, James Hogg's *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824) and Robert Louis Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886) being significant examples. By 1997, Daniel Carlin, the protagonist of James Robertson's *The Fanatic*, is complaining that 'we don't need any mair doubles, oor haill fuckin culture's littered wi them' (quoted p. 89). In her essay on 'Calvinist and Covenanter Gothic' in Carol Margaret Davison and Monica Germanà's collection of essays, *Scottish Gothic: An Edinburgh Companion*, Alison Milbank points out that Carlin addresses this observation to his own reflection in a mirror, and of course solicits a response. The opening chapters of *Scottish Gothic* make it clear why the 'Caledonian Antisyzygy' has such traction as a concept, and especially the extent to which the gothic has served as both an agent and a metaboliser of the resulting anxieties: literature aside, the gothic, as a cultural inheritance, has occasionally been positioned in contrast to the Celtic, the latter being an eighteenth-century 'invention', or so claims Nick Groom in his insightful essay here on the genesis of Scottish gothic.

It was the publication of *Ossian* in 1760 that focused critical energy into schismatic arguments over what might constitute a Scottish literature or culture. English commentators used its fraudulent provenance as an excuse to delegitimise it, and thereby the notion of Celtic letters itself, while others claimed that Scottish culture was in fact the *authentic* legacy of the (historical) gothic spirit in the British Isles. In distinct contrast to the ersatz medieval document *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), *Ossian* arguably remains to this day a tainted quantity, treated as a base forgery, while Horace Walpole's conceit is indulged as a piece of ludic mischievousness. But, as Davison demonstrates in Chapter Three, *Ossian* was bound up with the emergence of the gothic novel in the late eighteenth century. Its impact on the work of Ann Radcliffe, especially, is enough that the Ossianic and the gothic can be regarded as an interrelated legacy – yet another uncanny doubling. Complicating things further is the contrivance by English writers such as Radcliffe of their own Scottish gothic imaginary,

owing much to William Shakespeare's presentation of Scotland in *Macbeth* as a wild hinterland of internecine barbarity and antique superstition.

Scottish writers responded with more 'authentic' (a perilous word to use in the context of many of this book's arguments) iterations of Scottish gothic, and accordingly, Sir Walter Scott and James Hogg are here afforded a chapter each, in the form of vigorous case studies by Fiona Robertson and Scott Brewster respectively. Moreover, Hogg's involvement with *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* in the early nineteenth century is explored by Robert Morrison. Morrison makes a convincing case that *Maga* (as the publication was affectionately dubbed) had a transformational effect on the gothic, by dispensing with complicated, lengthy narrative in favour of psychological acuity and concise totality of effect. In America, Edgar Allan Poe extended this aesthetic, and the resulting cross-currents of transatlantic literary influence can be variously felt in Francophile Decadence, the emergence of the short story as a distinct form, and the work of writers as diverse as Charles Baudelaire and Arthur Conan Doyle. H. P. Lovecraft used the sustained intensity of atmosphere identified by Poe in the *Maga* 'tales of terror' as a central plank of his own theorising on weird fiction. And indeed, the innovations in Scottish gothic to be found in the pages of *Maga* in the early nineteenth century continue to cast a cyclopean, if under-acknowledged, shadow over the genre into the twenty-first century.

As a student, Stevenson would rummage through the nineteenth-century equivalent of bargain bins looking for old copies of *Maga* to snap up and pore over. Taking up the baton from Hogg et al., his distinctly Scottish contributions to the gothic are discussed by Roderick Wilson, who happily casts his critical net wider than just *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. Thus, we are treated to productive analysis of tales such as 'Thrawn Janet' (1881), 'Olalla' (1885), and 'The Merry Men' (1882). Seeking out or revisiting the latter tale seems almost irresistible after reading Wilson's discussion of the invocation of 'a kind of existential Gothic, or indeed a Gothic existentialism, in its vision of the natural world as a whirl of energy and matter, always at risk of shipwreck in "the roaring blackness" at the edge of an abyss' (p. 148). Wilson argues that with *Jekyll and Hyde*, Stevenson's earlier Calvinist dualism develops into 'multiple indeterminacies' – perhaps an appropriate phrase to use in relation to the competing historical and cultural legacies delineated in the opening chapters of this anthology.

Sarah Dunnigan's subsequent discussion of J. M. Barrie carefully excavates a more muted gothic aesthetic at play in Barrie's works, including of course the 'ultimate Gothic

fairy tale' *Peter Pan* (1911), with its 'ambiguously celebratory desire to recover the dead and the vanished' (p. 165). After Barrie, we proceed briskly into the contemporary, to Muriel Spark, Iain Banks, and others, and through the frames of queer Scottish gothic and female Scottish gothic. Complementing Barbara A. E. Bell's earlier chapter on 'Scottish Gothic Drama', Duncan Petrie discusses 'Scottish Gothic and the Moving Image', his analysis of *The Wicker Man* (1973) also prefigured in Milbank's previous discussion of John Buchan's proto-'folk horror' masterpiece *Witch Wood* (1927).

Despite Carlin's complaint to his own reflection, then, it would seem that the 'Caledonian Antisyzygy' persists, and – as this fine anthology demonstrates – continues to manifest itself in endlessly fascinating ways in the polysemic texts of the Scottish gothic. Moreover, since many of the writers discussed in this volume have a reach far beyond the specific context of their Scottishness, it will no doubt prove invaluable to anyone seeking to acknowledge or further explore this context in their own research.

James Machin

Catherine Spooner, *Post-Millennial Gothic: Comedy, Romance, and the Rise of Happy Gothic*
(London, New York: Bloomsbury, 2017)

On a sunny day in August 2011, at the foot of one of Germany's most iconic Gothic ruins, Heidelberg Castle, Catherine Spooner navigated a captive audience attending her plenary lecture at the biennial conference of the International Gothic Association through an unfamiliarly cheery mediascape of gothic lifestyle blogs, television make-over shows, fashion accessories, and finally Heston Blumenthal's *Gothic Horror Feast* (2010).[1] Blumenthal's extravagant, four-course gothic menu, culminating in an edible graveyard as dessert, drew powerfully on canonical motifs, from the Marquis de Sade to Bram Stoker, and was hence patently anchored in the tradition and history of the gothic, but something odd seemed to be going on. Yes, there was the extravagance, the showy pantomime, the pleasure-in-horror that we associate with the gothic, but this was a gothic to be enjoyed and consumed. This was a world in which vampires sparkle rather than terrorise, in which Goth fashion is high street rather than underground, and in which Frankenstein becomes Frankenweenie. In short, this was an act of gothic consumption making people smile and barely linked to the trauma, anxiety, gloominess, or nightmarishness generally linked with the gothic mode of writing. As fascinating, entertaining, and brilliantly presented as this ethnological survey of contemporary popular culture in her plenary was, one question seemed to keep returning: is any of this really gothic?

Spooner's answer to this question has now appeared in book form, and it is well worth the wait. What we witnessed in Heidelberg is, she argues powerfully here, post-millennial gothic and, as such, a new instance of the multiple incarnations, inflections, and transformations which have characterised the gothic since its eighteenth-century inception. The choice of the term 'post-millennial' for a book that deals with fifteen years of the new millennium at best may seem somewhat overstated, but this is an issue that Spooner explains effectively. The cultural anticipation leading up to the millennium, as well as specific cultural events around the year 2000 (such as the Columbine killings and the 9/11 attack on New York) caused such a dramatic cultural shift that it justifies this distinction. In the wake of these events, she notes, there was a shift towards comedy, romance, and consumption that she terms 'Happy Gothic' (pp. 5, 24). Spooner 'agrees that Gothic is no longer where it used to

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[1]Throughout this review, 'Gothic' with an upper-case 'G' is employed to denote a particular style of architecture, as well as when referring to 'Gothic Studies' as an academic endeavour. The lower-case 'gothic' is used (outside of quotations) to denote the genre more broadly.

be, but rather than lament its passing, seeks to map its new territories' (p. 8). Spooner's 'post-millennial' inflection of the gothic is one that is associated with a lively lifestyle culture, with comedy, enjoyment, and romance; it is intensely visual and design oriented, with 'a sense of lightness, playfulness, comfort, joy or even euphoria' (p. 186). This is a gothic informed by consumption and consumerism, by popularity, and subcultural practices and appropriations. For many critics, however, such a form of cultural production is barely gothic. Referring to Fred Botting's descriptions of a sense of exhaustion in the gothic in his *Limits of Horror* (2008) and to titles such as Joseph Crawford's *The Twilight of the Gothic?* (2014), Spooner first sketches a familiar image of Gothic Studies, which views popular postmodern versions of the gothic as lacking authenticity. Rather than offer a model of a gothic in decline from its supposed pinnacle of cultural critique, Spooner instead asserts that the aim of cultural criticism should not to argue for any particular worth to these cultural practices or artefacts – cultural products do not have to be 'good', 'critical', 'anxious', or 'subversive' for them to be culturally significant and worthy of study, and authors do not have to argue for a particular political status of their objects of research. For Spooner, the popularity, economic success, and global reach of this post-millennial gothic is reason enough to map and analyse its manifestations in a serious manner. As we shall see below, there is also an important gender-political component to Spooner's project here, because the connection between 'Gothic' and 'Romance' has been dominated by criticism of the latter as a 'light-weight', populist cultural format enjoyed by women; Spooner argues powerfully for a re-assessment of such explicit value judgments and their implicit structural roles in defining the gothic as a 'serious' genre.

The eight chapters of *Post-Millennial Gothic* explore a range of topics, starting with gothic lifestyle and moving through a consideration of the new gothic aesthetic in fashion, and discussions of Goth subcultures, as well as literature, film, and television. Spooner's account begins with the exploration of the new gothic mediascape already mentioned. Navigating a terrain of advertising, leisure, interior design and fashion blogs, and finally lifestyle television programmes like *Grand Designs* and Heston's cookery shows, this chapter introduces a complex field of cultural production which traverses Goth subcultures, fiction, art, and consumer practices, to reveal a confrontation of fear and fun. These are tensions which impact on academic debates too, of course, as precisely this friction between 'anxious' and 'happy' modes of the gothic demands that we reconsider the critical framework through which we approach, categorise, and even define gothic. As is demonstrated by the example of Kevin McCloud's ill-chosen, fawning references to Strawberry Hill in season 8, episode 4 of

Grand Designs (2008, see pp. 43-45) as a supposed counter-point to the artificiality and bad taste of a working-class rendition of a Gothic castle (actually echoing, as it does, eighteenth-century responses to Walpole's gothic counterfeit itself), the priority of a canon based on 'horror' and 'disgust' over the pleasure of consumption poses serious questions of academic narratives surrounding the gothic too. To what extent does 'the gothic' have to actually 'do' anything or follow any specific aesthetic tastes? To what extent is McCloud's class-based hegemony mirrored by a gendered hegemony in prioritising horror over romance or trauma over titillation?

Chapter Two turns to Tim Burton's films, to contextualise the apparent turn to an increasingly visual manifestation of the gothic in the years before and after 2000, and which manifests most clearly in the design and fashion products described in the preceding chapter. Of course this visual 'turn' may be seen more correctly as a return to the architectural and visual aesthetic from which the gothic emerged as a literary mode in the final third of the eighteenth century, as Spooner herself briefly sketches out (pp. 52-54), but, in terms of contemporary gothic, Burton is said by many to have developed a 'Burtonesque' aesthetic that prioritises the visual over the narrative. In Burton's films, the gothic is evoked most clearly in visual terms and quite often deliberately rejects the abject horror typically associated with other gothic movies. Burton has established a style of acting – using selected performers (such as Helena Bonham Carter and Johnny Depp), particular forms of stage design, and production strategies – Spooner argues, that has become a lucrative brand and has encouraged other directors (like Brad Silberling and Guillermo del Toro) to follow suit. The case for this being a 'new kind of Gothic' (p. 25) seems a little overstated, especially following Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnic's work on *Gothic and the Comic Turn* (2005); the re-opening of Horace Walpole's Strawberry Hill following a very public restoration campaign; and multiple exhibitions centred around Gothic art and architecture, including *Gothic Nightmares* at the Tate (2006) and *Horace Walpole's Strawberry Hill* at the V & A (2010). Nevertheless, Burton's role as a talisman of a gothic aesthetic aligned with Goth subcultural identities has come to define gothic production since 2000 in ever-more important ways. This is a broader, more inclusive sense of the gothic, one that involves both a set of aesthetic principles developed since the 1760s *and* contemporary (sub)cultural practices based on, re-interpreting, and re-producing these principles as part of a daily performance.

Chapters Three and Four return to a more sociological approach to Goth subculture, tracking the lifestyle and fashion components of this now-broader conceptualisation of the

gothic in Spooner's terms, and discuss an 'ongoing renegotiation of Goth identities in response to moral panics elicited in the media' (p. 21). These are key chapters in understanding a new, positive, and self-confident Goth identity since 2000, even if cases such as the murder of Sophie Lancaster in 2007 show that this confidence is not shared by all areas of society. These chapters document an increasingly accepted and sympathetic role for Goth cultures, one which casts them as tolerant, creative, articulate, and self-expressive, and this section of the book shows how this emerges through and is represented in public and social media, as well as fiction, film, and television. Spooner points towards the development of 'Perky Goth' identities here, noting that, in Goth subculture, 'Perky Goth began as a joke, but is fast becoming a dominant paradigm' (p. 77). Arguing that Sophie Lancaster's murder acts as a catalyst for a new positive image of the Goth, Chapter Four then turns its attention to highly popular forms of cultural production such as the *Twilight*, *Being Human*, and *True Blood* phenomena, understood here as expressions of this 'new' currency of this perky gothic. There is an important gender-political component to Spooner's argument here: whether among scholars of the gothic or the wider public, much of the criticism surrounding these phenomena focuses on their specifically 'female', 'immature', and 'lightweight' nature, in opposition to more 'mature' or 'serious' gothic productions that articulate cultural, socio-economic, and environmental anxieties born of the contemporary neo-liberal global regime. That this mirrors critical responses to the gothic romances of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries shows that this post-millennial incarnation, rather than being a degenerate half-sister, actually plays through a similar logic of cultural negotiation and transaction that prevailed in the gothic from its earliest inception. In this respect, perhaps the most innocuous-looking term in the title, 'Romance', turns out to be one of Spooner's most important critical concepts and decisions, enabling her to locate these products within a gender-biased hierarchy in gothic discourse that has lasted almost as long as the gothic itself has existed.

The subsequent chapters follow on from this renegotiation, exploring what this model of the gothic as romance might mean for contemporary cultural products, looking at teenage fiction and films, comedy and camp versions of the vampire, and self-consciously constructed stereotypes of Goth masculinities in television sit-coms. In Chapter Five, the focus is on 'the whimsical macabre' (p. 100), a phrase Spooner develops to describe a genre of fiction which predominantly represents teenage girls and which is marketed towards young women in particular. Here, the monstrous is no longer terrifying but rather cute – much like Tim Burton's animated figure, Frankenweenie. As Spooner explains, this movement 'reconfigures

the gruesome and grotesque as playful, quirky and even cute, and often draws upon imagery associated with childhood' (p. 99). The chapter traces a compelling narrative through nineteenth- and twentieth-century receptions of Romantic gothic, encompassing Emily Brontë, Lewis Carroll, Heinrich Hoffmann, and Tim Burton, and also considering such mass-marketed product lines as the Monster-High dolls. Chapter Six follows up this focus on children and playful versions of the gothic in order to consider the 'sympathetic monster' more fully. Focusing on the vampire in particular, the chapter traces the development of comic iterations of the vampire since Stoker's *Dracula* through to Burton's *Dark Shadows* (2012) and Sharon Needles' *Dracula* (2015), leading Spooner to consider the 'monster-to-hero' trajectory of the vampire noted by critics such as Crawford and Botting in recent years (p. 122). *Post-Millennial Gothic* takes an original approach to this normalisation of the monstrous, however, in that it looks not only at the transition to the humorous and pleasant monster, but also at the role that the vampire has played in the genre of comedy more broadly, drawing on such diverse sources as Abbot and Costello, George Hamilton's *Love at First Bite* (1979) and of course *Sesame Street*'s Count von Count. In this account, the vampire appears as a 'comic subject rather than object, one who is the author of their own laughter' (p. 124). Chapter Seven continues this focus on comedy to look at stand-up comics such as Tim Minchin and Andrew O'Neill in particular, but also extends to critical considerations of the stereotyped Goth in mainstream television series such as *The Mighty Boosh* (2004-07), *The IT Crowd* (2006-13), and *The Big Bang Theory* (2007-present). This chapter also includes a consideration of television makeover-shows, and argues that the dandy-like image of the male Goth transported from popular sit-coms becomes a 'riskier' lifestyle choice for men in 'reality' television, one 'that flouts social expectations' (pp. 145-46). While each of the chapters follows its own distinctive trajectory, they seem to fall into two distinct groupings. Chapters One to Three are more theoretical in scope and address contemporary gothic cultural artefacts as a way of engaging critically with existing research paradigms in a manner which will be of interest to readers of popular-cultural theory and Gothic Studies alike. Chapters Four to Seven are linked by a recurring engagement with the figure of the vampire, and offer a coherent and convincing overview of young-adult fiction and more mainstream film and television productions that will be of interest to researchers working on these market segments in particular.

Chapter Eight rounds off the study with a return to gothic as a lifestyle and leisure practice, turning our attention to a specifically gothic-inspired tourism industry. Of course,

Whitby is the primary location for studying these practices of 'dark tourism', which is defined as a form of 'consumption of sites associated with death and suffering' (p. 166). Looking in particular at Whitby Abbey, The Dracula Experience, and the Whitby Goth weekend, Spooner's argument both invokes and transcends 'dark tourism' as an interpretive model, arguing that Paul Magrs's *Adventures of Brenda and Effie* series (2006-present) actually celebrate a mainstream, carnivalesque, pleasurable form of located Goth lifestyle in Whitby that becomes a source of 'humour and play, distilled and intensified by their location' (p. 27). Thus, Whitby becomes a 'template for a subcultural community united in difference in which the paramount values are playfulness, tolerance and fun' (p. 181). Where Spooner's book argues for a 'distinctive shift in Gothic sensibilities since the late 1990s' (p. 184), it is arguably in the annual pilgrimage to Whitby that this shift finds its most colourful and lively (re-)incarnation.

Post-Millennial Gothic is a critical tour de force: across its ten chapters, Spooner draws on an encyclopaedic knowledge of literature, film, popular culture, and sociology to paint one of the most compelling accounts of contemporary gothic cultural expression to have been published in recent years. What emerges is an account of contemporary gothic that argues powerfully for changed relations between 'Goth' and 'gothic'; where the emergence of Goth subcultures in the late 1970s and early 1980s could be understood as an influential appropriation of traditions and motifs drawn from a 'canon' of gothic literature, art, and film, the image of the gothic that emerges here is one where 'Goth now affects the *production* of Gothic texts' (p. 184). Alongside her account of this re-jigged relationship between lifestyle and fictions, Spooner's most persuasive argument lies in her assertions regarding the visual, even *spectacular* nature of contemporary gothic, with visual aesthetics increasingly prioritised. In both cases, the 'happy Gothic' that she describes could, perhaps, have been more strongly anchored in older critical discourses relating to similar popular forms of the gothic aimed at spectacular visuals (such as Walpole) and widespread consumption in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (such as German dramas on the London stage). While Spooner is correct in identifying a tendency in Gothic Studies to prioritise the more anxious or trauma-centred forms of the gothic, critics have been too quick to downplay the fact that many of the original gothic texts of the late eighteenth century were themselves bestsellers among the middle classes, and hence more difficult to identify as 'subversive' or 'critical' of the bourgeois quotidian than the canonical, Foucault-inspired studies of the 1980s and 1990s have encouraged us to think they are.

That said, such a transhistorical view is not the aim of the present study, and Spooner does punctuate her argument with some indicators of this popular tradition, most notably in her discussions of the gender politics of the romance. To echo the famous phrase from Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), Spooner's *Post-Millennial Gothic* is Gothic Studies, 'up-to-date with a vengeance' and like the gothic she describes, I'm more than 'happy' to recommend it to students and scholars alike.

Barry Murnane

Anna Watz, *Angela Carter and Surrealism: 'A Feminist Libertarian Aesthetic'*
(London: Routledge, 2017)

Angela Carter's critical reputation, always strong since her early death in 1992, has received several recent boosts, with Edmund Gordon's 2016 biography arriving soon after Rosemary Hill's *Unicorn: The Poetry of Angela Carter* and Christopher Frayling's contextualising analysis of some of her gothic short fiction, *Inside the Bloody Chamber* (both from 2015). Anna Watz's *Angela Carter and Surrealism: 'A Feminist Libertarian Aesthetic'*, a careful study of Carter's complex relations to surrealist writing, politics, and thought, is a welcome addition to this burgeoning critical tradition. Watz's contribution provides important insights into some of the European cultural and intellectual influences on this most gothic of modern English writers.

The influence of surrealist writing and art on Carter's work is, of course, well known (Penelope Rosemont's 1998 anthology *Surrealist Women* mentions Carter as a writer who 'made no secret of' her closeness to the surrealist movement).[1] Watz's analysis grounds this relationship (in high gothic style, one might note) in reassessing a manuscript in the Angela Carter Papers Collection held by the British Library – Carter's unpublished early-1970s translation of Xavière Gauthier's provocative 1971 feminist analysis of the movement, *Surréalisme et sexualité*. Carter's encounter with Gauthier, Watz argues, 'had a major impact on Carter's reevaluation of surrealism' and 'shaped the development of her entire feminist project' (p. 4). The encounter furthermore 'prompted Carter to embark on a more sustained interrogation of the work of the Marquis de Sade', an interrogation culminating in *The Sadeian Woman: An Exercise in Cultural History*, Carter's controversial 1979 polemic (its American subtitle, *The Ideology of Pornography*, indicates more clearly Carter's critical-political approach).

Watz deploys the key concept of 'The Surreal Uncanny' in a series of close analyses of key works, highlighting their central surreal thematics in order more broadly to delineate Carter's 'feminist libertarian aesthetic' and introduce into the discussion of surrealist influences an account of Carter's combinatory aesthetics. This both foregrounds and throws into historical relief her particular brand of post-war English gothic. Watz reads the 'surreal uncanny' as a product of intersecting currents of European thought, Anglo-American debates about pornography, and the elaboration of Carter's own English gothic avant-garde. Thus,

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[1] *Surrealist Women: An International Anthology*, ed. by Penelope Rosemont (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998), p. xxxviii.

'the uncanny in surrealism' (p. 36) is analysed via Sigmund Freud, Hal Foster, and Julia Kristeva (but not, oddly, Hélène Cixous) as a form of revolt, a 'blurring of the real and the imaginary', in novels like *Shadow Dance* (1966), but also in relation to powerful gothic images like the 'freshly severed hand, all bloody at the roots' that the heroine Melanie apparently finds in a drawer in *The Magic Toyshop* (1967). This image, Watz suggests, 'invokes the many amputated hands in surrealist art and literature, perhaps the most iconic of which is the severed hand in Buñuel and Dalí's *Un Chien andalou*' (p. 46). Carter's writing is thus seen here as momentarily grounded in a clearly discernible surrealist tradition of recurrent motifs, and Watz's broad argument, developing through the book and particularly in chapters on *The Sadeian Woman* and (in conclusion) on 'Feminist-Surrealist *Bricolage* and Performativity', expounds the political and theoretical significance of that tradition.

The central thread of Watz's book identifies Carter's demythologising strategies, in particular as products of her engagement with Gauthier's highly critical and politicised arguments about surrealism. Carter's abiding interest in 'the sadistic themes of much surrealist art' (p. 39) is, Watz suggests, a direct product of her engagement with Gauthier, and her overall relation to surrealism emerges as both ambiguous and highly productive. Watz asserts that, '[f]ar from rejecting surrealism as a whole, Carter is engaged in an ambivalent dialogue with male surrealist discourse and iconography' (p. 42) contributing to 'a feminist extension of the movement itself' (p. 43). This argument is traced through enlightening and perceptive discussions of *Shadow Dance*, *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffmann* (1972), and *The Passion of New Eve* (1977), and a concluding examination of Carter's anthologies of short stories (*Wayward Girls and Wicked Women* in 1986) and of fairy tales (from 1990 and 1992).

Together, these works illustrate Carter's extensive and often ambivalent contribution to the key intersection with which Watz is concerned – that between 'the utopian element of surrealism and the central goal of 1970s avant-garde feminism' (p. 136). The significance of the gothic elements underpinning Carter's intense scrutiny of this intersection – her concern with masquerade and fakeness, her analyses of gender and other identities, her exposure of the power structures that define modern human sexual relations, her accounts of the material force of fantasy and its cultural effects – remains implicit throughout Watz's discussion. In exploring these themes, the book makes useful comparisons between Carter and Roland Barthes (both visited Japan at roughly the same time, Barthes producing *Empire of Signs* in 1970, Carter some of the short stories of 1974's *Fireworks: Nine Profane Pieces*; both were

consummate and highly influential critical demythologisers). Carter's strategies for the analysis of myth (which she conceived of as 'a vast repository of outmoded lies') suggest, Watz argues, 'a very Barthesian approach', mobilising works that eventually constitute 'an ethnographic surrealist collage' (p. 108).

Angela Carter and Surrealism offers a clear, well-written, critically insightful discussion of how Carter's idiosyncratic aesthetic is haunted by surrealist influences. It opens up suggestive spaces for further critical engagements. It would be interesting, for example, to complement Watz's reading by locating Carter's output and influence in relation to a particular strain of post-war English-language, surrealist-influenced, and multi-disciplinary gothic. Such a tradition might be rooted in film (Hammer horror, and the recent critical interest in English folk-horror cinema of the 1960s and 70s) and literature (J. G. Ballard's 'inner space' science fiction, with its debts to Paul Delvaux and the Belgian surrealists, but also, perhaps, the strange, trauma-haunted short stories and blitz reportage of William Sansom). Such connections would help locate Carter's work in relation to other manifestations of the specifically English post-war assimilation of European avant-garde experimentalism. Watz's book skilfully maps the cultural and intellectual territory for possible future engagements with Carter's challenging oeuvre, and provides a much-needed scholarly account of the debts that her gothic writings owe to the surrealist tradition.

John Sears

S. T. Joshi, *Varieties of the Weird Tale*
(New York: Hippocampus Press, 2017)

This collection of essays by S. T. Joshi, on various exponents of the 'weird tale', includes a number of his introductions to collections of such tales. The combined result is uneven, with potted biographies and general summaries sitting uneasily beside accounts of the historical minutiae of composition that are likely to be of interest – and of profound interest in some cases – mostly to specialists. Thumbnail assumptions and some special pleading need to be skirted in order to get at those passages where Joshi relaxes enough to bring scrutiny to a text or a series of texts, particularly effective in the case of Ambrose Bierce's 'The Death of Halpin Frayser' (1891). Despite the variegated content, a number of coherent themes run across the various entries, and the necessarily jumbled nature of so many narratives generates creatively questionable spaces for the critical reader.

Concerned, perhaps, to encourage a more general reading, Joshi's introduction makes a series of broad proposals, reaffirming his conviction that 'the best weird fiction was "the consequence of a world view" in that it sought to refashion the universe in accordance with the author's philosophical vision' (p. 12). This is most impressively described in a chapter on Lord Dunsany, and his 'Gods of Pegāna' mythos, with its mutant time, aesthetic animism, fearful gods, and sleeping cosmic destroyer. As a result of the popularisation of weird writing and its collectivisation as a genre, various tropes (according to Joshi) have come to stand in for that refashioning of the universe, though he does not consider what virtues, or otherwise, there might be in such repetition or citation. Through the example of Gertrude Atherton, who comes to writing after and through the shock of her son's premature death and her 'wholesale revaluation of her life' (p. 98), Joshi hints at a reading that would position these totalising visions as deeply personal, but does not pursue the theme. Nor does Joshi consider the dynamic between any such refashioning and the startling fictional places and spaces of the genre, in terms of a tension between the local ambience and the general cosmic or world view.

Standing in for a discussion of place is a more general thematic focus on supernatural realism and mimesis as a dominant mode, and of the limitations of H. P. Lovecraft's dictum (his insistence on realistic description until the one moment when the marvellous appears) when discussing the 'sensuous prose' (p. 323) of a contemporary writer like Caitlín R. Kiernan (who is the subject of an inspiring introduction) or Thomas Ligotti, for whom 'the writer is a demiurge, creating a universe that may or may not connect with the "real" world at

his whim' (p. 321). All this begs for a similar discussion of the ambiguity of locus in the many works that Joshi describes, but instead the critic seeks to resolve these efficacious uncertainties as something duller. By depicting Lovecraft's place descriptions as done 'to the best of his considerable abilities' (p.328), and Kiernan's as the functional use of 'rhetorical tools' to help the reader 'grasp the bizarre' (p. 328), Joshi makes the slippage of stable meaning within weird realism more of a technical failure of description than a powerful and uncanny characteristic of it.

Joshi seems, paradoxically, on firmer ground with his descriptions of the '*indefinability* of the "Things"' (p. 153, italics in original) of William Hope Hodgson's stories or of Ligotti's world gone '*awry*', in which nightmare does not reflect but 'has replaced reality' (p. 320, italics in original). Discussing such things in terms of writers doing their best or boiling down reception to a possessive grasp, as readers lay claim to their own reading as objective and final, seems as exaggerated a concretisation as Hodgson's 'gigantic crab' and 'giant rats' (p. 155). This is particularly pertinent, as Joshi cites in his 'Science and Superstition' essay an ecology of horror proposed by Tom Goodsell, a character of Fritz Lieber's: 'Fear is accumulating. Horror is accumulating [...]. Our culture is ripe for infection [...] they'd haunt us, terrorize us, try to rule us. Our fears would be their fodder. A parasite-host relationship. Supernatural symbiosis' (quoted p. 292). And so realism folds back into a real world that it has already infected to render that world ready for it – a postmodern post-truth world of writing and reading, of symbiotic composition and consumption that Joshi seems unwilling to recognise.

A number of Joshi's pieces touch on the success of weird fiction in the context of the decline of orthodox or establishment religions. Once again, he takes his first cue from Lovecraft and the suggestion that supernatural fiction is 'coeval with the religious feeling and closely related to many aspects of it' (p. 16), and then develops this to argue that 'a decline in religious belief would result in the augmentation of a need for *aesthetic* outlets for it' (p. 17). In the last few years, there has been an observable spike in publishing and social-media discussions of 'English eerie' and 'folk horror'. This is, at least partly, attributable to the access to publication available to now-middle-aged critics for whom these sub-genres – in both TV and written forms – represented their childhood introductions to alternatives to scientific materialism and mainstream Christianity. At the same time, technological developments in distribution have made the original products once more available to a mass market. This is opening up such fields to younger consumers and makers; it will be of interest

to enthusiasts for the weird tale to observe the effects, if any, of this, in combination with the political 'chaos magick' in an infected and abject cyberspace, upon the sub-genre.[1] Joshi's description of a barren period for weird writing – 'from 1940 to 1970, only Shirley Jackson [...] and Robert Aickman could be said to have attained genuine eminence' (p. 17) – perhaps constitutes something similar to that experienced by uncanny 'English eerie' fictions between the early 1980s and the millennium, and the nature of these 'dry spells' warrants further critical investigation.

Finally, there is the surprising lack of attention that Joshi gives to the suffocating weight of citation that seems to characterise so much weird writing – at least in his own account of it, which ranges from Atherton's modelling of characters after Henry James to almost everybody's nodding to Lovecraft. Yet there is little attention given here to the paradox that an art that is so apparently intuitive and attentive to the ineffable should repeatedly fall back upon references to its precedents and traditions. In tune with the reflections of Lieber's Tom Goodsell, uncanny fiction has long infected itself, a 'real world' haunting equivalent to M. R. James 'suggesting the pervasiveness of the past's influence on the present [...] in which the present is entirely engulfed and rendered fleeting and ineffectual in the face of the heavy cultural burden of prior centuries' (p. 174). Given this resilience, the weird tale may in future constitute a fecund site for working out some of the meanings of a new political culture in which the present is similarly predatory upon itself.

Phil Smith

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[1] See Gary Lachman, *Dark Star Rising: Magick and Power in the Age of Trump* (New York: TarcherPerigree, 2018).

BOOK REVIEWS: FICTION

***A Suggestion of Ghosts: Supernatural Fiction by Women 1854-1900*, ed. by J. A. Mains**
(Kent: Black Shuck Books, 2017)

During the last two or three decades, there has been a number of publications containing exclusively supernatural/mystery tales by female authors of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These include anthologies like *The Virago Book of Victorian Ghost Stories* (1988) edited by the late Richard Dalby, to whom J. A. Mains, the editor of the present volume, refers in his editorial note, as well as the republication of ghost-story collections written individually by women writers, such as those by Marjorie Bowen and Harriet Prescott Spofford that have been edited by Jessica A. Salmonson for Ash-Tree Press in the late 1990s and early 2000s, or those by Catherine Crowe and Alice Perrin edited by Dalby for Sarob Press in the 'Mistresses of the Macabre' series around the same period. It is therefore a welcome development that, after so many years of neglect, a major press like Wordsworth Editions has, during the last decade or so, begun systematically to recover and re-evaluate uncanny fiction by female writers of the gothic and the weird from the Victorian period and the first half of the twentieth century, in their 'Tales of Mystery and the Supernatural' series. Penguin Books have also, relatively recently, released at least one anthology of ghost stories (*The Penguin Book of Ghost Stories: From Elizabeth Gaskell to Ambrose Bierce*, 2010) in which Victorian women writers of the supernatural occupy almost as much space as their male counterparts.

Certain authors that appear in these editions are well known for their non-supernatural fiction − such as Elizabeth Gaskell or Edith Wharton − while others, like Mary E. Braddon or Charlotte Riddell, are almost entirely associated with Victorian ghostly fiction and the gothic (though most of them had written a substantial amount of realist fiction as well). However,, as Lynda E. Rucker points out in her very insightful introduction to the present anthology, despite their popularity in the nineteenth century, spooky tales by women writers of the Victorian period have not been as frequently anthologised as those written by men (like Edgar Allan Poe, Charles Dickens, and J. Sheridan Le Fanu). Indeed, even a cursory glance through the contents of anthologies that contain supernatural tales from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries − anthologies released throughout the years by such publishing houses as Oxford University Press or Modern Library, but also by many lesser-known presses − reveals that the vast majority of the stories included were penned by men.

Rucker therefore asserts that the ghost-story genre is identified mainly with male writers, despite the fact that female writers of the genre were plentiful and prolific, while she also stresses the extremely important role that women (both as writers – such as Ann Radcliffe, Clara Reeve, and Mary Shelley – and as readers) played in the development of gothic horror in general, a genre that was the progenitor of everything defined as 'horror' today. Rucker adds that, even within the horror genre itself, women's uncanny tales are not often regarded as worthy enough representatives – certainly not to the degree that stories by male authors like Poe and M. R. James are – due to what are usually deemed to be the 'feminine' or feminist concerns of their supernatural short fiction, such as the status of women, female sexuality, marriage, or motherhood. Nevertheless, the increasing number of published collections of ghostly or weird tales by women writers indicates that this perception has begun to change, and many neglected female authors of the supernatural (from Victorians like Amelia Edwards and Rhoda Broughton, to twentieth-century writers like D. K. Broster) are gaining increasing attention from critics and readers, through the republication of their fiction by major or small, independent publishing houses (including Wordsworth Editions, Sarob Press, and Victorian Secrets) in recent years.

In this context of growing interest in uncanny tales by women writers, Mains has undertaken an extensive exploration of old periodicals (newspapers and magazines) in order to discover tales by Victorian women writers that have not yet been anthologised. Thus, the present volume is a compilation of very rare ghostly tales by women, and most of the authors' names are barely if at all recognisable – even for ghost-story aficionados. The avid reader of nineteenth-century ghost stories by women will not come across Elizabeth Gaskell, Edith Nesbit, or even Catherine Crowe in this anthology. The only relatively well-known authors who are included are American writer Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, who wrote both realist and supernatural fiction and was popular at the turn of the century, and Irishwoman Katharine Tynan, famous primarily as a poet, and then as a novelist and short-story writer.

Naturally, the Victorian tales included in this volume (which cover the second half of the nineteenth century) are full of stereotypical gothic motifs and tropes, such as a visitor spending the night in a supposedly haunted chamber, apparitions that are connected to some sort of secret inheritance or treasure hidden in an old mansion or castle, supernatural phenomena that have a natural explanation, and so on. These tales are certainly not the strongest representatives of the ghost stories produced during this period, and unquestionably not the best ghost stories written by women writers of that era – for high-quality supernatural

tales, one would have to 'resort' to such accomplished authors as George Eliot, Edith Wharton, Vernon Lee, Margaret Oliphant, or Mary E. Braddon. However, as Rucker observes in her introduction, these tales should not be evaluated by today's standards, but instead understood as samples of what people enjoyed reading over a century ago; in this case, it is not their literary merit that matters most, but their historical significance. Nevertheless, out of all fifteen tales of this anthology, there are, inevitably, those that I find more worth mentioning than the others.

'The Little Green Door' (1896) by Freeman is more of an imaginative time-travel tale − with a moral lesson − than a traditional ghost story. It is a delightful, charming little gem, well written and very enjoyable, offering much more than a typical uncanny tale of that period usually does, with its uncommon − considering the time it was written − plot-line and sense of humour. 'The Death Spancel' (1896) by Tynan, my personal favourite from this anthology, is a dark tale about the dreadful consequences of lust and unbridled passion. This is a fascinating story, where witchcraft is the means by which the sinners are bound together; the author also emphasises the Victorian notion of pure, untainted love between lawful couples and the violent, sinful passion of adultery. Although 'A Legend of All-Hallows Eve' (1879) by Georgianna S. Hull evolves like a typical ghostly tale of that period − featuring a budding romance, a secret, and a spectre − without any particular plot twist, it has a promising beginning, introducing an intriguing young heroine, who does not conform to the social norms and the feminine stereotypes of her era. 'The Ghost of the Nineteenth Century' (1880) by Phoebe Yates Pember is mostly a psychological ghost story about a haunting sound that exists in the mind of the heroine, preventing her from moving on with her life; in this respect, the author presents the supernatural phenomena as a manifestation of the haunted self.

'The Spectral Rout' (1865) by Frances Power Cobbe – an Irish author and activist for the rights of women and animals – is a typical Victorian ghost story, with two sisters discovering a lost inheritance. The tale is more interesting for the detailed description of the impoverishment of two members of the upper class, rather than for the gothic mystery itself. Nevertheless, there are some truly chilling moments, like the image of the ghastly eighteenth-century bewigged old lady looking in her mirror, which anticipates a similarly creepy apparition in Le Fanu's classic 'Madam Crowl's Ghost' (1870). 'The Closed Cabinet' (1895) by Lady Gwendolen Gascoyne-Cecil is a tale that had appeared in anthologies anonymously until the present publication. This is a ghostly novelette distinguished by deep psychological

insight and a feminist subtext. It deals with the haunting of a young cousin by an old ancestor – the abused wife of an alcoholic – who committed murder and suicide. Although the story is grounded in Christian morality, condemning crime and sin, the author seems to sympathise with the tormented female apparition; moreover, the tale highlights the ability of the younger generation to release the family from an awful curse – that the crime of the ancestor provoked – purely by strength of will.

'The Oakleigh Ghost' (1900) by Annie Armitt is an amusing tale that satirises the metaphysical/supernatural trappings of the Victorian era, such as séances and theosophy, while also showing that the progress of science and technology can sometimes produce the same 'eerie' effects as otherworldly phenomena. The story 'A Speakin' Ghost' (1890) by Annie Trumbull Slosson (an accomplished author and pioneer entomologist of the nineteenth century) depicts the evolving relationship between a ghost child and a solitary woman. It is a very moving tale about loneliness and the way that lonesome or abandoned people can, unconsciously or 'metaphysically', be drawn to each other, by transcending the boundaries between life and death. This 'ghost' can therefore be considered as a projection of the heroine's secret yearnings for companionship and family. Finally, I have two brief references to make: firstly, to 'Miss Massareene's Ghost' (1887) by Australian E. A. Henty, which is primarily a romantic comedy, in which the supernatural serves to bring together two young people secretly in love with one another; and secondly, 'At the Witching Hour' (1897) by Elizabeth Gibert Cunningham-Terry, a tale where the discomfort provoked by the supernatural agent is mainly tactile, foreshadowing the tales of M. R. James.

This is an edition addressed to readers who have already delved, at least to a degree, into the ghost stories of the Victorian era and who wish to expand their knowledge of the Victorian ghost story. It would be very suitable too for those who wish to become specialists in the uncanny tales written by women authors of the second half of the nineteenth century, since it also provides valuable information – through the inclusion of a biographical note that comes before each tale – detailing the lives and works of many long-forgotten female writers of that period.

Maria Giakaniki

BOOKS RECEIVED*

Ailise Bulfin, *Gothic Invasions: Imperialism, War, and the Fin-de-Siècle Popular Fiction, 1890-1914* (Cardiff: Wales University Press, 2018).

Marius-Mircea Crisan, *Dracula: An International Perspective* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

Justin D. Edwards and Johan Höglund (eds), *B-Movie Gothic: International Perspectives* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018).

Adam Daly, *The Reins of the Infinite* (Kibworth Beauchamp: Matador, 2018).

Rebecca Duncan, *South African Gothic* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2018).

James Gracey, *The Company of Wolves* (Leighton Buzzard: Auteur, 2017).

Anya Heise-von der Lippe, (ed.), *Posthuman Gothic* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2017).

William Hughes, *Key Concepts in the Gothic* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018).

William Hughes (ed.), *Gothic Studies*, 19.1 (2017).

Peter Hutchings, *Historical Dictionary of Horror Cinema*, 2nd edition (Lanham, ML: Rowman and Littlefield, 2018).

Darryl Jones, *Horror Stories: Classic Tales from Hoffmann to Hodgson* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

----------, *Sleeping with the Lights On: The Unsettling Story of Horror* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

Murray Leeder, *Horror Film: A Critical Introduction* (New York and London: Bloomsbury, 2018).

Roger Luckhurst (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Dracula* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

James Machin, *Weird Fiction in Britain, 1880-1939* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

Laura Mee, *The Shining* (Leighton Buzzard: Auteur, 2017).

Gilles Menegaldo (ed.), *Tim Burton: A Cinema of Transformations* (Montpellier: Presses Universitaires de la Méditerranée, 2018).

Rebekah Owens, *Macbeth* (Leighton Buzzard: Auteur, 2017).

Edgar Allan Poe, *The Pit and the Pendulum and Other Tales*, ed. David Van Leer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

David Roche (ed)., *Steven Spielberg: Hollywood Wunderkind and Humanist* (Montpellier: Presses Universitaires de la Méditerranée, 2018).

Rikke Schubart, *Mastering Fear: Women, Emotion, and Contemporary Horror* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2018).

Yael Shapira, *Inventing the Gothic Corpse: The Thrill of Human Remains in the Eighteenth-Century Novel* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

Mike Shepherd, *When Brave Men Shudder: The Scottish Origins of Dracula* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Wild Wolf Publishing, 2018).

Aaron Worth (ed.), *The Great God Pan and Other Horror Stories*, by Arthur Machen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

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For a complete list of books available for review, please email irishjournalgothichorror@gmail.com.

FILM REVIEWS

My Friend Dahmer, dir. by Marc Meyers (FilmRise, 2017)

When Jeffrey Lionel Dahmer was arrested in 1991, the ensuing media furore surrounding his case quickly cast him as America's greatest fear – a quiet loner who had, from 1978 to1991, murdered seventeen men and boys. Mostly queer men of colour, his victims were drugged, raped, murdered, and mutilated, with their body parts preserved and kept within Dahmer's filthy Milwaukee apartment.[1] The American fascination with Dahmer has shown no signs of subsiding over the years; Dahmer's own father published a memoir, *A Father's Story*, in 1994; Jeremy Renner portrayed him in the 2002 feature film *Dahmer*; and online forums such as Reddit and Websleuths are filled with recent discussions from true-crime fans about his case.

Twenty-six years on from Dahmer's arrest (and twenty-three years on from his death in prison in 1994), another addition to the ever-growing collection of 'murderabilia' surrounding Dahmer has arrived in the form of Marc Meyers' *My Friend Dahmer*, adapted from the 2012 graphic novel by John 'Derf' Backderf. The film concerns Backderf's friendship with Dahmer during their high-school years, leading up to Dahmer's first murder in 1978, and traces Dahmer's troubled adolescence in an attempt to 'understand' his development into one of America's most notorious serial killers. As the true-crime genre continues to boom across all media forms, this new film may well serve as a welcome addition to Dahmer lore for true-crime fans. However, a closer inspection reveals a hollow centre at the heart of this depiction of the 'birth' of a serial killer.

Marc Meyers, in his role as both director and writer, has created a visually rich film. 1970s Ohio is depicted here as unsettling in its contrasts; grey roads and American functionalist buildings cut through the lush, green forests surrounding Dahmer's childhood home. There has also been some attempt to recreate panels from the original source material, and there are some powerful images of Dahmer (portrayed here by Ross Lynch) as he shuffles between home, school, and his garden shed where he keeps the preserved roadkill animal corpses. The camera lingers on Dahmer, creating a kind of eerie iconography; the face and body of the killer transform on screen, as he struggles with his sexuality and troubled family life. This transformation is a reminder of the images of Dahmer broadcast around the

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[1] See Brian Masters, *The Shrine of Jeffrey Dahmer* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1993).

world as his crimes were discovered, images that depicted him as a closeted 'freak' hiding a dark secret that became harder and harder to conceal. Dahmer's famous mug-shot photograph was used to further a narrative of monstrosity hiding under normality; a handsome man driven to gruesome murder. Meyers has clearly taken this image into account, as the camera frequently centres Dahmer's body within the frame and, therefore, the action.

The cinematic images of Dahmer are, however, ultimately superficial – a recreation of an iconic image rather than the creation of a living, breathing character. Backderf's novel portrays Dahmer's descent into murderousness through its development of the grotesque drawn image, as his face becomes increasingly agape and contorted, his eyes shadowed and concealed behind his glasses as he descends further into anger and isolation. By contrast, Meyers' film relies on prolonged shots of an emotionless Dahmer and a clumsily placed sentimental score to signify character progression. Stiff, wooden dialogue and awkward direction of the actors serve to magnify this problem; scenes between Dahmer and his father seem more like well-rehearsed readings than convincing performances, and conversations between ostensible teenagers smack of being written by a middle-aged man. *My Friend Dahmer* has been marketed as a glimpse into the 'normality' of the infamous serial killer, but the unnatural feel of the film overall destroys any familiarity that Meyers may have been hoping to create.

The film does, however, become more 'natural' in tone whenever the action moves to the Dahmer household. Dahmer's home itself is clearly understood by Meyers to be the 'breeding ground' for the serial killer, a jumping-off point into madness and murder. The domestic space is portrayed as dark, claustrophobic, and oppressive, a place where his mother (in a standout performance by Anne Heche) criticises, argues, pops pills – a place from which his father is conspicuously absent as an emotional presence. Nevertheless, it remains unclear as to how Dahmer's character progresses throughout the film; the domestic space seems to function here as both start- and end-point to Dahmer's murderousness. While it has been argued that the original graphic novel can be considered a *Bildungsroman*, there is no such sense of a journey within *My Friend Dahmer*.[2] We begin with a lonely, isolated teenager, and we end with a lonely, isolated teenager; we do not see Dahmer's 'leap' into murder, nor (bar a couple of gruesome scenes) do we get any real sense of a build-up towards it. David Schmid has previously written about the role of suspense within the true-crime genre. He notes that, although violence 'does not necessarily assume a central place in the [true-crime]

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[2] See Harriet Earle, '*My Friend Dahmer*: The Comic as *Bildungsroman*', *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics*, 5.4 (2014), 429-40.

narrative', the *promise* of violence is ever present, and the audience expects some end to the suspense, some sort of climax wherein that violence is eventually realised or understood.[3] Crass as it may sound, there is no 'payoff' in *My Friend Dahmer*, and the film suffers for it. Meyers seems so intent to avoid accusations of exploitation or of aestheticising violence that the narrative feels circular and stilted as a result.

My Friend Dahmer has made some brave choices. Unfortunately, it has not made the right ones, nor enough of them. The decision to have Dahmer almost murder a central character towards the end of the film feels more schlock-horror than character drama, and the addition of a new character who seems 'crazier' and socially worse off than Dahmer is half baked; it's unclear what point Meyers is trying to make with him. Towards the end of the film, one scene stands out as emblematic of *My Friend Dahmer*'s limitations. Staying at a hotel for a school concert, Dahmer shares a room with an African-American student (Dontez James), noted to be the only student in Dahmer's high school who isn't 'white'. As he lies on the bed, Dahmer stares at the boy's prone body and asks, pointedly, '[a]re your insides the same as my insides?'. Although Dahmer would, of course, later mutilate his victims and observe their insides, the effect is somewhat problematic; the scene offers a nod and a smirk to camera that serves to erase, rather than amplify, the magnitude of the murders of so many men of colour. Clearly, Meyers has intended this moment to be a disturbing foreshadowing, offering a frisson of dread to cut through the film and point to the murderousness to come. However, it's a clumsy handling of what could have been a horrific foretelling; as James lies on the bed, an object of Dahmer's gaze, he becomes objectified, existing only as a marginalised body onto which the audience can project their knowledge of Dahmer's later crimes without witnessing the actual violence done towards his later victims. The student's body exists, therefore, as a signifier rather than a person, a representation of a body or type rather than a human victim who has suffered.

Given the wider context of Dahmer's treatment in the media through true crime novels, television, and documentary, this erasure of the victimised body becomes even more problematic – one is reminded, for example, of Anne E. Schwartz's treatment of Dahmer's victims; her descriptions of their brutal murders are followed by a listing of their criminal records.[4] This is a voyeuristic treatment of a body victimised by the voyeur, and thus the audience become voyeurs themselves, complicit in a re-victimisation of the black body. And, despite what some of its critics might say, such voyeurism is not a prerequisite of the true-

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[3] David Schmid, *Violence in American Popular Culture* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2015), p. 223.
[4] See Anne E. Schwartz, *The Man Who Could Not Kill Enough* (Secaucus: Carol Publishing, 1992).

crime genre, particularly as the new true-crime trend continues to boom; the recent documentary series *The Keepers* (2017) and Alexandria Marzano-Lesnevich's novel *The Fact of a Body* (2017) are just two examples of true crime that focus on providing dignity and respect for the victim.[5] Where *My Friend Dahmer* might have been a sensitive analysis of what it means to become a murderer, it instead becomes yet another exercise in erasure that ultimately leaves a bad taste in the mouth.

Here lies the problem with *My Friend Dahmer*: it is a surface-level examination of an endlessly complex and fascinating case, a visually arresting but emotionally vacuous portrayal of one of America's most notorious men – a film that could have been a worthwhile addition to Dahmer's story, but which ultimately feels like a cash grab.

Jess H. Anderson

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[5] 'The convening of the public around scenes of mass-mediated violence has come to make up a wound culture: the public fascination with torn and opened bodies and torn and open psyches, a public gathering around shock, trauma, and the wound' (Mark Seltzer, *True Crime: Observations on Violence and Modernity* (Abingdon: Taylor and Francis, 2007). p.48).

Beast, dir. by Michael Pearce (Agile Films/Stray Bear Productions, 2017)

Michael Pearce's debut feature, *Beast*, is a self-consciously dark, adult fairy tale. The marketing campaign emphasises this via the trailer's selection of scenes in which Moll (Jessie Buckley) moves purposefully through a forest at night, her curling red hair like a flame through the dark woods, along with Pascal (Johnny Flynn), the brooding, blue-eyed lover she desires unwisely but uncontrollably. The pastoral imagery and expressionistic use of colour temporarily lift this erotic thriller out of its contemporary setting and into the ahistorical realm of fable. Joyce Carol Oates describes the fairy-tale mode as crude and transparently wishful. It is a form that often (but not always) reflects 'the unquestioned prejudices of a conservative patriarchal folk culture', but nevertheless contains 'an incalculably rich storehouse of mysterious, luminous, riddlesome and ever-potent images'.[1] *Beast* utilises this storehouse to explore human ugliness, pathological violence, and the wilful amorality of romantic love.

The story takes place on an island idyll off the coast of Normandy. Our protagonist Moll is a shy, reserved girl who was home schooled after a childhood transgression involving girl-on-girl violence. When she meets Pascal, their class-divided romance seems almost retro and quaint; his black jeans cause a ruckus at the country club, and her rebellion against the snobbish mores that have been imposed on her seems to be a postponed rite of passage. The tone changes though when a young girl's body is found in a potato pit and Pascal is the lead suspect. From here, it emerges that Moll is not simply in love with a man who is accused of being a serial rapist and murderer; she truly believes him to be one, seemingly from the moment she was told he was jailed once before for sexual assault of a minor.

As this suggests, part of the film's suspense lies in the sense of narrative and generic disorientation. The viewer is uncertain of what outcomes to expect and what rules of darkness, sickness, and romance govern this cinematic world. The film's title suggests a beast-bridegroom narrative like 'Beauty and the Beast' as obvious inspiration, but Johnny Flynn's appearance is far from off-putting and her attraction to him is far from mysterious. In addition, the trailer scene described above suggests 'Little Red Riding Hood', and Moll's chaotic attraction to masculine, earthy, violently sexual Pascal resonates with the idea of being led, not so reluctantly, from her expected trajectory and running wild. When we are first introduced to Moll, singing in a choir led by her domineering mother, the surrounding

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[1] Joyce Carol Oates, 'In Olden Times, When Wishing Was Having ...: Classic and Contemporary Fairy Tales', *The Kenyon Review*, 19.3-4 (1997), 98-110 (p. 103).

scenery of cliffs and sea, along with the punitive control of her voice, all suggests 'The Little Mermaid'. Unfortunately for Moll, it turns out that the fairy tale she has found herself in is 'Bluebeard', the prototypical example of what Sue Short refers to as the 'flipside to fairy-tale romances, and the fantasy of living happily ever after with a stranger'. For Short, such tales frequently revolve around 'beasts who cannot be romantically redeemed and who offer death, rather than deliverance, to the women they become involved with'.[2] However, what is arguably most interesting about the film is that it does not act as a cautionary tale about taking a demon lover. Instead, it plays on the temptation to believe in a narrative of redemptive, heteronormative romance. In doing so, it highlights the extent to which the iconography of such narratives remains powerful even when we as adults/feminists/socialists/intersectional scholars know how these stories can and have been used to support patriarchal hierarchies of power and difference.

In an extension of this idea, the film's style colludes with the fairy-tale imagery, telling the story through intimate close-ups and intense camera identification with Moll. The sensuous *mise-en-scène*, horizontal panning, and focus on touch and texture all evoke the 'haptic visuality' that Laura Marks describes as a recurring motif in feminist and intercultural film, one that encourages an immersed, embodied dynamic between the viewer and the images onscreen.[3] In the scene where Moll and Pascal have sex in the woods, the camera is so close to their bodies that it obscures them. This has the effect of making 'vision difficult and thus to invite the viewer to feel rather than see the film, to make contact with its skin', as Jennifer Barker says of experimental porn film.[4] In the following scene, the camera focuses on the clamminess of Moll's face and neck as she lies back on a plush cream couch, her lips and fingernails embedded with dirt. Pearce succeeds in making the viewer want to get even more submerged in the diegetic world of the film. When asked what draws her to this man who is undoing all that should be good in her life, she replies, '[h]is smell' – and the viewer can only imagine what that scent might be like. The visual cues and evocations of other senses encourage an embodied spectatorship that allows the viewer to identify closely with Moll's experiences rather than coolly observe them.

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[2] Sue Short, *Fairy Tale and Film: Old Tales with a New Spin* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave, 2014), p. 92.

[3] See Laura U. Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).

[4] Jennifer M. Barker, *The Tactile Eye: Touch and the Cinematic Experience* (Berkeley: University of California, 2009), p. 23.

Concurrently, when Moll becomes isolated after Pascal's arrest and detainment, we are immersed in the embodied representation of her moral disorientation and physical disgust. The transgressive nature of remaining loyal to a man accused of sexually violent crimes has not only contaminated Moll in the eyes of the community; she absorbs the shame into her body as well. After providing an alibi for Pascal on the night of the victim's abduction, the police confront her with photographic images of the girl's brutalised and discarded corpse. Moll later burrows into the waterlogged earth to make her own shallow grave and swallows clay to see how it felt to be one of those girls. The viewer (and perhaps she) can only speculate as to her motivations: guilt, morbid curiosity, or even bizarre sexual jealousy. Moll's self-actualisation ultimately involves destroying Pascal, but again it is ambiguous whether this is motivated by self-preservation, feminine solidarity, or revenge and as such cannot be untangled from her boyfriend's predation and violence.

In this way, the film eschews traditional cause-and-effect psychologising explanations for its protagonist's actions, in favour of representing moment-to-moment reactions to her environment and new information. The experience of watching *Beast* is anxiety inducing, as much as it is voyeuristically pleasurable. Moll as a character becomes even more compelling when this relationship makes her realise that she is not now, nor has she ever been, a 'nice', 'normal' girl, and we stayed enraptured with her tactile emotional chaos until the film's tumultuous and satisfying conclusion.

Máiréad Casey

***The First Purge*, dir. by Gerard McMurray** (Universal Pictures, 2018)

The First Purge might initially appear to have nothing original about it – it seems to be little more than a B movie, where participants have twelve hours to commit whatever crimes they wish without repercussion. There are, however, a few interesting elements to the film, the fourth instalment of the *Purge* franchise (2013-present). Building upon the earlier chapters, *The First Purge*, the most financially successful film in the series to date, has a slightly more developed and insightful narrative, especially from a social-science and economic perspective, and provides some depth to the concept of 'Purge Night'.[1] Directed by Gerard McMurray and starring Y'lan Noel, Lex Scott Davis, Joivan Wade, Mugga, Luna Lauren Velez, Kristen Solis, and Marisa Tomei, the film depicts the origins of the yearly activity as a 'social experiment'.

Set in the mid-twenty-first century, the government has been overthrown by the New Founding Fathers of America (NFFA). The main action of *The First Purge* begins with NFFA members Arlo Sabian (Patch Darragh) and Dr May Updale (Marisa Tomei) announcing live on TV that the experimental purge will take place on Staten Island. Before this, we see various interviewees being asked questions to judge their suitability for the experiment. The NFFA offers five thousand dollars to the residents of the island to stay in their homes during the experiment, as well as financial compensation to those directly participating in the violence; Staten-Island inhabitants can choose to take part, though few of them do. The NFFA also give participants tracking devices and contact lenses with cameras so that they can monitor the night's activity, 'Big Brother'-style. Many choose to leave the island, others choose to stay but not participate, and others are trapped due to unforeseen circumstances. Activist Nya (Lex Scott Davis), her little brother Isaiah (Joivan Wade) and drug dealer Dimitri (Y'lan Noel), amongst others, remain – not as participants, but as potential victims.

As well as showcasing acts of violence, *The First Purge* also highlights the deplorable living conditions that the residents of Staten Island endure. Not only is the housing substandard, but, as we learn early on, through pre-purge interviews conducted with potential participants for Purge Night, the area has a considerable drug problem. It is important to note that this disadvantaged community is predominantly black and minority. Given the current political debates surrounding race in America, this is not only topical, but extremely relevant to contemporary US issues, particularly recent police shootings of unarmed black civilians.

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[1] See <https://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=purge4.htm> [accessed 15 October 2018].

The aim of the first Purge Night is to establish the impact of the night's violence on crime rates generally. For example, the authorities are interested to see whether the escalated violence that they anticipate occurring on the night will reduce overall subsequent crime rates, as the violence is supposed to function as a form of 'catharsis' for the community. Purge Night is therefore focused primarily on 'fixing' an impoverished 'problem' area by using violence as a tool to cull and calm the population, as opposed to addressing constructively the socio-economic factors and societal inequalities that cause these problems in the first place, such as poverty, lack of infrastructure, inadequate education, and healthcare. This is a system that works to sweep these issues under the carpet rather than deal with them head on.

The 'solutions' depicted here also mirror conservative views and the process of othering certain segments of the population along the lines of race and social status. In particular, the film evokes eugenics and 'black-on-black' violence; the authorities are essentially asking the population to sort itself out, but the recommended methods mark this population as fundamentally alien to 'respectable' society. What is more, although participation in Purge Night is voluntary, as there is a monetary incentive to take part, it gives many of financially disadvantaged population hope of a better life – they hardly have a 'choice' at all. For the community, the potential to earn money, and a sharp awareness of the immediate needs that it would feed, distract from the fact that this is essentially a population cull of the poorest sections of the population. The film therefore positions Purge Night and the experiment as exploitative, a point underlined when it evolves into a game that the powerful and rich, as in other *Purge* films, have a choice to participate in, unlike those to whom poverty has denied this choice.

While thematically the focus is on socio-economic issues, those who enjoy the violent element of the series will not be disappointed, as there is still enough excitement to hold an audience's attention. Most of the film's violence is perpetrated by a group of mercenaries hired by the NFFA, and one rogue member of the Staten-Island community, drug addict Skeletor (Rotimi Paul). Skeletor appears to be the epitome of the 'evil' and feral archetype that Purge Night would appeal to in the first place; the inclusion of such a character allows the filmmakers to go so far as to feature threats of rape among the usual acts of violence committed on the night. Sexual assault and rape have generally not featured in any of the previous instalments in the *Purge* series. In light of the deviant nature of Purge Night, it seems bizarre that violent sexual crimes were not really addressed to this extent prior to this

film. Indeed, this could be considered problematic, considering that the film deals with lower socio-economic groupings than the earlier films do. *The First Purge* could therefore be read as attributing this crime specifically to those on lower social tiers, as the focus in the previous films is more on wealthy characters.

As the narrative progresses, however, we see that the real enemy is external, as mercenaries are recruited by the NFFA to interfere with the way in which the situation would have naturally played out for participants; this is 'necessary' because, it emerges, the NFFA and scientists have over-estimated the level of violence that would occur. The mercenaries are masked, dressed as members the Ku Klux Klan and in Nazi uniforms, and are depicted as cold and calculating, opening fire on the unarmed crowd hiding in a church and hunting down those who roam the streets. This visual motif can be seen as referencing 'white crimes' such as the rise of fascism and Nazi groups, but perhaps more specifically also echoes the spate of shootings in the United States perpetrated by lone white men. Although not subtle, the inclusion of these spectres of white violence highlights the fact that the enemy is external, as it becomes clear that the original participants only rarely attack each other.

As with many depictions of covert governmental operations, ranging from *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012) to the *Bourne Identity* series (2002-16), this interference in the system is ultimately cleaned up (just as rogue spies are conventionally killed off by hired contract killers and so on). In a clichéd fashion, Dr Updale realises too late that her experiment has been taken too far, when she discovers that the results are being tampered with by the introduction of the mercenaries. Her motivations, although idealistic, are also positioned by the film as rigorously scientific and of benefit to society at large, and once she finds out that the mercenaries have been drafted in to kill people because the naturally occurring violence was minimal, she understands that her experiment has turned into a genocide. This sets the scene perfectly for Purge Night to become an accepted part of life for the future, as the details of Updale's original findings and the initial motivations for the purge are hidden from the 'respectable' public, making it appear more democratic and universally beneficial for all those involved.

The First Purge is by no means a ground-breaking film. It is, nonetheless, enjoyable in a 'B-movie' fashion, reminiscent of *Assault on Precinct 13* (1973), relying on clichés and somewhat tired tropes – such as a bubbling love story, a 'bad guy' becoming the 'good guy', and plenty of gunfire and action sequences. The script is also completely unmemorable, being more functional than anything (such as Dr Updale dramatically asking 'what have I done?!'),

and merely serving to move the narrative along with the action. The film does, however, mostly feature a black cast that largely controls the narrative, and is framed from the perspective of African-American characters, which is refreshing. The sense of fear is also nicely evoked; the NFFA are terrifying, relatively faceless, with hidden motivations, and perfectly suited to what is essentially a dystopian thriller. It also raises some contemporary issues, albeit in a somewhat simplistic fashion, allowing for conversation about the socio-economic factors that minorities face in the US.

Overall, what makes this instalment unique to the series is how *The First Purge* focuses primarily – at least initially – on those of lower socio-economic status, as opposed to the wealthy, who are featured heavily throughout the remainder of the series. It also shows activism and resistance from this demographic in the form of small ineffectual protests depicted early in the film. McMurray does a highly commendable job in rejuvenating what potentially could be a dying franchise, adding a much more 'relatable' dynamic to this movie, as it shows how the Purge has its roots in the contempt that the rich have for the 'ordinary' people. It is not only less elitist and more democratic than previous instalments, but also shows that fundamentally, people of a lower economic status are less violent, more moral, and more resilient than those of the upper classes may have expected. The frightening thing, given the current cultural milieu, is that this vision of the future seems very plausible, and perhaps *The First Purge* is, more than anything, actually a cautionary tale, warning us of what politics may become.

Caroline Egan

***The Ritual*, dir. by David Bruckner** (eOne Films, 2017)

After an unexpected death, four old university friends decide to commemorate their deceased companion with a hiking trip to Northern Sweden. When injury necessitates a short cut through a dense and ancient woodland, the trip turns into a desperate flight for survival. *The Ritual*, based on the Adam Nevill novel of the same name, is David Bruckner's second horror film as director, with a sharply written script by Joe Barton. The premise of the film is far from original; a group of over-confident and under-prepared characters enter the woods and encounter something horrific. It is a narrative motif central to a wide range of films as diverse as *Deliverance* (1972), *The Blair Witch Project* (1999), and *Green Inferno* (2013). Despite its familiar origins, in the capable hands of Bruckner and his skilled collaborators, this treatment of the material delivers a very original story with unsettling, eerie moments.

Shooting in Romania as a substitute for Sweden, Bruckner uses the film's remote location and small cast to focus the narrative and deliver an impactful film with relatively limited resources, relying more on creating a pervasive atmosphere of dread than on gory spectacle. The cast (Rafe Spall as guilt-ridden Luke, Arsher Ali as the witty Phil, Robert James-Collier as the problem-solving Hutch, and Sam Troughton as the ebullient Dom) all deliver excellent performances, exchanging dialogue which is so snappy and immediate that it seems to be almost improvised. The characters are skilfully drawn, with overlapping interests and motivations, resulting in a group that are believably laddish, yet held together by a clear bond of friendship. Many poorly written horror films are flawed from the outset by the writer's need for narrative conflict, a conflict often created by crafting a group of interesting but disparate characters who have no authentic motivation for being together. College sports teams, family interventions, and Hollywood ambition are conventions used to gather characters who otherwise appear to dislike each other. Such inauthentic ensembles feature in films as diverse as *Jeepers Creepers II* (2003), the 2013 *Evil Dead* remake, and *Starry Eyes* (2014). While doing so provides narrative conflict and even tension, the use of such devices often results in artificiality and unrealistic character arcs, distancing the viewer from the action.

The characters in *The Ritual*, however, are part of a carefully delineated group dynamic, each with complementary strengths and foibles. All have been affected by the sudden violent death of their friend Robert (Paul Reid), but none feel it more acutely than Luke. Because of Luke's reluctance to let go of his youth and because of a split-second act of cowardice, Luke blames himself for Robert's death. Luke's guilt provides the audience's

gateway into the story, but each character offers something unique and, as they are picked off one by one, the relationships realign, pushing the survivors to their emotional limits, revealing unexpected depths or resentments. Character and relationships therefore drive this survival narrative, ensuring that every scene is weighted with significance and dread. Bruckner uses the journey as a crucible to test the characters; propelled by violence toward violence, he sets them on a journey where they have only themselves as a resource. Brutal tragedy has pushed the four friends on this path, unifying them in a ritual of memorialisation, making them leave behind the modern world and their previous lives. This nordic odyssey strips away all conceits and affectations, forcing them to fracture old friendships and find new strengths, with only their raw character to help them survive an ancient evil.

There is, however, another major element at work in the narrative – the Woods. The rural, arboreal setting has recurred with increasing frequency in horror cinema since the turn of the millennium, arguably reflecting anxieties about cultural and political precariousness, as Victoria McCollum suggests.[1] By situating the woods as a place of death, Bruckner offers an unspoken reminder of humanity's mortality and decay, subtly suggesting that the plant world we casually ignore will always be indifferent to us, possessing an 'absolute alterity', and reminding us that plant life can, in the end, cover our very graves.[2] Shulkind's cinematography maximises these qualities, lingering on the landscape and drifting across the trees, successfully conveying the bleak remoteness, desolation, and stillness of the landscape and dense forest. Shulkind's use of a high-aperture setting on the camera lens means that the extreme depth of field in the image allows the whole landscape to appear in sharp focus, even into the distance. The consequence of this is that, with everything in the same focal plane, the normal three-dimensionality of the location depicted flattens out, creating a strange alienated space. This technique visually abstracts the closely growing trees, making them look alien and threatening, transforming the woods into a screen of branch and bark hiding terrible secrets. This technique also uniquely facilitates multiple layers of storytelling in a single, framed composition. This is used to particularly shocking effect, as subtle movement makes us suddenly realise that the characters we have been closely watching are not in fact alone in the wooded landscape.

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[1] Victoria McCollum, *Post 9/11 Heartland Horror: Rural Horror Films in an Era of Urban Terrorism* (London: Routledge, 2018), p.110.
[2] Dawn Keetley, 'Introduction: Six Theses on Plant Horror; or, Why Are Plants Horrifying?', in *Plant Horror: Approaches to the Monstrous Vegetal in Horror*, ed. by Dawn Keetley and Angela Tengu (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), pp.1-32 (p.6).

Ben Lovett's score is strongly evocative in communicating this uncanny presence, via descending *glissando* dissonance and trembling *sul ponticello* strings, conveying a threat and eeriness that is heavy in the cool, damp air. The forest becomes a liminal space that reveals the characters' frustration and resentment, but also surprising tenderness and care for one another. Mark Towns's editing sharpens the threat established by sound and camera work, cutting away before the viewer is certain of what they have seen, and lingering on the emotional consequences of events. This subtly expresses the dread which descends on the small group. Ghinea Diana's art direction and the production design by Adrian Curelea visually communicate the impermanence of human kind's creations when set against such an ancient and indifferent green world. Abandoned vehicles and decayed equipment subsumed and physically enmeshed in the landscape suggest the impermanence of humanity's interests and achievements, and the inevitability of our demise in the face of time and the impersonal hostility of nature. Diana's and Curelea's skills also offer some persuasively dream-like nightmare visuals, surreally yet naturalistically blending woodland glade with retail lighting and fixings in Luke's recurrent nightmares.

Bruckner, for most of the film, wisely offers only glimpses and hints of the ancient, terrible thing that tracks and hunts the friends through the woods – a three-fingered skeletal hand too high on a branch; a half-seen grey shape slowly but suddenly moving in frame. These fleeting, incomplete phantasms leave us to make sense of the gaps, forcing us, like the protagonists, to impose meaning on what we see. The deep growls, gurgles, and knocks of the sound design are equally effective in this strategy. One particularly harrowing scene communicates a shocking unnatural violence purely through the begging screams of one of the surviving characters, aurally conveying a vicious, uncanny brutality that few visuals could ever impart so convincingly. In doing so, Bruckner, in effect, makes us co-performers in this violent narrative.[3]

Keith Thompson does a superlative job of creature design, with skills honed through his work for Guillermo del Toro on *Crimson Peak* (2015) and *The Strain* (2014-17). Thompson constructs a contradictory creature, something which appears natural, but unnatural, new, yet ancient, terrifyingly different to anything else the audience might have seen, and in so doing visually imparts the creature's uncanny, otherworldly nature. The design also makes the creature a challenge to recognise, even when we get a clear look at it, and the protagonists also struggle to recognise when its influence is at work. The psychic and

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[3]Jerome Bruner, *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), p. 27.

emotional influence of the creature, both supernatural and contaminative, is conveyed through the protagonists' shame and abjection, as it bends them to its will. From the first encounter, it is clear that they are physically and spiritually out of their depth, yet the complacent, secular logic of the modern world prevents them from acknowledging their ignorance of the ancient natural world and recognising the supernatural danger they are in, until it is too late.

While the basic story may cover well-trodden territory, this particular telling carves out a fresh path through that old forest, revealing features seldom seen before. As it wends its way, the trail offers insights and visions which are engaging and genuinely unsettling. The cast, especially Spall, give exceptional, subtle performances, made yet more real by excellent technical support. Bruckner clearly knows his horror, and is unafraid of showing the emotional and psychological pain and suffering that are so often glibly passed over in horror cinema. *The Ritual* is a rewarding, if frightening, walk through the darkest of woods.

Gerard Gibson

Unsane, dir. by Steven Soderbergh (Bleecker Street, 2018)

Horror has a love-hate relationship with mental health. At the same time that it gives voice to those othered by their struggles with mental-health issues and those who care for them, it also demonises those same parties, turning madness into a threat every bit as unapproachable as any supernatural demon or spirit. It turns mental institutions into prisons and their staffs into gothic villains and mad scientists seeking to manipulate and torture patients for their own sadistic gains. Films that feature such settings pit patients against staff – *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1975), *Shutter Island* (2010), *The Ward* (2010), *Stonehearst Asylum* (2014) – or patients against the world – *Halloween* (1978), *Silence of the Lambs* (1991), *Split* (2016). This is not to mention the many horrific figures who never make it to the hospital but who give audiences a first-hand view of dangerous delusions. The trailer for Steven Soderbergh's 2018 *Unsane* wedges the film right in the middle of this filmic mental-asylum tradition, focusing on a young woman coerced into a restrictive hospital but who may belong there after all. The fear is that she is, in fact, not in control of her mind and its interpretation of the world. The even bigger fear is that she is perfectly well, and that the surrounding world conspires to suppress a sane mind into an 'unsane' one. The biggest fear of all is that we, the audience, can't tell the difference.

In one sense, the film plays right into audience expectations about asylum horror films. Soderberg has been in this setting before, with projects like *Side Effects* (2013) and *The Knick* (2014-15), but these films focused on different sinister angles of mental-health care. In *Unsane*, we briefly see protagonist Sawyer Valentini (Claire Foy) at her new job as a financial consultant in a new city. We witness her strained relationships with others: snapping at a customer, forcing a conversation with her mother, ducking advances from her boss, encouraging a fleeting (failed) sexual encounter with a stranger. She does not ingratiate herself with the audience, coming across as cold, brusque, and self-centred. In this context, we learn that, as a victim of stalking, she struggles with PTSD. Her paranoia has a reasonable origin but comes across as irrational, now living 450 miles from the incident as she does. We don't feel like she's in any real danger, and no one else is alarmed. She goes to see a counsellor, who turns a vague statement – that she doesn't want to live a life of fear – into a suicide concern. Sawyer signs paperwork as a new patient, and that's when things get weird: entrapment, dehumanisation, and gaslighting ensue. Sawyer's voice and credibility are taken away with her clothes and belongings.

As in most horror films, the authorities prove to be useless. Her first call, 911, is disregarded, and the lawyer who her mother speaks to offers little help. The villains of the first half of the film are, undoubtedly, the hospital staff that refuses to acknowledge Sawyer's humanity and that thrives on her vulnerability, as well as several of the other patients who repeatedly harass her. A more ubiquitous villain is the health-insurance and healthcare institutions. The hospital must meet a certain quota of patients, so they entrap those with insurance into their care, most of whom do not need this type of observation. When the insurance company stops paying, they release them. Thus, not only does the system routinely terrorise those with inadequate or no insurance by barring them from the care they need; the film shows them also forcing care on those who don't need it, damaging their civil liberties, physical and mental. This statement on the American healthcare system alters the traditional focus on patients or staff as threat, extending it to the larger groups they represent.

A second disturbing villain emerges once it becomes clear that Sawyer is not paranoid; her mental faculties hold up remarkably well considering the circumstances. She begins to see her stalker, David Strine (Joshua Leonard), among the staff, a claim no-one else believes. Under a false identity, he mixes up her meds, confirms her instability to the doctors, and eventually gets her alone in solitary confinement – just the two of them: staff and patient, stalker and prey. And, because of the anonymity of the system, Strine documents her as 'discharged', ensuring that no-one knows that she's there.

What is most brilliant about this film is not just the statement on the broken American healthcare field (we've seen that before in films like *Saw VI* (2009)). Anxieties about health insurance, capitalist intents, and inhuman human quotas quickly overshadow the old anxieties about mental-health patients as monstrous or the staff as pure evil. Beyond this is the more daring stark reality of the stalker and the harsh, almost visceral, frustration of not being believed about the danger one is in. We've seen stalkers and their victims before. In fact, most horror films include them. But *Unsane* deals specifically with the matter of a woman reporting her abuse and facing disbelief on the part of authorities who control her. Every step of that disbelief can be deadly, from not believing Sawyer that she doesn't need to be locked up, to not believing her that one of the staff members is her stalker, to not believing that locking her up with this man as her superior poses a threat to her mental and, most of all, physical wellbeing.

By putting all these themes side by side, Soderberg shows how both mental health and sexual harassment are judged, discredited, shoved aside, locked up. Both situations

dehumanise the victim or patient through systemic gaslighting. The question must also be raised: did we believe her? Were we, as audience, complicit in this disbelief? The film certainly sets us up to be. Shortly after Sawyer has been locked in with other patients for the night, she bangs on the door, and a man opens it. Both Sawyer and the audience see Strine open the door, and Sawyer punches him. When the camera cuts back to this man, however, it is another staff member whom she has punched, leaving us to believe that these clear images of her stalker are just delusions projected onto other people. We've seen this before in her life outside the hospital, but never such an extreme case of misrecognition. We see that her perception is false with our own eyes, so when we see Strine handing out meds, we assume it's her paranoia getting the best of her again, and we doubt her ability to perceive and assess her own danger. When we see him again, however, he proves his existence by looking her in the eye and flashing a letter addressed to her mother, presumably stolen from her house. This sneaky move proves both that he is real – the other staff members not knowing or caring about her as an individual – and that he has become an even bigger threat, now expanding his stalking to her mother. After this confirmation that it is Strine, our own ability to navigate another's trauma and experience comes into question. Her reactions are normal. We are the ones who can't recognise that until it's become too late, and then we become horrified by her invisibility and our place in putting her there. We have seen what Sawyer sees, and we still have the nerve to demand further proof from the people around her, from those outside what she's seeing. They deny that he is Strine. It is only when Strine reveals himself to be real by producing the letter and then engaging directly with his victim that we believe Sawyer: we believe evidence from the predator, not the victim.

This is a masterful statement on the #MeToo movement and the overwhelming challenges to women who want to come forward to report stalkers, abusers, sexual predators, and rapists.[1] Not being believed leads to not being seen as reliable or rational or sane: is this person delusional? For women in this vulnerable position, this is the real horror. The fact that Soderberg filmed the entire feature with an iPhone further locates it in this political context, as more and more hate and sex crimes are captured on phones, revealing abuses ignored by law enforcement and the media, that were previously left purely to circumstances evidence and 'he said, she said'. Soderberg blames his small budget on the decision to shoot with an iPhone, but he later claimed it offered him freedoms he didn't have with a traditional

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[1] Jess Joho also makes this connection to the #MeToo movement in '*The Crown* Star Claire Foy Embodies #MeToo in New Thriller *Unsane*', *Mashable*, 27 March 2018 <https://mashable.com/2018/03/27/steven-soderbergh-unsane-horror-movie-me-too/#zUWDSQQ4piq9> [accessed 7 October 2018].

camera.[2] There have been mixed responses to this decision in terms of the quality and colour of the film.[3] I would argue that, considering the content of the film and unsettling, unpolished, unglamorised position of the protagonist, the iPhone created the confused sense of reality/unreality that so troubles the audience and that sets this aside from other asylum horror films.

Laura R. Kremmel

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[2] Eric Kohn, 'Steven Soderbergh Says He's Done Directing Studio Movies and Wants to Only Shoot on iPhones—Sundance 2018', *IndiWire*, 26 January 2018 <http://www.indiewire.com/2018/01/steven-soderbergh-interview-sundance-iphone-unsane-1201921769/> [accessed 7 October 2018].

[3] See Charles Bramesco, '*Unsane*: How Steven Soderbergh Manages to Thrill with Just an iPhone', *Guardian*, 21 March 2018 <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2018/mar/21/unsane-iphone-steven-soderbergh-thriller-shot-camera> [accessed 7 October 2018]; and Tasha Robinson, 'Steven Soderbergh's All-iPhone Movie *Unsane* Makes a Poor Showing for the iPhone 7', *The Verge*, 23 March 2018 <https://www.theverge.com/2018/3/23/17156978/unsane-movie-review-iphone-7-steven-soderbergh-claire-foy> [accessed 7 October 2018].

The Cured, dir. by David Freyne (IFC Films, 2017)

The Cured (2017), a zombie horror movie and the first feature film from writer and director David Freyne, premiered at the Toronto Film Festival in September 2017 and was released in Ireland in April of this year. The movie is set in Dublin and was produced by Ellen Page, who also co-stars.[1] *The Cured* is probably best described as an Irish zombie movie that incorporates a political allegory. Freyne's flesh-eaters are clearly not the revivified corpses of the traditional zombie movie. Seventy-five per cent of the film's infected population are, as the film opens, now believed to be cured of the virus, which took over their bodies and left them psychotic and hungry for human flesh. Haunted by flashbacks of their former flesh-eating ways, they are being reintegrated into a society where survivors cannot forgive or forget their deeds.

Freyne has stated in an interview for *Variety* in September 2017 that the idea for *The Cured* came to him seven years ago. It was 'inspired by a lot of politics that was happening in Europe and Ireland at the time, where people were suffering and kind of bailing out banks and being held responsible for things beyond their control, like the cured are'.[2] The sectarian conflict between Unionists and Nationalists in Northern Ireland during the Troubles is additionally hinted at (at one stage a pipe bomb is thrown and, in an allusion to the Maze Prison, which housed paramilitary prisoners during The Troubles, the virus that caused the zombie outbreak is called the 'Maze'). At the same time, the allegory also works when applied to the recent world-wide discrimination faced by refugees or to the Israeli/Palestine conflict. The cured here are victims, not monsters.

As victims, they are constantly harassed – by probation officers, the army, and the police – and discriminated against by society at large. The cured who have relatives willing to take them back – such as Senan (Sam Keeley) – return to suburbia from rehabilitation, but an unwelcome majority remain in half-way houses where probation officers seek to demean them, particularly those who have held positions of power in their former lives. Accordingly, Senan's friend Conor (Tom Vaughan-Lawlor), who resides in one such building and was a barrister before he became infected, is demoted from advocate to street-sweeper. In a twist on

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[1] In an interview with *Den of Geek* in May 2018, Page states that she was drawn to the project because she loved the script and its interesting new take. She refers to it as 'a film where in some scenes you're running from zombies and in the next you feel like you're shooting a small family drama. I just thought it so interesting tonally and a new twist on the genre'. Interview with Matt Edwards, *Den of Geek*, 9 May 2018 <http://www.denofgeek.com/uk/movies/ellen-page/57550/ellen-page-interview-the-cured-zombies-producing-and-more> [accessed 30 May 2018].

[2] See 'Ellen Page on Zombie Movie *The Cured*: "It Blew Me Away"', Toronto Film Festival, *Variety*, 2017 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DKO2SZIGhcE> [accessed 30 May 2018].

such run-of-the-mill zombie movies as George Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) and Danny Boyle's *28 Days Later* (2002), where the infected are portrayed as mindless monsters, the cured, as they struggle to come to terms with their demoted status and the prejudice they encounter are, initially at least, granted more depth and humanity than their persecutors. The power-crazed police and military that control the city and the often biased and unforgiving citizens of Dublin are the real beasts here. We feel nothing but compassion for the silences and uncertainties of the former zombies as they strive to find ways to deal with both the State and the psychological trauma they endure. We find ourselves moved by Senan's tenderness for his nephew, Cillian (Oscar Nolan) and impressed by Conor's wry wit in the face of continuous harassment. Scorned by their intellectual inferiors, they are the ultimate outsiders.

An analogy could be drawn here with the politically driven science-fiction thriller *District 9* (2009), where the empathy of the audience is likewise with mistreated alien-others – that is, if Freyne's allegory did not become increasingly complex and confused as the line blurs between oppressor and oppressed in the final third of the film. When Conor, as leader of an underground movement of ex-flesh-eaters, convinces the group that freedom lies in wreaking havoc on the State, and the uncured are released from prison onto the streets of Dublin to consume and terrorise the innocent, identification with the outsider is lost. Freyne's intention to mirror the journey from civil-rights movement to violent protest to civil war is evident, but it fails. A movement that was born out of justifiable grievances not only fights back, but is now the enemy of man himself. Only Senan faces up to Conor and remains virtuous. Disappointingly, however, this division of the two male lead characters into 'good' and 'bad' rehabilitated flesh-eater seems clichéd and breaks the allegorical spell.

The problem, in part, lies with the fact that Tom Vaughan-Lawlor's character is less developed than Keeley's: through the use of flashbacks, we are given more insight into Senan's character, and thus more readily relate to his struggle to reintegrate into society. Vaughan-Lawlor's performance as Conor is mesmerising, but his character is simply too wicked as leader of the dissenting and radicalised band of revolutionaries (he recalls Count Orlok in *Nosferatu, A Symphony of Horror* (1922)) to carry the political metaphor. Stripped of all redeeming qualities, it is difficult to feel empathy for Conor or his fellow rebels when they finally take the law into their own hands. Moreover, it is unclear as to whose side, exactly, the audience is meant to be on when the only solution offered to the murder and mayhem caused by the dissidents is a discriminatory and corrupt Irish State.

But if the political analogy flounders, the action does not. The story moves from domestic drama (with the aforementioned release and return of the cured but guilt-ridden Senan to his widowed and grieving sister-in-law's house (Ellen Page)) to zombie horror movie with ease, with the horror element introduced drip by drip. The cannibalistic element is first witnessed in Senan's flashbacks to his flesh-eating past, then intensified with a disturbing portrayal of a feral, yet clearly distressed, uncured female zombie at the hospital where Senan works as a porter. Conor's menacing attempts to intimidate and control Senan's sister-in-law, Abbie, also sends shivers down the spine and anticipates what's to come. It is not until the former barrister's fanaticism and predatory nature are fully revealed, however, that the movie has us grasping our seats – and when the infected escape and create mayhem on the streets of Dublin with a mass zombie attack, true zombie gore is finally seen. An imbalance might have occurred here, between riveting drama – where issues such as post-traumatic stress, and the power of memory to invade the present, are put under the spotlight – and traditional zombie movie, with the infected hunting in packs. It is to Freyne's credit that this does not occur – and this is due not only to the well-paced introduction of the horror element, but also to the continuity provided by the setting and to Sam Keeley's impressive performance.

The Dublin of *The Cured* is a soulless wasteland. The dimly lit city is filled with graffitied walls and vacant and decaying spaces, the red brick of the houses the only warmth on the murky green, brown, and grey palate that migrates from street to house. Recalling Belfast in the 1970s, the streets are filled with army trucks, and strewn with discarded newspapers and rubbish, the khaki green of the soldiers' uniforms mirroring the green walls of Abbie's home and Senan's jacket as he wanders like a lost soul through the streets of Dublin. Just as Senan states that he feels the continued presence of another being trapped inside his body, and cannot escape his memories, so too the city enwraps him in its sombre cocoon. That he is weighed down is evident by his performance – he constantly avoids eye contact and stares at the ground, going so far inside himself that he sometimes appears reluctant to speak. And while Page and Vaughan-Lawlor are utterly convincing as the characters they play, it is Keeley who carries the show, and who ultimately provides continuity, as he crosses the divide from flesh-eater to cured and back again in a superb performance.

All in all, despite its flaws, this is a zombie horror movie for the thinking person and a promising debut from Freyne. *The Cured* not only leaves us aghast as the citizens of Dublin

are hunted and consumed by the infected; it also leads us to question the very society we live in. Everyone who has ever suffered discrimination from the State or its citizens will empathise with the plight of the cured. As Freyne has said, the cured are 'being held responsible for things beyond their control'.

Wendy Mooney

Alien: Covenant, dir. by Ridley Scott (Twentieth Century Fox, 2017)

Alien: Covenant is the sixth instalment in the much-celebrated and critically acclaimed science-fiction/horror saga initiated in 1979 by Ridley Scott's *Alien* and consisting also of James Cameron's *Aliens* (1986), David Fincher's *Alien³* (1992), Jean-Pierre Jeunet's *Alien: Resurrection* (1997) and the prequel film *Prometheus* (Scott, 2012).[1] *Alien: Covenant* is also the twenty-fourth work by the eclectic eighty-year-old British producer and director, whose work has successfully spanned all cinematic genres, from science fiction (*Blade Runner*, 1982), through costume and historical drama (*1492: Conquest of Paradise*, 1992, and *Kingdom of Heaven*, 2005) and fantasy (*Legend*, 1985), to the detective film (*Black Rain*, 1989), the road movie (*Thelma and Louise*, 1991) and comedy (*A Good Year*, 2006).

Covenant is a sequel to *Prometheus*; the earlier film depicts the search for the origins of the human species by a group of scientists, explorers, and the leading members of the Weyland Corporation, tracing their encounter with a being belonging to the race of the so-called Engineers. In *Prometheus*, the explorers discover near the end of the film that the last surviving Engineer had been frozen into hyper-sleep thousands of years earlier, preventing him from destroying Earth, a mission that he fortunately does not complete upon awakening. *Prometheus* is filled with references to religion, specifically Christian beliefs (allegedly, the Engineers' mission to destroy our planet was ordered around the time of Christ's death), the creation of life (the protagonist is sterile, but she gives birth to an alien life form), and, in a nod to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), the horror of a creator refusing his own progeny. The film builds ruthlessly towards its monumental finale: after the excitement of the journey through space and the promise of discovering the origins of humankind – a question that remains unanswered in the end – only the female protagonist of the story, Dr Elizabeth Shaw (Noomi Rapace), survives the encounter with the hostile life forms. At the end of the story, she journeys in the company of the seriously damaged android David (Michael Fassbender) towards the Engineers' planet in search of answers – personal, ethical, and theological.

Covenant begins in 2104, ten years after the previous expedition, and focuses on the crew of the eponymous starship transporting 2000 colonists and 1140 embryos to the habitable planet Origae-6. After a neutrino tempest damages the ship and kills its captain, the crew receives a rogue transmission from a nearby planet, which apparently also possesses all the characteristics for being inhabitable. The new (reluctant and insecure) captain of the

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[1] I have excluded from the count *Alien vs. Predator* (2004) and *Alien vs. Predator: Requiem* (2007) as outside of the *Alien* 'canon'.

vessel, Chris Oram (Billy Crudup), accompanied by a group of crew-members – including the second in command, the previous captain's wife, Daniels (Catherine Waterstone) – thus descends on the planet. Here, they find the crashed starship that carried Dr Shaw and David; this of course is actually the Engineers' home planet. They are accompanied also by Walter (Michael Fassbender), a more attentive and efficient version of the David android. During the exploration of the planet, two crew-members are infected by the spores of a local plant and die soon after, by 'giving birth' to hostile, albino hybrid creatures that attack the members of the expedition after the sun sets (dusk falls rapidly on the planet). A hooded David intervenes to help the group of explorers, and leads them to an abandoned city filled with the carbonised bodies of the Engineers, all frozen in tragic poses. While the team attempts to contact the ship in orbit, David confronts first his own brother, Walter, and then Captain Oram. The android admits having raped and killed Dr Shaw and having experimented with the pathogen for the creation of the alien life forms, which he defines as 'gorgeous'. The captain is deceived by David and attacked by a facehugger, a crab-life creature that can 'impregnate' other life forms. He then gives birth to the darker-coloured form of the alien that the spectators of the saga are familiar with. In the meantime, David fights against Walter, while the remaining crew-members attempt to leave the planet. The film ends with a predictable twist eliminating the possibility of a happy ending, in spite of the multiple victories against the xenomorphs. The biblical meaning of the term 'covenant' as a bond agreed upon by two groups or parties thus assumes a negative connotation by the film's end; the bond has been broken by David's betrayal of the human species at large and his probable attempts to create a colony of xenomorphs out of the bodies of the colonists.

There is, therefore, no redemption at the end of *Covenant*, no positive hints at the future progress of humanity or the development of science. In this sense, the film confirms Ziaddun Sardar and Sean Cubitt's definition of science fiction as 'both afraid of science and in love with science'.[2] The technological advancements that, according to the fictional universe of the *Alien* saga, have allowed human beings to create artificial intelligences and to travel through space have only produced the potential for the annihilation of humankind, and have led to David's probable future reign of terror on Orega-6. As Matt Zoller Seitz has noted, the film 'only looks like a hard sci-fi film about technology and rational thought. In its heart it's more of a dark fairy tale about destruction and creation, death and birth, parents and children (biological and figurative), and sexual violation and monogamous love (many of the

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[2] Ziaddun Sardar and Sean Cubitt, 'Introduction', in *Aliens R Us: The Other in Science Fiction Cinema*, ed. by Sardar and Cubitt (London: Pluto Press, 2002), pp.1-17 (p. 5).

crew are married)'.[3] Questions relating to parenthood are indeed central to the plot of *Covenant* and emphasise the link of the film with its predecessors. On the one hand, this film confirms the tendency of the previous instalments of the saga to elide the anatomical distinction between males and females on which our culture is based, as aliens are given birth to mainly by male characters. *Covenant* is therefore about male gestation and birth, an inversion of parental roles that could terrify some male spectators because, as Chad Hermann has argued about *Alien*, 'here the patriarchal imagination is not afraid of mother; it is afraid of *becoming* mother'.[4] On the other hand, a narrative investment in a female protagonist is evident in the many parallels that can be established between Ripley (Sigourney Weaver), the main character and 'Final Girl' of the first four films, and Daniels, the female protagonist of *Covenant*. Both characters can be defined as admirable human beings and not as an amalgam of stereotyped masculine traits in female disguise, as Cynthia A. Freeman argues in relation to the depiction of Ripley.[5] Indeed, Ripley and Daniels display both fear and courage, expressing resolution when fighting against the aliens, but also crying for the death of their companions, therefore encompassing what are considered to be 'masculine' and 'feminine' traits.

Beyond these issues, *Covenant* has generated many opposing reactions from critics. Guy Lodge praises the film as 'roaringly, repulsively effective' in its capacity to impress and thrill its spectators.[6] Both Christopher Orr and Mark Keizer appreciate the simplification of the story's plot, in contrast to the philosophical questions asked (and left unanswered) by its predecessor *Prometheus*.[7] According to Keizer, the film corrects the mistakes of the 2012 film, criticising its attempts to link the origins of the xenomorph to that of humankind as unnecessarily complicating the horrific premises of the story, through constant allusions to the act of creation and the relationship between the two androids (who mirror Cain and Abel). By contrast, Christopher Llewellyn Reed believes that, in spite of the well-choreographed action sequences, *Covenant* fails because of its 'far less successful […] attempts to weave

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[3] Matt Zoller Seitz, '*Alien: Covenant*' <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/alien-covenant-2017> [accessed 14 April 2018].

[4] Chad Hermann, '"Some Horrible Dream About (S)mothering": Sexuality, Gender, and Family in the *Alien* Trilogy', *Post Script: Essays in Film and the Humanities*, 16.3 (1997), 36-50 (p. 38).

[5] Cynthia A. Freeman, *The Naked and the Undead: Evil and the Appeal of Horror* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2000), p. 64.

[6] Guy Lodge, '*Alien: Covenant* Brings the Franchise Back to Its Sci-Fi Horror Roots' *Newsweek*, 20 May 2017, <www.newsweek.com/2017/06/02/ridley-scott-alien-aliens-alien-covenant-sigourney-weaver-michael-fassbender-612842.html> [accessed 10 April 2018].

[7] Mark Keizer, 'Movie Review: *Alien: Covenant*', *Cinegods*, 15 May 2017 <cinegods.com/movie-review-alien-covenant/> [accessed 10 April 2018]; and Christopher Orr, '*Alien: Covenant* Is the Best Installment Since *Aliens*', *The Atlantic*, 19 May 2017 <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2017/05/alien-covenant-ridley-scott-michael-fassbender-review/527319/> [accessed 10 April 2018].

transcendental musings on the nature of existence and the hubris of playing god into what ultimately boils down to a high-production-value slasher pic'.[8] Megan Basham dismisses the plot of the film as 'a been-there, done-that mad scientist resolution'; and Thelma Adams criticises the human characters as 'shades of shades of past sci-fi heroes that have gone before, hardly differentiated'.[9] Finally, Richard Brody argues that 'what Scott delivers in *Alien: Covenant* is the simulacrum of seriousness without the sense of self-conscious silliness, a grim earnestness that's reinforced by a thudding, grandiose aesthetic that utterly lacks originality'.[10]

I, however, feel that the grandiose aesthetic is an undeniable merit of the film and transforms the experience of viewing *Covenant* into an impressive visual spectacle for the viewer. As is typical of many films by Scott, *Covenant* is characterised by rich details, beautiful photography (especially the frames depicting the starship being shattered by storms), elaborate settings, vivid colours (the computer screens aboard the starship are set against the blue-filtered and almost chiaroscuro landscapes of the Engineer's planet), convincing characters, and realistic special effects. The latter, in particular, effectively convey the loathing and disgust provoked by blood (which here is even darker and more slippery than in the previous films), and by guts and saliva. The alien creatures are very much alive here, and their constant aggressiveness and malignity are astonishingly affective: their attacks on humans produce moments of genuine horror characterised by fast-paced action, and punctuated by rapid cuts.

However, the actual villain of the story is David, whose will to procreate has led to the creation of a hideous progeny, thus realising the worst fears of the protagonist in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. David had already demonstrated his personal agenda in *Prometheus*, where he disobeys direct orders and ruthlessly sacrifices his human companions to experiment on the properties of the black liquid created by the Engineers. However, his almost childish enchantment with both the human world and the alien life forms has been replaced in this instalment by cold cynicism, detached scheming, and deviousness. His

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[8] Christopher Llewellyn Reed, 'Film Review: The Android's the Thing, in *Alien: Covenant*, for Better and for Worse', *Film Festival Today*, 18 May 2017 <www.filmfestivaltoday.com/film-reviews/film-review-the-androids-the-thing-in-alien-covenant-for-better-and-for-worse> [accessed 10 April 2018].
[9] Megan Basham, 'Design Flaws: Horrifically Violent *Alien: Covenant* Doesn't Deal with Weighty Concepts', *World Magazine*, 19 May 2017 <https://world.wng.org/2017/05/design_flaws> [accessed 10 April 2018]; and Thelma Adams, 'Lost in Space: *Alien: Covenant* Creeps and Crawls', *Observer*, 19 May 2017 <observer.com/2017/05/alien-covenant-movie-review-michael-fassbender-ridley-scott/> [accessed 11 April 2018].
[10] Richard Brody, 'Alien: Covenant Bursts with Pomposity', *The New Yorker*, 24 May 2017 <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/richardbrody/alien-covenant-bursts-with-pomposity> [accessed 10 April 2018].

motivation, only alluded to in the first film, is revealed in *Covenant*, particularly in the flashback sequence at the beginning of the story in which David confronts his own maker Weyland (Guy Pearce) about the search for human origins and immortality. David's dialogue with Walter fully reveals the former android's semi-contained hatred for his creator, who has denied him the capacity to reproduce. This is expressed through his recitation of Percy Bysshe Shelley's 1818 sonnet 'Ozymandias'. Percy Shelley's depiction of the decadence of great empires and emperors is perfectly rendered on the visual level by the poisonous realm that is now the Engineers' ruinous city, and is interspersed with flashbacks depicting the android's genocidal destruction of the alien race – motivated, it seems, by personal revenge.[11]

In addition to these visual elements, one of the greatest merits of the film is the soundtrack, composed by Jed Kurzel, who has also worked on the music of Jennifer Kent's *The Babadook* (2014), as well as his brother Justin Kurzel's films *Macbeth* (2015) and *Assassin's Creed* (2016). In *Covenant*, the soundtrack blends musical elements from both *Alien* and *Prometheus*, further underlying the narrative and visual links between the films. In its alternation of moments of ecstatic delight, delicate interventions from a piano, ominous crescendos of strident strings, and martial hammering beats, this film's music provides an excellent accompaniment to the images. The track 'Spores', for example, perfectly marries the octopus-like movements of the black powder entering one of the explorers' ears and infecting him. The extreme close up of the insides of the human ear depict the contagion as a much more insidious adversary even than the alien creatures of the saga. Rather than being a metaphor for the lethal spreading of cancer or AIDS, as critics such as Ellen Bishop and Amy Taubin suggest, the black liquid/powder created by the Engineers to destroy entire civilisations can therefore be interpreted as a metaphor for both the contemporary spread of epidemic diseases in general, and for the effects of chemical weapons of mass destruction.[12] In this sense, the film directly relates the fictional threat to human life to contemporary concerns.

Visually and aurally stunning, *Covenant* is a film that will certainly conquer its viewers' attention and appreciation, whether they are familiar with the previous instalments

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[11] According to Brody, 'David, the older model of android, [...] [also embodies] a repugnant stereotype, the high-culturally effete and seductively evil gay man – he puts the tip of a wood flute into Walter's mouth ("You have symphonies in you, brother.") and kisses him on the lips'. Also, as Adams has noted, the relationship between the two androids is a reminder of the fratricidal bond between Data and Lore in *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (1987-94).

[12] Ellen Bishop, 'Alien Subject/Alien Thought: The Female Subject in the *Alien* Films', in *Critical Studies on the Feminist Subject*, ed. by Giovanna Covi (Trento, IT: Dipartimento di Scienze Filosofiche e Storiche, 1997), pp. 127-63 (p. 162); and Amy Taubin, 'The Alien Trilogy: From Feminism to Aids', in *Women and Film: A Sight and Sound Reader*, ed. by Pam Cook and Philip Dodd (London: Scarlet Press, 1993), pp. 93-100 (p. 96).

in the saga or they have just 'come out of their cryogenic tubes', as it were, and encountered this film first. In spite of its narrative link with its predecessor *Prometheus*, the 2017 film is enjoyable on its own, and will provide a memorable experience for all fans of science-fiction and horror films.

Antonio Sanna

Ghost Stories, dir. by Andy Nyman, Jeremy Dyson (Lionsgate Films, 2018)

Adapted by Jeremy Dyson and Andy Nyman from their 2010 stage play of the same name, *Ghost Stories* is an affectionate and self-reflexive homage to the British portmanteau-horror subgenre, and is as unabashedly melodramatic as it is deeply unsettling. The plot centres on the character Professor Goodman (played by Nyman), a parapsychologist and professional cynic who is compelled to review three unsolved cases: a night watchman encounters a poltergeist while on duty in an abandoned asylum for women; a teenage driver has an accident in the woods; and an affluent financier is haunted by the spirit of his unborn child. Male anguish bubbles under the surface and, as the cases unfold, Goodman begins to question his lack of faith in the supernatural, which, we are told, is a reaction against his strict, Jewish upbringing.

Although we see very little of it, the spectre of Goodman's childhood haunts the story like a fourth case. At the start of the film, we see a memory of his sister being violently thrown out of the family home by their father for being in a relationship with a South-Asian man. Goodman bears witness but is unable or unwilling to intervene. Not only does this flashback foreshadow the finale; it also emphasises the importance of accountability in each of the cases. Anxieties about fathers and fatherhood abound in *Ghost Stories* (the first case features a father consumed by the guilt he feels about not visiting his hospitalised daughter, who suffers from locked-in syndrome), while the text itself is equally haunted by its literary and cinematic ancestors. The nested structure, with Goodman's own story framing the three cases, is clearly a nod to the anthology horror films popularised by Amicus and Hammer studios in the 1960s and 70s, while the themes and imagery are evocative of Stephen King's tales of childhood trauma, such as *It* (1986). Additionally, the framing of these micro-narratives is reminiscent of the 'found-manuscript' device frequently deployed in gothic fiction: Goodman first encounters the cases when he receives a package in the post containing a tape recording from his presumed-dead hero Charles Cameron, a paranormal investigator and television personality from the 1970s who mysteriously disappeared at the height of his fame. Intrigued, Goodman agrees to meet Cameron at an eerie caravan site on the coast (one of several dilapidated, confined locations within the film), where he has been living in self-imposed exile since his 'disappearance'. Like the found manuscript, these cases are contested texts; Goodman openly interrogates their authenticity and in turn, the viewer questions his.

Set against the backdrop of contemporary Yorkshire, *Ghost Stories* is a decidedly British horror film that subtly confronts societal issues such as everyday racism and class

disparity without patronising its audience. The film has a pervasively claustrophobic feel, even during scenes set in the open countryside of the Peak District, an atmosphere which intensifies the sensation that you are never seeing the full picture. Throughout, ordinary spaces are rendered uncanny by the presence of misplaced and displaced images, such as a hooded figure lurking in the corner of an old photograph, or a cradle in the middle of a disused railroad. Like Nyman's previous work with psychological illusionist Derren Brown (their television collaborations include *Derren Brown – Mind Control* (2000-03), *Trick of the Mind* (2004-present), *Russian Roulette* (2003), *Séance* (2004), and *Messiah* (2005), plus four stage shows), *Ghost Stories* is loaded with visual and aural 'clues' that only make sense once the curtain has fallen. Both the stage play and the screen adaptation resemble a magic show in that objects and people disappear, only to reappear later when you least expect it. You cannot trust your sight because, to quote the tagline of the film, 'the brain sees what it wants to see' – a message that is echoed in the posters marketing the film release, which deliberately misspell the title as 'Ghost Storeis'. *Ghost Stories* is an exercise in sleight of hand, but who is pulling the strings? The use of misdirection keeps us groping in the dark for answers, but to what extent are we content to linger in a state of suspended disbelief, eagerly anticipating the rabbit-out-of-the-hat moment? *Ghost Stories* relies on our complete trust in Goodman's narrative and the big reveal does not work without this collusion.

Those familiar with the stage play will note several small yet significant changes. For example, the play opens with Goodman delivering a lecture on ghosts, whereas the film shows Goodman debunking a fraudulent psychic on live television, in front of an audience. Not only does he publicly expose the psychic, but he crushes the faith of a grieving mother who believes that she has been communicating with her dead son via the show's host. Far from remorseful, Goodman is at best smug, and at worst entitled; he clearly believes that he is doing gullible, superstitious people a favour. Goodman is a classic unreliable narrator, yet, ironically, the impact of the final sequence – which reveals him to be the unwilling creator of his own nightmare – hinges on the audience's trust in his 'master narrative'. Ultimately, Goodman's impulse to debunk the supernatural is less to do with protecting people from exploitation from faux mediums (his TV show is just as exploitative of the grieving mother as it is of the host) and everything to do with guilt. The real ghost of the story is memory – specifically, a repressed childhood memory in which Goodman witnesses a couple of bullies pressure a mentally handicapped boy to enter a drainage tunnel, causing him to have a fatal asthma attack. When Goodman finally confronts this memory, the fantasy scenario he has

created disintegrates, giving way to reality, which turns out to be far more terrifying than any ghost. As the fetid corpse of the dead boy pulls him towards his fate, the walls literally fall away to reveal a comatose Goodman lying on a hospital bed in a persistent vegetative state, which we learn is result of a failed suicide attempt. The effect of this ending is deeply uncomfortable, as it denies us a resolution and draws attention to our gullibility as viewers. Like the grieving woman in the paranormal television show that Goodman sabotages, our longing for the supernatural is exposed.

This climactic revelation may be subconsciously rooted in the Radcliffian tradition of providing a rational explanation for seemingly supernatural events; however, *Ghost Stories* retains an air of postmodern ambiguity that undercuts the formulaic tendencies of its genre. Its bizarre, darkly comic quality bears traces of Dyson's previous work on *The League of Gentlemen* (1999-2002 and 2017) (particularly Paul Whitehouse's night-watchman character in the first case covered by Goodman), as does the satirical lens through which it presents British culture. By adapting *Ghost Stories* for the screen, Nyman and Dyson have skilfully reanimated their highly successful show for a new audience, but in doing so, they risk forfeiting its mystery, particularly because the shock ending is likely to be a major talking point amongst audiences. In an age of too much information, the secrets of *Ghost Stories* cannot remain secret for long.

Carly Stevenson

A Quiet Place, **dir. by John Krasinski** (Paramount Pictures, 2018)

What would it be like to live in a world where the slightest sound might mean your doom? John Krasinski's film rests on a *Twilight Zone*-esque premise, but gives us a tense, economical suspense thriller that delivers a much more cinematic experience than might be implied by so brief a description.

The film features next to no spoken dialogue, with characters communicating primarily in American Sign Language. *A Quiet Place* depicts a day-after-tomorrow future where humanity has been decimated by monsters able to snatch away any person who makes even the tiniest untoward noise. The film opens on the Abbott family – survivors travelling barefoot through the ruins, communicating through daughter Regan's native sign language. The camera, alternating between wide-angle shots of the landscape and close, personal views of the protagonists, goes a long way to convince the viewer that these are the only people left in the world. Deaf actor Millicent Simmons is the story's focal point, as the narrative gestures towards such themes as growing pains, survivor guilt, and the barriers between the deaf and the hearing. The film is at its best when it trusts in its visual details – the cast convey volumes with look and body language; little touches like the noiseless game pieces are eminently more evocative than the clumsily expository newspaper clippings pinned to the walls of the father's workshop-cum-retreat. Through these details, we come to understand the family's relationships better than the characters explain those relationships to us.

A Quiet Place is, nonetheless, a far-from-silent film. Marco Beltrami's orchestral score comes in waves, sometimes lapping at the edge of the scene, sometimes surging until it pins the viewer to their seat. Like the film's dialogue, however, the music sometimes overcommits and becomes a distraction – telling us what to feel when we are already feeling it (the score almost drowns out some of the later action scenes). The film does have one standout moment of spoken dialogue, roughly two-thirds the way through. The conversation itself is unimportant – it tells us little that we have not already intuited – but it offers both the characters and the audience a moment of release that speaks strongly to the relationship that the hearing have with speech and sound. Regan's exclusion from the scene is a telling (and again, mostly unstated) symbol of the emotional distance between her and her father, but it also serves as a comment on the exclusion of the deaf from the hearing world – even though the family is dependent on sign language for survival, Regan remains an outsider even amongst people who love her. Immediately preceding the film's long finale, the scene

provides a thoughtful moment that illustrates Krasinski's usually excellent pacing, providing a moment's respite before the ever-increasing pressure of the last half-hour.

In comparison, the finale is overcooked, contriving to throw the characters into greater and greater peril with every plot development, but the film's tight 90 minutes keeps the viewer in suspense despite this. The slightly laboured climax demonstrates how heavy-handed the story is overall, rehashing predictable conservative tropes about fathers making sacrifices for their children and previously gentle mothers taking up arms in defence of the family. The father, Lee (Krasinski), is an ingenious and practical man who resembles the all-American father figure of the atomic age of science-fiction horror. Lee is technical, dedicated, privately caring but publicly stern, a flawed-but-noble leader to the family unit – a character that the film's conclusion discourages us from reading too critically (we might have seen Raymond Burr in the role 60 years ago, and wondered how Jimmy Stewart might have improved it). Lee's sacrifice is presented as necessary and uncomplicated, the proper duty of a patriarch, while the family continues (literally) in the efforts of the mother (Emily Blunt).

Perhaps these signifiers are intentional, framing the piece as a slice of timeless Americana, with all the melodrama that might entail. Krasinski's role as writer, director, and star of the project, working alongside real-life spouse Blunt, invites us to read the film's structure less sympathetically, however. The director has described himself as a horror neophyte, and thus it seems more likely that the makers thought the film's use of sign language was innovative enough, and sought to maintain its mainstream viability by making the rest as conventional and 'relatable' as possible. Yet *A Quiet Place* is a film that leaves its best ideas unstated (via its visual cues, its usual absence of explanation), and so it is difficult to distinguish between moments of subtle and accidental brilliance throughout. Perhaps its atomic horror stylings are a hidden reward for the cine-literate viewer. Perhaps Krasinski is a science-fiction horror savant. Regardless of the film's cleverness (or lack thereof), the piece remains a highly effective thriller – one best appreciated in the dark and the quiet.

Richard Gough Thomas

Jigsaw, dir. Michael Spierig, Peter Spierig (Lionsgate, 2017)

Finality is a concept the implications of which the horror genre seems to have blissfully disavowed when developing sequels. Studios have learned to contend with the inescapable fact that, although everything ends, a franchise's lifespan can be prolonged by injecting a little creative adrenaline to revitalise even the most ailing brands. Narratively, it is possible to exhaust many conventional storytelling possibilities before a property changes form, such as when the *A Nightmare on Elm Street* franchise (1984-2010) moved firmly into experimental meta-territory with *Wes Craven's New Nightmare* (1994) after *Freddy's Dead: The Final Nightmare* (1991). The term 'final' can also signal the onset of a crossover phase where similar properties team up for a showdown, as in *Lake Placid vs Anaconda* (2015) following *Lake Placid: The Final Chapter* (2012). Others are satisfied to ignore continuity and proceed unabated; slasher legend Jason Voorhees, for example, has twice bid farewell to audiences in the same established canon with *Friday the 13th: The Final Chapter* (1984) and *Jason Goes to Hell: The Final Friday* (1993). Perhaps most amusingly guilty of having to navigate this challenge is the *Final Destination* franchise (2000-11). In a series built around the idea of finality, the conclusively titled *The Final Destination* screened in 2009, yet reneged on its promise, as *Final Destination 5* (2011) arrived only two years later.

Thus, following *Saw: The Final Chapter* (2010), comes *Jigsaw* (2017), the eighth instalment in the long running torture-porn series (2004-17) now explicitly named after its titular villain. *Jigsaw* is the first entry to be directed by the Spierig brothers, whose filmography includes vampire escapade *Daybreakers* (2009) and the underrated time-travel mystery *Predestination* (2014). This latest addition to the *Saw* franchise is the first after a seven-year hiatus, largely due to the waning popularity of the sub-genre, in conjunction with the rise of the *Paranormal Activity* series (2009-15), which usurped its long-held throne at the Halloween box office. To mark the tenth anniversary of *Saw* (2004), the original was re-released into cinemas in 2014, providing a barometer to gauge the appetite for the return of torture porn – it bombed spectacularly. Nonetheless, as it remains a familiar and lucrative multimedia artefact – even boasting its own rollercoaster ride in Thorpe Park in Surrey – it was inevitable that a new movie would eventually surface.

Jigsaw emerges during a renaissance for horror, exemplified by the overwhelmingly positive critical reception of Andy Muschietti's adaptation of Stephen King's *It* (2017) and Jordan Peele's subversive racial commentary, the Academy-Award winning *Get Out* (2017). Hence, *Jigsaw* is somewhat out of place, as torture porn came to prominence in a cultural

climate dominated by heightened fears of terrorism post-9/11, and capitalises on the moral outrage cultivated by the Guantanamo Bay and Abu Ghraib scandals. The *Saw* variety of excessive visual sadism now feels at odds with the ultra-low-budget but high-tension premises of recent hits like *Don't Breathe* (2016). *Jigsaw* circumvents any potential friction that may be caused in trying to reconcile these two extremes, by opting to uphold its identity, albeit with some slight amendments, rather than force an adherence to fashionable cinematic trends.

Picking up ten years after the death of John Kramer aka Jigsaw (Tobin Bell), the film sees Det. Halloran (Callum Keith Rennie) trying to solve a wave of homicides that suggest that Kramer has risen from the grave and is playing games once more. Two forensic specialists – straight-edged army veteran Logan Nelson (Matt Passmore), and edgy Kramer enthusiast Eleanor Bonneville (Hannah Emily Anderson) – assist in examining the increasing number of casualties, each raising suspicions that they may be involved in the murders. The game in question takes place in a barn, where five rivals are warned they must confess their sins to gain freedom from the traps.

The return of Kramer is teased, but handled predictably enough using a plot device comparable to that employed in *Saw II* (2005), in which past- and present-day stories run concurrently to mislead the audience. In doing so, it plays on viewers' knowledge of previous instalments, while jettisoning some of their less-credible scenarios. While the franchise routinely calls for the suspension of disbelief, it would be highly implausible to accept that Jigsaw could orchestrate his own autopsy, as depicted in *Saw IV* (2007). This is a wise business decision, as Lionsgate could have substantially undone the remaining consumer goodwill by legitimately resurrecting Jigsaw and undermining whatever developments cinemagoers would be willing to abide at this stage in the story. Ultimately, during the film's climax, it is revealed that the baton (saw?) has been passed, and Nelson has assumed Jigsaw's mantle.

The new film is reasonably successful in terms of negotiating this transition. In Nelson's closing monologue, we learn that it was he who, as a medical resident a decade beforehand, mixed up Kramer's X-rays, hampering an early cancer diagnosis. As punishment for this transgression, Nelson was placed in Jigsaw's very first game. However, excusing this mistake, Kramer shows mercy and adopts Nelson as his student. Nelson concludes his speech by declaring that Halloran's criminal informant Edgar Munsen (Josiah Black) was responsible for killing Nelson's wife, and promises to avenge others failed by the detective.

Jigsaw therefore confers Nelson with several of his mentor's attributes, such as suffering from a family bereavement and an encounter with mortality – this time cleverly portrayed through his detention and torture in Fallujah. Nelson's occupations are testament to strong screenwriting, as they immediately imbue him with history, experience, and motivation, as well as neatly granting him the practical skills and personality traits necessary to facilitate the smooth exchange of Jigsaw's quintessential qualities to a younger leading man.

As *Jigsaw*/Jigsaw, both brand and villain, seek to forge a new identity after a period of extended absenteeism, the depiction of Nelson in this way is apt. Like the tool, the brand has dulled and is in need of renewal, but more critically, the soldier is himself a political tool, instrumental in implementing foreign policy – in this case, in dismantling the tyrannical regime in Iraq. Following his tour of duty overseas, Nelson continues to shoulder the burden of this labour, referring to himself as a 'broken man'. Despite reconstruction and reunification, his self-identity is still fragmented, physically illustrated through the scars on his back from enduring Jigsaw's trap. Thematically, the film nods here towards national anxieties surrounding the figure of the returning serviceman, as Nelson murders his fellow citizens on US soil, drawing uncomfortable parallels with Oklahoma-City bomber Timothy McVeigh.

This is not to say that the franchise is completely overhauled; the spellbinding Tobin Bell brings his usual commanding presence to his brief appearance, which allows for the bulk of the screen time to focus on the new faces of the *Saw* franchise. Kramer's rhetoric exhibits a godlike vigilantism as he vows to ensure that the 'sins against the innocent are atoned for', positioning himself as a liberator through hostility as he demands a 'blood sacrifice', pledging 'salvation' in what captive Ryan (Paul Braunstein) describes as a 'fucked up confessional'. In one unsettling instance, the prisoners are dragged from one room to another chained by shackles around their necks, only to realise they are to be hanged unless they admit their misdeeds. Here, Jigsaw acts as if he were a divine judge, jury, and executioner, espousing a retributive ideology anchored by its own ethical code. Accordingly, Jigsaw's ubiquity resonates through the slogans on the film's one-sheet advertisements, which state that he is 'everything', 'everyone', and 'everywhere'. The diversity with which his followers are represented on the posters confirms how the scope and reach of his message infiltrates a broad cross-section of society, with their shared duty being succinctly communicated in a short promotional clip exclaiming 'we all have a part to play'. Tellingly, each devotee dons a

pig's head disguise to carry out their mission in secrecy, in a costuming that evokes the Guy-Fawkes mask of international hacktivist group Anonymous.

Jigsaw also extends the series' constant self-revisionism, which promotes multiple viewings. While one could argue that these elaborations are overly contrived, they do serve to enrich the characters by encouraging further consideration of their *raisons d'être* – but only up to a point. Minor addendums to the *Saw* universe's lore are now diluting the central conflict of the Kramer character. This is particularly evident during a flashback sequence centring on Mitch (Mandela Van Peebles), a young man who sold Kramer's nephew a defective motorcycle that caused a fatal accident. The scene is conducted in a perfunctory way, and this additional information seems unnecessarily tacked on. It is also extremely jarring to get such an eleventh-hour plot point, especially documenting specific biographical events that inform the primary character's life experience and ultimate criminality, particularly considering that the catalyst for Kramer to begin his 'work' was his surviving a suicide attempt, as was clearly outlined all the way back in *Saw II*.

The other main protagonists are, to a certain extent, stock characters, but are reasonably well drawn. Halloran's red sports car and casual chauvinism, for example, easily endow him with the swagger of a crooked-cop type, as he admires Eleanor's 'great ass', refers to her as 'sweetheart', and asks if she is one of those 'kinky types'. While it would have been intriguing to pit him against *Saw*'s other principal foe, Mark Hoffman, sadly Rennie's greatest battle is maintaining a convincing American accent, his Canadian inflection sporadically breaking through. Classic characters like Dr Gordon fail to appear, and Kramer's ex-wife Jill Tuck only gets a passing mention; however, the film preserves and explains some key *Saw* markers, such as how Nelson recreates Jigsaw's audio recordings by digitally splicing sound files together. This rationale sustains the property's brand recognition and informs the inclusion of other identifiable signifiers, including the infamous hacksaw and Billy doll – one can't help but sense the market research at play here.

Nonetheless, for this 'soft' reboot to succeed, it must also demonstrate evidence of modernisation. From the introductory credits, the film announces itself as an update, with a revamped 3-D logo, as well as a techno variation on Charlie Clouser's (ex-NIN) sinister theme tune. *Jigsaw* further enhances its world with advanced technology, for example when Bonneville uses a laser to remove a bucket from a cadaver's head, leading to the recovery of a flash drive – because Dictaphone tapes are so *Saw IV*. This welcome change confirms that *Saw* has finally begun to progress to the next phase of industrial evolution, as the use of

cassettes and CRT televisions, although effective in generating a creepy atmosphere, seemed dated even throughout the series' initial run. The decline in the use of such outmoded items highlights *Jigsaw*'s place within a horror landscape in which the restored popularity of retro culture in film (in, for example, Muschietti's work) and indeed on television with throwback hit *Stranger Things* (2016-present) reigns supreme.

That said, considering that the franchise is famed for its grisly violence, the traps in *Jigsaw* are mostly lacklustre watered-down affairs, featuring common elements such as poison and circular saws. One notable exception sees Mitch and Anna (Laura Vandervoort) locked in a filling grain silo, implying they will be buried alive, only for it to transpire that it will immobilise them as knives and garden tools are rained in from above, delivering an imaginative twist. Unfortunately, for these incidents to produce any dramatic impact, the audience must be emotionally invested in the people involved. This, indeed, is one of *Jigsaw*'s foremost shortcomings, as the players are essentially forgettable cannon fodder. This is in contrast to Adam and Dr Gordon in the original, where the entire film hinged on deftly shifting audience allegiances by drip feeding details of their backstories. Even the outcome of Anna and Ryan's decisive confrontation, during which a crucial choice is supposedly made, is a damp squib. Traditionally, the major spectacle is reserved for the finale, and here the brutal head split is certainly impressive, redeeming the film somewhat on this score, as the bloodshed to this point is tame when compared with the nauseating heights of *Saw III* (2006), *Saw IV*, or *Saw: The Final Chapter*.

Overall, visually, *Jigsaw* disappoints. Lacking the grimy gloss of its predecessors, the decidedly clean register detracts from the action to such a degree that the captives' performances resemble the dress rehearsal of a high-value community-theatre production. Likewise, the game's barn setting looks cheap and artificial, with its brightly lit open plan exposing the relatively low budget, instead of disguising it. This uninspired set design is especially conspicuous during the final scene, when Nelson and Halloran must activate controls before them to escape from their restraints – the red buttons and green arrows seem to simplify the control's functionality and spoon-feed the viewer. The choreography of the opening police chase is equally unimaginative, culminating in Munsen's car crashing through yellow water-filled barrels, a feature more at home in 1994's hi-octane thriller *Speed*. Equally, the explosion of Ryan's friend's car in a flashback feels staged; the viewer can all too easily picture the pyrotechnicians just off screen. The use of rapid-fire crime-scene photos that peppered the original movies is also missing, depriving the spectator of this customary

graphic embellishment. Tonally, the unremarkable cinematography and generic set pieces give the film's presentation at best a made-for-TV aesthetic, or at worst a *Scary Movie* (2000-13) interpretation of *Saw*.

To conclude, *Jigsaw* is a studio-mandated franchise revival, engineered to complete a checklist of pre-ordained narrative beats, and, as such, plays out like a montage of *Saw*'s most memorable moments. Regrettably, the creativity shown in the Spierig brothers' earlier work has been curtailed, likely succumbing to pressure to adhere to the business plan for a prized product. The real litmus test for the health of the *Saw* franchise will be found in a sequel, should it materialise – this could help establish the direction of a new saga, possibly re-incorporating Dr Gordon and Hoffman further down the line, with Bonneville likely to assume a role akin to that of faithful apprentice Amanda Young. Future instalments would benefit from moving beyond philosophical enquiries into survival, immortality, forgiveness, and obsession found in earlier entries, to investigating weightier socio-economic themes, as accomplished by the surprisingly provocative *Saw VI* (2009), which explores the method by which insurance companies determine a customer's eligibility for cover.

Encouragingly, *Jigsaw* seems cognisant of such global matters, tentatively acknowledging the zeitgeist for collective social activism with its marketing. Similarly, the film recognises the worldwide fiscal downturn by penalising those who embody the precariousness involved in securing domestic space, as Ryan owns up to having 'sold bad mortgages'. Should the franchise more fully realise its potential in this regard, and frame the torture against backdrops of other pertinent social problems, perhaps scrutinising political divides, religious tensions, and class inequalities, it might be a while before we see *Jigsaw: The Final Chapter*.

Gavin Wilkinson

FILM/ TELEVISION REVIEW ESSAY

Hereditary (dir. by Ari Aster, 2018) **and** *Sharp Objects* (HBO, 2018)

In *Madness in Civilisation*: *A Cultural History of Insanity*, Andrew Scull observes of post-war psychoanalytic perceptions of the American nuclear family that

> Freud's theories had discerned the roots of psychopathology in this setting, and his American followers laid a host of problems at the feet of the family. And especially, the analysts indicted America's mothers, as the source, it would appear, of an ever-expanding array of illnesses and debility, and even a threat to the health of the nation.[1]

It wasn't long, Scull notes, before a host of these 'Pathological Mommies' appeared in popular fiction and film. As evidenced by well-known films such as *The Bad Seed* (1956), *Psycho* (1960), *Rosemary's Baby* (1968), and *Carrie* (1976), this preoccupation with 'bad' and/or conflicted motherhood represents one of the most significant tropes found in American horror cinema from the 1950s onwards.

The traumatising potential of the 'Pathological Mommy' is elevated to particularly disturbing heights in two of 2018's most high-profile gothic narratives: writer/director Ari Aster's debut feature film *Hereditary*, and the HBO TV mini-series *Sharp Objects*. They proffer eerily overlapping visions of toxic mother-daughter relationships so bleak – and so extreme – that to observe that both teeter on the verge of hysteria by the time their respective denouements roll around is something of an understatement. There's hardly a crumb of comfort or of hope to be found in either production, both of which focus on the trauma endured by the children of controlling matriarchs whose influence is as inescapable as it is corrosive.

Hereditary neatly establishes from its opening frame that this will be a story of malign influence exerted from beyond the grave. It begins with the text of a local newspaper obituary, neatly establishing that elderly matriarch Ellen Taper Leigh (the actor remains uncredited, and is only ever depicted onscreen in photographs) has passed away after a long illness. The film opens on the morning of Ellen's funeral service, at which her only surviving child, Annie Graham (Toni Collette), gives a subtly strained eulogy. Ellen was, Annie admits, a complicated and self-contained woman who had, ominously, 'her own private rituals'.

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[1] Andrew Scull, *Madness in Civilisation* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2016), p. 342.

We learn that Ellen had an unusually close but complex relationship with her granddaughter, Annie's youngest child, a thirteen-year-old girl named Charlie (Milly Shapiro). 'Grandma always wanted me to be a boy', Charlie fretfully confides. Like the 'private rituals' line, it's a statement ultimately meant to be taken literally. *Hereditary* belongs to that long lineage of horror films one watches in an entirely different way the second time round. Trailers for the film slyly implied that it was going to be yet another entry in the 'evil child' canon, and things certainly seem to be going that way when Charlie's off-kilter emotional affect, social awkwardness, and compulsive vocal tic (an oddly unsettling 'cluck') become more pronounced than ever in the days following Ellen's burial. She performs odd little rituals in the woods that surround the family home, and methodically decapitates a dead pigeon. The extent to which Charlie's alarming behaviour is focused upon during the opening scenes means that, when she is killed off less than half an hour into the film's running time, it comes as a complete surprise.

The impact of this development is compounded by Aster's skilful staging of the bizarre accident which takes Charlie's life. Her older brother Peter (Alex Wolff), who is sixteen, has been browbeaten by Annie into taking his decidedly anti-social sister to a teenage party. Soon after their arrival, Peter heads upstairs to smoke pot, telling Charlie to stay put and eat a piece of chocolate cake that has been left on the kitchen counter. This Charlie does, apparently unaware that the cake has been contaminated with nut particles (her allergy having been referenced earlier). Peter, upon realising that she is in anaphylactic shock, frantically sets out to drive Charlie to hospital. The child writhes in suffocating agony in the backseat, and we begin to fear that she may not make it. And then Charlie, gasping for air, leans out of the window and is decapitated by a telephone pole. It's a moment which leaves the audience reeling.

What really drives home Aster's masterfully unsettling treatment of this horrific incident is Peter's reaction, which is to drive home, say nothing, and catatonically hide under the bed covers until Annie, off-screen, discovers her daughter's headless corpse in the backseat of the family car. As her screams of gut-wrenching loss penetrate Peter's fugue state, the film completes its superbly assured move in to an exhilaratingly unpredictable gear. For Annie, Peter, and her long-suffering husband Steve (Gabriel Byrne), things are only going to get worse. *Much* worse.

The death of a child, the guilt felt by an older sibling left behind, and the malign influence of a monstrous mother also constitute the basic narrative building blocks of *Sharp*

Objects. The eight-part series opens as Camille Preaker (Amy Adams), a self-loathing and hard-drinking crime reporter, is asked by her editor to return to her hometown of Wind Gap, Missouri, to investigate the circumstances surrounding the disappearance of a young teenager, a mystery that is all the more ominous since another local girl was found murdered only a year before. As with *Hereditary*, viewers expecting a conventional treatment of the subject matter – in this case, the small-town-based, 'Dead Girl'-focused murder mystery of the kind neatly dissected by Alice Bolin in her 2018 book of the same name – will find these expectations confounded.[2] Although the need to discover who has been murdering Wind Gap's girls is important for both the show and the main character, the series is, arguably, more accurately understood as an ambitious, impressionistic character piece genuinely invested in representing the ways in which a wounded psyche attempts to process unresolved trauma.

This means that events in *Sharp Objects* are largely (though not entirely) filtered through Camille's booze- and emotion-fuelled perspective. Her return home triggers the release of a host of unwanted associations, sensations, and memories connected with her unhappy childhood – particularly those surrounding the protracted illness and death of her beloved younger sister, Marian (Lulu Wilson). For twenty years, Camille has so intensely repressed her recollections about the truth of what really happened to Marian (and to her) that her only relief comes in the form of compulsive self-harming behaviours, such as cutting and alcohol abuse. From the outset, Adam's intensely sympathetic performance and closed-off body language communicate the fact that, despite Camille's desperate attempts to just keep it together, write the damn story, and retreat to the safe distance of her (tentatively) stable life in back St Louis, simply being physically present in Wind Gap has stirred up powerful emotions which can no longer be contained.

Many of the show's most effective thematic conceits are underlined by recurring visual motifs that reinforce this sense that *Sharp Objects*, in classic gothic fashion, is all about this painful process of unlocking and interpreting that which has hitherto been forcefully repressed within Camille's damaged psyche. Her frequent flashbacks tend to surface as brief, impressionistic intrusions into the present day, which slowly begin to suggest a relationship between her traumatic childhood experiences and Wind Gap's more recent horrors. This sense that Camille is being haunted by the past is underlined by the fact that we see at least one almost-subliminal ghost-like glimpse of her sister Marian in every episode.

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[2] Alice Bolin, *Dead Girls: Essays on Surviving an American Obsession* (New York: Harper Collins, 2018).

As the original 'Dead Girl' whose fate lies at the heart of Wind Gap's many intertwined horrors, she is simultaneously everywhere and nowhere. These flashbacks are lensed with a pastoral poetry (they often take place outdoors, away from Adora's authoritarian presence) which evokes the intermingled sense of love and loss that Camille feels as she unwillingly reconnects with the departed sibling she obviously loved very deeply.

What remains of Camille's family is dominated by *Sharp Objects*' magnificently malevolent mother-figure, Adora Crellin (Patricia Clarkson), a commanding small-town aristocrat whose ultra-feminine dress sense and viper-like stillness conceal a streak of madness and pathological narcissism that has for decades been enabled by those around her. It is obvious from their first encounter that Adora resents Camille's presence in town, never mind the family home. The identity of Camille's father, as in Flynn's source novel, is never revealed, and is in fact irrelevant (the same can be said of Annie's father in *Hereditary*, who is only referred to very briefly). She is, like her sisters, first and foremost Adora's child, whether she wants to be or not. The other residents of the palatial family estate, suggestively depicted as a plantation-era mansion, are Camille's stepfather Alan Crellin, Adora's fawning enabler (Henry Czerny), and their thirteen-year-old daughter, Camille's half-sister Amma (Eliza Scanlen). In contrast to the coldness with which she treats Camille, Adora continually ministers to Amma with hyperbolic effusiveness – smothering one daughter with love even as she freezes out the other.

Unlike Camille, who has rejected everything her mother had to offer, and Marion, who was fatally compromised by her innate desire to be a 'good girl', Amma seems to have figured out a way to somehow please Adora *and* cultivate an identity of her own. She's the classic home angel/street devil, one minute playing with her elaborate doll house (a replica of the family home), and in the next sneaking into town so that she can malevolently meander around town with her binge-drinking, pill-popping gang of roller-skating Mean Girls. In a character detail that will ultimately become important, Camille soon realises that Amma lords it over her peers in the same way that Adora, owner of Wind Gap's biggest business (a hog-butchering plant), pulls the strings of the adults in town. Although she is simultaneously fascinated and alarmed by Amma's neediness and talent for deception, Camille cannot help but begin to feel genuine affection for her volatile sibling.

As well as featuring genuinely terrifying matriarchs, then, both *Hereditary* and *Sharp Objects* present us with troubled thirteen-year old girls who are depicted both as victims and sources of potential (and actual) threat. Furthermore, both Amma and Charlie are ultimately

revealed to be the hapless pawns of powerful mother figures (Adora and Ellen). There are other central visual and thematic similarities between the two narratives. Both feature pivotal confrontations that take place at the dinner table; have ineffectual father figures (Alan and Steven); and include multiple scenes in which brooding thematic and visual significance is attributed to the interior and exterior design of the striking family home. They also have in common an overriding fear that, in one's hidden family history, inescapable doom may lurk.

However, the key visual motif connecting the texts is the doll's house. In *Sharp Objects*, Amma's constant fussing with her prized possession underlines the extent to which she has been dangerously infantilised. It also foreshadows the show's climatic revelation that both she and Marian have been the victims of Adora's Munchausen's-by-Proxy Syndrome, a psychiatric disorder in which sufferers – usually mothers – purposefully poison those in their care, in a bid for attention, status, and the 'pleasure' of performative care-giving. Amma has, for her entire life, been a kind of living doll to Adora, a figure to be dressed up, deliberately sickened, made well, and poisoned again. We eventually discover that Camille, who refused to 'play along', has been rejected because, unlike poor Marian, she refused to acquiesce to her mother's demand for utter compliance. The doll's house also, crucially, conceals the horrific evidence that decisively links Amma, and not Adora, with the horrific murders of her classmates (the missing girls whose fate brought Camille back to town in the first place). As we already know, Camille has turned her own rage, despair, and capacity for violence inwards, deliberately harming herself for many years as a result. Amma has, catastrophically, *externalised* her fury, and directed it violence outwards – towards the girls she saw as rivals for Adora's deadly attention.

The doll's houses which feature in *Hereditary* are not a child's macabre playthings. Instead, they are eerily detailed replicas of the spaces in which key events in Annie's family and emotional life have taken place (including the hospital room in which Ellen died), as if, by recreating these sites externally, Annie can safely work through her obvious internal conflicts. She is an accomplished artist whose work, it is made clear, has acquired acclaim and critical respect. But in the aftermath of the dual tragedies which have stricken the family, her increasingly obsessive fixation upon these dioramas – which soon include a gruesome recreation of Charlie's death scene – make it clear that Annie has begun dangerously to dissociate herself from Peter and Steven. Indeed, it seems for a while that like she is likely succumbing to the strain of mental illness that is said to have cost both her father and brother their lives. Colette's remarkably visceral, intense performance plays a key role in establishing

the extent to which Annie's already fragile mental stability has been undermined by grief, rage, and justifiable paranoia.

The terrible truth about the conspiracy festering at the heart of the Graham family has earlier been telegraphed to us by the fact that Aster repeatedly frames his doomed protagonists as hapless dolls manipulated by unseen but malevolent forces. Ellen Taper Leigh may be dead, but she was (consciously at least), unbeknownst to Annie, a Satanic-cult leader who, many years before, set in motion sinister plans now coming to fruition. It's a development hastened by the fact that, when Annie (in what would, in a very different type of film, be a positive development) decides to attend a bereavement-support group, she ends up falling under the influence of yet another manipulative mother figure, Joan (Ann Dowd), later revealed to be one of Ellen's most trusted acolytes. Even as she attempts to escape Ellen's emotional (and occult) legacy, therefore, Annie becomes more and more entangled in her web – and increasingly aggressive towards her own son Peter, whose already profound emotional distress is greatly exacerbated by her dangerously erratic behaviour.

By the time *Hereditary*'s insanely hyperbolic climax occurs, it has evolved into a bracingly literal tale of demonic possession reminiscent of classics such as *Rosemary's Baby* (1968) and *The Omen* (1976), as well as another recent horror hit from the same production company (A24) – Robert Eggar's *The Witch* (2015). However, this seemingly unlikely swerve from stark and uncompromising family melodrama (intriguingly, Aster has cited the work of famed British realist Mike Leigh as a key influence) to full-throttle supernatural horror works surprisingly well, and is in complete keeping with the profound sense of visual, aural, and thematic unease that has saturated the narrative from the start.

Ultimately, in both *Sharp Objects* and *Hereditary*, there is nothing worse than realising that the shadow of the 'Pathological Mommy' can never be escaped, and that the corruption of once-innocent youngsters – Amma and Peter – has always been inevitable. In the final moments of *Hereditary*, Annie, reduced to a shrieking, violent pawn by her mother's scheme, carries out an act of graphically depicted self-destruction so extreme that it surpasses even the most notorious moments in von Trier's *Antichrist* (2007). Yet, despite the undeniable jolt of shock that this development evokes, the instant that elicited audible gasps from the cinema audience I watched the film with was a line of dialogue from Annie which reveals a devastating but cathartic truth – 'I never wanted to be your mother'. For all of the undisputable shock value of the film's final scenes, then, it is in *Hereditary*'s harrowing depiction of the two of the most taboo emotions associated with maternity – resentment

towards one's children and regret at ever having had them in the first place – that linger longest.

    Sharp Objects also knows how to use raw emotional impact – and the painful truth – to leave the viewer reeling. Although we are briefly presented with the possibility that Amma and Camille can establish a happy and healthy life together once they are finally free of Adora, all hope is cruelly ripped away in the closing minutes. When Camille, once more prompted to probe below the seemingly stable surface of things, impulsively investigates the interior of Amma's precious doll's house, she discovers that the décor has been accentuated with human teeth (it had earlier repeatedly been observed that Wind Gap's murdered girls were missing some of theirs). As she sits in stunned silence, having instantly grasped the devastating implications of this discovery, Amma walks into the room, sees the expression on her sister's face, and utters the show's perfectly shattering final line – 'Don't tell Mama'.

Bernice M. Murphy

TELEVISION REVIEWS

Superstition (Syfy, 2017)

As any devotee of the history of death culture will tell you, the American Civil War transformed the funeral industry, ushering in not only modern embalming practices and contemporary death care, but also inaugurating the distinct tradition of the African-American funeral home as a vital social, cultural, and economic force within the black community.[1] When the war was at its bloodiest and many soldiers were buried on the battlefield, it was often their black comrades who were assigned the grim task of interring their remains.[2] In the decades following Emancipation, this wartime familiarity with mortality intersected with a growing anxiety about the treatment of black bodies by white undertakers.[3] Believing that their loved ones would be cared for with more dignity by funeral directors drawn from the black community, many African Americans chose to entrust their deceased family and friends to undertakers who would not only treat them with respect, but who would also be familiar with the post-mortem customs and traditions of the community. The funeral business therefore became one of the first industries in which newly emancipated African Americans could achieve any real measure of economic success. Consequently, the funeral home occupies a unique position in the African-American cultural imagination. At once a signifier of socio-economic advancement and a safe space in which to mark the passing of friends and family, the funeral home is a locus of community in which distinctly African-American funereal rites such as home-goings – elaborate services that include a week-long visitation to the home of the bereaved, a wake, and an extravagant funeral procession – can be celebrated and preserved.[4]

It is this rich tradition of the black funeral home as both a centre of community life and a repository of cultural memory that provides the foundation for *Superstition*, a new series created for the US channel Syfy by Mario Van Peebles – a veteran filmmaker and the son of renowned pioneer of black cinema Melvin Van Peebles – and Joel Anderson

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[1] See Tiffany Stanley, 'The Disappearance of a Distinctively Black Way to Mourn', *The Atlantic*, 26 January 2016 <https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2016/01/black-funeral-homes-mourning/426807/> [accessed 22 May 2018].

[2] Ibid.

[3] See 'Researcher Explores History and Complexity of African-American Funeral-Home Business', *Virginia Tech News*, 22 January 2016 <https://vtnews.vt.edu/articles/2016/01/012216-ncr-lyonsafricanamericanfuneralhomes.html> [accessed 22 May 2018].

[4] See Jakara K. Griffin, 'Home-goings: A Black American Funeral', *Anthropological Perspectives on Death Tradition*, 23 April 2017 <https://scholarblogs.emory.edu/gravematters/2017/04/23/home-goings-a-black-american-funeral-tradition/> [accessed 22 May 2018].

Thompson. Set in the fictional town of La Rochelle, Georgia, the first series of *Superstition* spans twelve episodes and focuses on the complex family dynamics of the Hastings clan, an African-American family whose official livelihood is provided by their undertaking business, which is housed in a rambling, gothic-style funeral-parlour-cum-family home. This is not, however, simply a realist scenario, as we learn that the family are entrenched in a centuries-old supernatural battle between good and evil. The first episode establishes the series' ongoing preoccupation with the intricacies of familial relationships, as we are introduced to war veteran Calvin Hastings (Brad James) who, upon returning to his hometown after deployment in Afghanistan, must confront not only his often-combative relationship with his father, Isaac (Mario Van Peebles), but also the legacy of a mystically induced past trauma. This thematic preoccupation with the paranormal and its effect on family relationships immediately lends itself to comparisons with the CW's immensely popular and rather similarly titled horror series *Supernatural* (2005-present) – and, in many ways, the comparison is apt. The Hastings family, like *Supernatural*'s Winchester clan, is comprised of 'demon hunters' embroiled in an ongoing battle against various forces of otherworldly wickedness. Indeed, the parallels evoked by the series' assonant names hint at a connection between the two shows. *Superstition* is self-aware enough to acknowledge this early on in its first episode, with Calvin questioning whether his monster-fighting father has an arsenal of weapons laid out in the back of his car 'like Sam and Dean' – the brothers at the heart of *Supernatural*.

Unfortunately, the infiltration of intertextual allusion and 'meta' humour into mainstream entertainment has meant that many derivative works attempt to avoid accusations of unimaginative imitation simply by acknowledging their debt to thematically similar precursors, without ever attempting to distinguish themselves on their own merits.[5] Likewise, *Superstition* often succumbs to the temptation to lean on meta-references in place of originality. Unfortunately, this over-reliance on the formulas established by more popular or familiar examples of genre television inevitably becomes *Superstition*'s greatest weakness, as the show's desire to adhere to pre-established generic conventions detracts from what might otherwise have been a fascinating exploration of uniquely African-American superstitions, mythologies, and traditions. Indeed, in many ways, *Superstition* appears to function almost as a fusion of *Supernatural*'s action-orientated horror and the forensic-mystery format popularised by shows like *CSI* (2000-15), as many of its episodes invariably require the

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[5] The knowing references in *Bones* (2005-17) to the show's obvious similarities to *The-X-Files* (1993-2002, 2016-18) is one obvious example of meta reference being used to deflect such criticisms.

Hastings family to investigate a mysterious or mystical death, with the help of sarcastic goth medical examiner Tilly (Tatiana Zappardino), before ultimately engaging in combat with the demonic entity responsible. While this combination of supernatural horror and investigative procedural is not necessarily unimaginative in itself, *Superstition*'s failure to deviate from the tried-and-tested formulas of these genres ultimately renders many of its episodes tedious and predictable.

That being said, *Superstition* is not simply a hollow imitation of its more successful CW counterpart; it is grounded in a very specific cultural milieu and draws upon a unique set of social and historical concerns. While *Supernatural* is often enlivened by the ecstatic, ceaselessly dynamic momentum inherent to the expansive, Kerouac-style road trip at the core of its narrative structure, *Superstition* is firmly rooted in a very specific time and place. The show is set in the sort of slow, humid Southern town where midday heat appears to cling to the sticky streets, and Spanish moss is draped languidly across the low-hanging branches of gnarled oaks. Moreover, *Superstition* is at its strongest when it foregrounds both its historicity and the familial connections at the heart of its narrative. Van Peebles and Thompson's decision to structure the show around the activities of an African-American funeral home clearly hints at a broader preoccupation with the investigation, representation, and preservation of African-American culture. Indeed, *Superstition* is a series that, in its foregrounding of African-American mythology, fashion, and cuisine, overtly celebrates black history and community. While the Hastings' funeral home provides burial services for all citizens of La Rochelle regardless of race, the family's profound commitment to the idea of dignity in death echoes the specific ethos of deep respect for the deceased out of which the African-American funeral industry emerged as a uniquely community-centric institution.

From Isaac's expansive collection of dashikis to his wife Bea's (Robinne Lee) use of Nubian mystical rites, the series makes numerous rich allusions to traditional West-African proverbs, dress, and customs. *Superstition* therefore gathers together a variety of references to the broader experiences of the African diaspora in Europe and America. Likewise, one of the most engaging elements of the show is its emphasis on family and community dynamics, as the first season explores not only Calvin's fraught relationship with his father, but his equally complex relationship with his ex-girlfriend – the town sheriff May Westbrook (Demetria McKinney) – and estranged daughter Garvey (Morgana Van Peebles). The most effective moments within the show are those that take place around the dining-room table, on back porches, and in local diners, where the Hastings quarrel, joke, and learn about folk traditions

and superstitions from the family matriarch, Bea. In its evocation of the intricacies of African-American culture – both in the broader terms of history and folklife, and in the more intimate sense of family and community – *Superstition* is truly a unique entry in the canon of contemporary genre television.

It is unfortunate, then, that, over the course of the first season, these moments of engaging familial interaction are repeatedly undermined by often-clumsy attempts at supernatural horror. For example, the first episode of the series finds the Hastings family confronted with a cluster of mysterious deaths in a local snake-handling church, a plotline which emphasises images of religious excess and rural lore and so echoes the long tradition of Southern-gothic iconography upon which *Superstition* attempts to draw. From here, however, the series quickly devolves into a rather formulaic 'monster-of-the-week' drama, becoming increasingly weighed down by its own internal mythology, as subsequent episodes delve into the family's ongoing battle against 'infernals'. It focuses a little too heavily on the nature of these beings, the mythology surrounding them, and the means through which they can be defeated. After all, these creatures are essentially demons, and the lengthy expository scenes dedicated to describing them are unnecessary, verbose, and tedious. As the episodes progress, this convoluted mythos becomes increasingly central to the show's narrative, largely displacing the originality of the culturally specific setting of a Southern black funeral home, while the engaging family dynamics are increasingly marginalised by a largely unimaginative TV horror narrative. While some episodes – the spectacularly over-the-top finale, for example – strive for an interesting (albeit B-movie-influenced) aesthetic, the series generally suffers from the kind of cartoonish CGI imagery that has by now become a staple of Syfy productions (see, for example, *Mega Piranha* (2010) and *Archnoquake* (2012)).

In many ways, then, *Superstition* is a frustrating show. It is apparent that the creators paid careful attention to both the cultural and historical significance of its setting. An early establishing shot of the Hastings funeral home, complete with a sign announcing 'Hastings Funeral Home – Est. 1907. Family Owned and Operated', signals the importance of themes such as history and family legacy. Moreover, this foregrounding of the show's setting clearly speaks to Van Peebles' desire to explore the complex history of the African-American community and its relationship to broader constructions of Southern identity. Indeed, the CEO of one of the show's main production companies, Barry Gordon, explicitly spoke to its ambitious commitment to inclusivity and representation when he claimed that '[w]e created

Superstition to be the most diverse genre TV series ever created for the global market'.[6] Throughout the series, the viewer can glimpse intriguing allusions to its debt to black culture and folklore. Bea Hastings' warning to Calvin to '[g]et your boots off the table. As if we need more bad mojo around here' recalls the popular superstition that resting one's shoes on a table attracts misfortune. Similarly, the most powerful talisman possessed by the family patriarch, Isaac, is the 'Ring of Solomon', an artefact that alludes to King Solomon's talking ring, a magical repository of wisdom, which in hoodoo lore was presented to the biblical leader by the Ethiopian Queen of Sheba.[7]

These allusions to the combined folk traditions of both the rural South and the African diaspora provide a frustrating glimpse of what the show *could* have been if it had fully committed to the premise of exploring African-American myths and superstitions rather than in many ways simply imitating the tried-and-tested formulas of shows like *Supernatural*. We see this, for instance, with one of the most intriguing characters to appear on the show, the recurring character of Aunt Nancy (Jasmine Guy), who is a manifestation of the West-African spider-trickster and storyteller, Anansi. Yet her presence is limited, and the full potential of her character remains under-developed, in line with so many of the uniquely African-American mythological elements that are invariably smothered by the generic supernatural drama conventions that ultimately come to dominate the show. Similarly, the show's use of dark imagery and sultry Southern menace reminds us that Van Peebles is drawing on a tradition of both fictional and non-fictional African-American gothic writing that extends back through Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) to Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861). Yet the generic nature of the Hastings family's battle with the infernals, along with their eventual confrontation with the demons' black-clad, cowboy-hat-wearing leader (W. Earl Brown), ultimately adds nothing to this exploration of black culture and community. The 'cookie cutter' formula of the show's horror tropes detracts from the far more interesting exploration of the nuances of Southern black culture.

Van Peebles is clearly committed to reinvigorating the conventions of genre television by moving it away from its historical focus on the concerns of a homogenous, primarily white, America. This ambition is admirable, and his project is a necessary one. Even amongst

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[6] See 'As Network TV Struggles with Diversity Issues behind the Camera, *Superstition* TV Series Has Embodied Inclusion from the Start as It Prepares for Global Launch in 2018', 19 December 2017 <https://www.marketwatch.com/press-release/as-network-tv-struggles-with-diversity-issues-behind-the-camera-superstition-tv-series-has-embodied-inclusion-from-the-start-as-it-prepares-for-global-launch-in-2018-2017-12-18> [accessed 21 May 2018].

[7] See Zora Neale Hurston, *Mules and Men* (1935)<http://xroads.virginia.edu/~ma01/grand-jean/hurston/chapters/hoodoo1.html> [accessed 21 May 2018].

the best examples of American horror television – *Supernatural* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003) spring to mind immediately – African or African-American culture is often either absent or figured as marginal and other. Whether depicted as a sinister force or an exoticised curiosity, the black presence in mainstream genre television is often depicted as a mystery to be solved, an other to be studied and understood. *Superstition* is an important addition to the canon of mainstream horror television because of the manner in which it resists such othering tendencies, presenting black culture as something intimate and familiar – a valuable, comforting, and complex part of the self rather than an exotic or threatening alien.

The show's setting in an African-American funeral home evokes a long history of black struggle and survival in an often-hostile nation, while the use of black folklore and superstition speaks of the rich cultural traditions that facilitated and enabled this process of survival. If the first season of the show is weakened by its reliance on plotlines borrowed from the popular genre staples of the past two decades, a second season (if commissioned) will hopefully be able to contribute something unique to the modern television landscape, by focusing strictly on the series' strongest features: the familial and cultural dynamics that lie at the heart of the show.

Miranda Corcoran

Riverdale, **Season Two** (CW, 2018)

This year saw the finale of the second season of *Riverdale*, the surprisingly popular, dark and sexy reimagining of one American pop culture's most twee and wholesome exports. Picking up where Season One's cliff-hanger left off, Archie Andrews (K. J. Apa), the updated version of the eponymous hero of the long-running Archie Comics, and his friends find themselves in Season Two hunting and being hunted by a sin-obsessed serial killer called the Black Hood. Meanwhile, Veronica Lodge's (Camila Mendes) mysterious and implicitly sinister father, Hiram Lodge (Mark Consuelos), arrives in town. In between all the riots, murders, stabbings and political intrigue, our main characters somehow find time to fall in and out of love – and learn that friendship, in a surprising twist, cannot actually do much in the face of severe and repeated moral compromise.

Said moral compromise may just be part of the rather nihilistic streak that seems to be running through a lot of modern pop culture these days (a trait which still feels like a reaction to or an attempt to capitalise on how well received Christopher Nolan's *Batman Begins* (2005) was), but it feels noticeably pronounced in *Riverdale* – even more so in this sophomore season. This show is not set in a world where difficult situations are resolved while our heroes maintain a moral superiority or clean conscience – far from it. For example, in this season we observe Archie stand by while someone gets shot, and cheerfully raising a private jock army to act as a vigilante force. Meanwhile, we witness the traditionally squeaky-clean Betty Cooper (Lili Reinhart) deliberately lure the serial killer to murderously dispose of a man who she perceives as a potential threat, not to mention helping her mother hide a body earlier in the season. As for fan-favourite Jughead Jones (Cole Sprouse), he (in one of the show's more shockingly glossed-over moments) horribly mutilates a woman by removing her tattoo with a knife in order to scare her out of town. These are not the 'good guys' of the conventional teen drama; they are more akin to the characters in the first act of a horror film like *I Know What You Did Last Summer* (1997),who transgress and (usually) spend the rest of narrative being punished for their deeds and haunted (often literally) by their actions. What little comeuppance there is in *Riverdale*, though, is short lived, light on long-term consequence, and designed solely for immediate melodramatic effect.

Season Two, it seems, is trying hard to be categorised as horror, or at least to invoke several of its aesthetics and tropes. From the lazily obvious episode titles – such as 'The Hills Have Eyes' or 'The Town That Dreaded Sundown' (which themselves occasionally find their way inorganically into spoken narration) – to plot points involving a *Carrie* (1976) musical or

the delivery of mysterious crates from the Miskatonic University via a certain Mr Lovecraft, the decidedly transparent references to gothic and horror staples abound. Yet the main tension of *Riverdale*'s horror elements lies in the fact that it is by no means clear who exactly they are aimed at – strangely, these references seem to be intended for a different demographic than those to which the show predominantly appeals. The show's primary target audience (mainly teens tuning in more for the mainstream teen drama than necessarily for the 'horror' elements) may not care about or even recognise the majority of the intertextual references.[1] (This is to say nothing of just how much this audience knows of the source comics or even *if* they know of the source comics at all. If *Riverdale* is an original property in their eyes, the subversion at the show's core is potentially lost on them).

The only reason to pay direct homage to the iconic shot of BOB from *Twin Peaks* (1990-91) mounting the couch and crawling toward the camera during Betty's nightmare, or for Veronica to have cushions in her lake house printed with the instantly recognisable design of the carpet from *The Shining* (1980), is to entice detail-driven horror fans to watch this show. Arguably, however, such nods to horror classics are too unsubtle to reward many such fans. The fact that the writers felt the need in scenes such as this to explicitly announce and explain the parallels with the horror 'greats' reveals a lack of confidence in their own audience; when Betty and Jughead dispose of a car in a swamp, for example, Jughead directly spells out the parallels with a scene in *Psycho* (1960), and references Norman Bates by name. Why include these explanations if aficionados will quickly recognise the references? And similarly, if the majority of audience members will *not* recognise these references, why even include them at all? These allusions therefore seem to be little more than an aesthetic choice, bolted inelegantly onto the otherwise (admittedly quite enjoyably) silly, overwrought teen drama and mystery plots revolving around small-town politics or family secrets.

Where the show succeeds more consistently is often in the sequences that occur directly after one of the endless, tension-free horror set pieces, in which the protagonists gather with their family units to unwind, only for some additional dark secret to emerge. Beyond these scenes, a number of the few truly tense moments this season emerge from Betty's home life, as her murderous long-lost brother stalks around her house, using her bathroom and staring at her menacingly while holding her infant niece, effectively holding Betty hostage in her own home. Such sequences are still a far cry from anything resembling

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[1] See Alison Herman, 'Teens Don't Watch TV – So Why Do They Love *Riverdale*?', *The Ringer*, 18 October 2017 <https://www.theringer.com/tv/2017/10/18/16492324/riverdale-season-2-teen-phenomenon> [accessed 23 August 2018].

subtle drama, but the claustrophobic confines of both the house itself and the family dynamics – her mother refusing to hear a bad word against him, for example – prevent Betty from easily resolving either the situation or dramatic tension.

Here, *Riverdale* is playing in the more traditional spaces that drama and horror deal in. From *Gaslight* (1944) to *The Thing* (1982), gothic cinema repeatedly emphasises the inescapability of the confines of the domestic abode, a situation intensified by the characters' distrust of one another and themselves. While quite standard for all intents and purposes, this type of drama stands out in *Riverdale* owing to the fact that – on top of being more tense and dramatically engaging than much of the rest of the show – these moments are decidedly in the minority. The show's usual modus operadi is notably louder, less subtle, and frequently more bluntly violent; it features not only various murders, but also full-on riots in the streets and arm carvings, to say nothing of the absurd image of Cheryl (Madelaine Petsch) emerging in full superhero-ified Red Riding Hood regalia, complete with a bow and arrow, to confront the main serial-killer antagonist, in a moment that appeared to have escaped from one of the CW's many comic-book shows.

These moments aside, stylistically, the show is somewhat at odds with itself. For all the narrative investment in the dark underbellies of the town, in dirty dealings, family secrets, and corrupted morals, the show's actual aesthetic is astoundingly glossy and clean. So, while the cinematography, production design, and lighting and so on are undeniably as easy on the eye as the selectively assembled cast, there is a noticeable disconnect between plot and visuals. The underlying 'message' of *Riverdale* is the same as that of *Twin Peaks* (just one of many aspects this show cribs from David Lynch's surreal drama) – that below the Norman-Rockwell sheen of the American small town lies moral filth, ethical darkness, and societal decay. In *Riverdale*, however, this moral and societal white-picket-fence-and-milkshakes sheen is simply covering another kind of sheen, a neon-lit sheen with dramatic shadows and perfectly photographed blood. There is no true dirt or grit in *Riverdale*, just overly stylised darkness and carefully lit leather jackets. The show has no interest in actually exploring darkness or horror, and this extends to its efforts to maintain a pristine aesthetic, even when it should be diving into the narrative and visual grime.

And this is *Riverdale* at its core. It is a show happy to invoke the rich tapestry of American gothic and horror cinema – and to a lesser extent, literature – as a mere additional flavour to add to its tonally mismatched genre ingredients of serious drama and comedy, with little narrative or character enrichment. While a show like *Hannibal* (2013-15) utilises its

horror elements to evoke a sense of the confusion and terror that can come with battling a mental illness, *Riverdale* merely uses horror as makeup, which is liberally and inconsistently applied to hide the face of an uneven and confusingly targeted melodrama.

Richard Drumm

The Strain (FX, 2014-17)

Adapted from a trilogy of novels of the same name co-written by Guillermo del Toro and Chuck Hogan, the TV series *The Strain* (2014-2017) combines elements of Bram Stoker's 1897 novel *Dracula*, del Toro's auteur style of storytelling, and post-9/11 anxieties, updating vampire-focused horror fiction for a contemporary audience. The show begins with a clear parallel to Dracula's journey to England, with a plane, in place of the novel's ship, landing in New York before going into radio silence. Fearing a possible terrorist attack, the CDC (Centres for Disease Control and Prevention) sends Dr Ephraim Goodweather (Corey Stoll) to investigate. On-board, he discovers that all the passengers are dead and that they are infected with parasitic worms. It is revealed that the plane was carrying The Master (voiced by Robin Atkin Downes), a vampire who aims to spread an epidemic throughout New York City, which will turn as many civilians into vampires as possible. The *Dracula* parallels continue throughout the pilot, as for example with the introduction of Abraham Setrakian (David Bradley), who is a clear analogue for Abraham Van Helsing, and is a key component of the show's conscious echoes of its source material. The programme as a whole focuses on a ragtag group of survivors, ranging from pest exterminator Fet (Kevin Durand), to retired luchador Angel (Joaquín Cosío), and a number of others who are forced to work together to stop the vampires.

The choice to adapt the novels into a television series instead of a film means that the narrative has more time to develop the characterisation of The Master and his vampires – who are referred to as 'Strigoi' (a term derived from Eastern-European folklore). Over the course of four seasons, the infectious outbreak spreads across New York and society crumbles, as The Master tightens his stranglehold over the city; in the fourth season, the Strigoi transform America into a dystopian police state. *The Strain* effectively balances two interconnected narratives, both with a distinct mood and tone: the show combines science fiction, as Goodweather tries to cure the disease, and gothic horror, in the scenes focused on The Master. The rules of how infection works are established early on and reinforced through scenes of lab experiments and autopsies, which serve to give the virus a pseudo-scientific grounding. Unlike much vampire fiction, which often ignores the exact mechanics of how vampirism works, *The Strain* thus compellingly applies the CDC's methods for investigating viral outbreaks to the supernaturalism of vampires. Stock horror clichés, such as vampires being vulnerable to sunlight, are now therefore explained in terms of physiology.

During the production of the pilot episode, del Toro stated, 'I'm trying to do what I do in my movies, which is to show it as a reality, but as a reality that is stylized. It's not like *CSI* or *The Wire*, it's real but it feels a little stylized'.[1] To produce this effect, *The Strain* employs multiple scenes of body horror. For example, the worms used to infect people with the virus are often shown in close-up shots burrowing into the eyes of their victims, simultaneously fascinating and disgusting viewers. Indeed, a poster advertising the premiere depicting a worm inside someone's bloodied eye in extreme close-up, with the gloved hand of a doctor holding it open, was removed from billboards in America after public complaints.[2] The depiction of the vampires extends this commitment to body horror; del Toro's fascination with monsters is a central theme in the majority of his cinematic works, from *Mimic* (1997) to *The Shape of Water* (2017), and the Strigoi are no exception.[3] Rather than the romantic vampires popular in recent films, the Strigoi are animalistic, and the show highlights their visceral nature, focusing on their feeding habits and bodily fluids. With the exception of Quinlan (Rupert Penry-Jones), a tragic anti-hero vampire, who is introduced in the second season, the Strigoi are presented as unsympathetic figures and are increasingly visually coded as fascists. Bearing a strong resemblance to Max Schreck's Count Orlok from F. W. Murnau's *Nosferatu* (1922), the vampires are dehumanised, depicted as bald, marble-skinned predators who hunt in packs, unable to speak or think as individuals. The most striking element that differentiates them from other cinematic vampires is that they do not attack their victims with the traditional neck biting (and the sexual frisson that it connotes). Instead, they attack from a distance by using protruding stingers that emerge from their mouths, allowing them to drain their victim's blood and force the infectious worms inside them, as to so add another unwilling victim to The Master's army of vampires.

As well as portraying its vampires as feral, violent animals, *The Strain* employs vampirism as a metaphor for fascism. Flashbacks in the first season explore Setrakian's experiences as a Holocaust survivor, and his first encounters with The Master and Eichhorst (Richard Sammel), a vampire Nazi who serves as The Master's emissary. Those who are infected lose their identities, becoming mere vessels through which The Master imposes his

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[1] Eddie Wright, 'Interview: Guillermo del Toro Takes *The Strain* to Dark Horse and Beyond', *MTV News*, 11 December 2012 <http://www.mtv.com/news/2627191/interview-guillermo-del-toro-the-strain/> [accessed 24 May 2018].

[2] Alex Ben Block, '*The Strain*: FX Changing Controversial Billboards After Negative Reaction', *Hollywood Reporter*, 27 June 2014 <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/strain-fx-changing-controversial-billboards-715542> [accessed 24 May 2018].

[3] Anne Thompson, 'Guillermo del Toro Interview: "At Home with Monsters" and That Missing Sketchbook', *IndieWire*, 8 August 2016 <http://www.indiewire.com/2016/08/guillermo-del-toro-interview-at-home-with-monsters-lacma-museum-sketchbook-1201711728/> [accessed 27 May 2018].

will on society. Indeed, in the second season, it is revealed that The Master can transfer his mind into other bodies to change his physical appearance. This can be read as a metaphor for the ways in which fascism can invade or overtake minds and erase individuality; The Master's voice comes from many bodies throughout the series, mirroring the erasure of individuality beneath the weight of a leader's ideologies.

In the fourth and final season, this vampirism-as-fascism subtext comes to the forefront, when the vampires use nuclear weapons to block out the sun and overthrow the American government, effectively controlling human society (the state of the rest of the world is largely ignored, and the show remains largely New York-centric). The *mise-en-scène* alters significantly in the last ten episodes to reflect this shift, becoming more claustrophobic and bleak, with a ruined Manhattan becoming a prison made up of dirty, dimly lit streets and constantly blaring propaganda, as the increasingly oppressed humans are rounded into concentration camps to be farmed for blood. These scenes use imagery associated with the Holocaust to explore the consistent and reoccurring nature of totalitarian societies. The flashbacks in the first season set in real-world Nazi concentration camps can be seen as a somewhat crass – adding a supernatural monster like a vampire into historical scenes of trauma could be seen as downplaying real-life human evil and as disrespectful to the suffering caused. By contrast, the modern dystopian scenes of the later season set in the show's present are more allegorical, distanced from historical events through a fictional, post-apocalyptic backdrop, allowing the show to comment directly on the nature of fascism.[4]

In addition to this figurative backdrop, as with many of del Toro's projects, *The Strain* employs imagery drawn directly from the gothic-horror and fantasy genres. Despite the fact that del Toro predominantly served as executive producer (taking on directing duties only for the pilot and two short segments within episodes directed by others, out of the forty-six that aired), elements of his distinctive gothic style can be identified throughout the series. For example, the set design of the villainous Eldritch Palmer's (Johnathan Hyde) office is made up of high ceilings with huge windows overlooking the city, decorated with strange medical devices and hearts in jars.[5] Similarly, in his first appearances, The Master is reminiscent of a ghoul from Victorian-era horror, appearing with his face covered and being noticeably taller than the other characters, recalling characters such as Victor Frankenstein's creature. As the

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[4] Amber Dowling, 'How *The Strain* is Redefining Itself in Its Final Season', *Hollywood Reporter*, 16 August 2017 <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/live-feed/strain-showrunner-season-4-premiere-1021090> [accessed 30 August 2018].
[5] Julia Echeverría, 'Pathogens, Vermin, and Strigoi: Contagion Science and Vampire Myth in Guillermo del Toro's *The Strain*', *Journal of Science and Popular Culture*, 1.1 (2018), 43-57.

character is fleshed out, his appearance becomes more mundane – in the final season, with the Strigoi becoming the dominant species, The Master wears a business suit, the monsters no longer having to hide in the shadows from humans. In addition, a non-scientific mythology built up around the origin of the Strigoi is explored in the later seasons, with pseudo-historical flashbacks set during the Roman Empire tracing The Master's backstory. These two strands, the scientific and horrific, become increasingly connected and interdependent as the story unfolds over several seasons – as Goodweather treats the Strigoi in terms of fighting a disease, Setrakian sees the Master as the cause of a more philosophical battle between good and evil, producing a contrast that often serves as an intriguing source of friction between the two characters.

As all of this suggests, *The Strain* brings together disparate ideas and imagery that have been central to the gothic and horror genres since *Dracula*. However, del Toro's creative input and the story-telling opportunities presented by modern television allow for an inventive twist on a familiar monster story, by grounding the fantastical within a modern, post-9/11 context. As a film, *The Strain* would have struggled to stand out within the crowded vampire genre, but as a television series, it successfully balances its influences and ambitions, and carves out a niche for itself as a distinctive piece of vampire horror.

Thomas Sweet

GAME REVIEW

Lingdong Huang, *Normal Human Face Simulator* (itch.io, 2017)

The human face is one of the most ubiquitous and average of sights during a given day. Seas of human faces float by in crowds, on trains, at meetings, and one stares back as if from within a mirror. Lingdong Huang's *Normal Human Face Simulator* deconstructs the 'normality' of the human face. Rather than simulating average actions such as blinking, smiling, chatter, Huang's game pits two faces against each other in a gnashing bout of cannibalistic combat. Without a conventional text-based narrative, *Normal Human Face Simulator* offers its players the option of becoming cannibals and, themselves, part of the gothic.

Hearkening back to the fading age of 'couch co-op', those years in the 1980s and 90s of local multiplayer games, *Normal Human Face Simulator* is a two-player fighting game played with a shared keyboard. Adding a physicality to the play, the players' faces are within, say, a foot of each other's as their fingers mash the keys in an attempt to gnaw at each other's digital faces. The procedurally generated graphics produce flappy, comical shreds of muscle and tissue over the skull beneath. The dazed, almost placid, faces of the simulated combatants and the overt, silly physics of the gore – which depicts the flesh flopping around and often getting stuck in unrealistic positions – positions this game squarely as a self-parody, one that exists within the larger tradition of gothic cannibals.

The gothic, as a genre, has a recurring fixation with cannibalistic appetites. Not often as literally manifested as in *Normal Human Face Simulator*, the trope is, nevertheless, omnipresent. The first gothic novel, *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), centres around a man 'consuming' his family for his own gain. More generally, the once-human vampire or zombie troubles the definition of cannibalism by consuming the humanity they have lost through their victims, while Faustian bargains effectively cannibalise the soul for mortal gain. Where these examples are abstracted acts of gothic cannibalism, *Normal Human Face Simulator* joins more literal depictions, such as the many adaptations of the folk-gothic tale of Sweeney Todd and films such as *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974). Rather than abstracting the act of cannibalism or rendering it figurative, *Normal Human Face Simulator* transforms the cannibalism that is inherent in the gothic into a literal act. However comic the result, Huang's game offers its

players the option to become digital cannibals and, in the spirit of the gothic, transgresses the distance implied by more literary cannibals. Instead of being passive observers or victims in a gothic plot, the players *are* the cannibals. Embracing one of gaming's unique features, *Normal Human Face Simulator* conveys this gothicised cannibalism without words.

Forcing its players to become digital cannibals has required Huang's game to remove several layers of abstraction. The most notable layer to have been removed is text-based storytelling – something video games occasionally share with film. Where the history of gothic texts has been dominated by the written word, video games can convey the gothic through play. *Normal Human Face Simulator* lacks any conventional story or narrative; instead, the players' act of lunging glass-eyed faces with gnashing teeth into each other constitutes the 'story'. No text or audio is there to command us to become cannibals; we, as players, choose this for ourselves. This decision is by no means far removed from the core of the gothic aesthetic – quite the opposite. The gothic, as a wide-reaching artistic tradition, can be seen as a continuous and cannibalistic dialogue. Horace Walpole's mock castle Strawberry Hill, the structure that launched both Gothic Revival architecture and the gothic literary tradition is, in itself, a cannibalistic building. Walpole designed his home by rending and consuming gothic architectural styles, with little concern for their history or usage beyond his aesthetic appraisal. In this vein, gothic artists emerging from that nexus have chosen to continue to consume and regurgitate gothicised aesthetics, narratives, and histories. The gothic is therefore a genre historically constructed through multiple forms of cannibalism. Centuries of architectural style, literary tropes, and folklore are consumed and remixed into the artistic mode of the gothic. Huang's *Normal Human Face Simulator* participates in this tradition of the gothic as cannibalised remix culture. Procedural graphics, the human form, couch co-op fighting games, and minimalist aesthetic are all cannibalised by Huang's art and reformed into a riveting two-player experience.

Normal Human Face Simulator, much like other gothic texts, also alienates us from ourselves. In the same way that the ancestral home becomes a haunted trap, or the lover turns vampire, occasionally you consume the face of the person sitting next to you on the couch – or at least play at the transgression. This game's transgression acts in the most obvious sense by having two people gnaw at each other's faces, but also by blurring the lines between comedy and horror, competitive and casual, modern gaming and the gothic literary tradition. And it

accomplishes all this without words, the only text in the game being a brief set of instructions on how to play.

Normal Human Face Simulator chews on the gothic tradition and cannibalises some of its most well-kept tropes and secrets. Without much in the way of narrative-by-text, the game communicates the gothic mode through its play. With a low price tag, accessible skill requirements, and unique alignment within the gothic tradition, *Normal Human Face Simulator* by Lingdong Huang is worth a bite.

Ashley Darrow

Blooper Team SA, *Layers of Fear*
(Aspyr, 2016)
(Reviewed on PC)

To discuss *Layers of Fear*, it is necessary to understand the success of the playable teaser of Hideo Kojima and Guillermo del Toro's *Silent Hills* (2014), as well as other recent games like *Resident Evil 7* (2017) and the upcoming *Visage*. The scenery of horror games has gone through a revival in the last few years, during which time games like *Amnesia: The Dark Descent* (2011) brought back some classical features of the survival-horror genre and used new strategies to enhance the suspense experience. The earliest horror games, in the 1980s, were bounded by the limited technology of the time; without advanced graphics, the game developers were inspired by horror fiction, and invested in investigative narratives, such as in *Haunted House* (1982) and *Alien* (1984). Those narratives could be accomplished digitally by employing text and symbolic signs associated with horror, such as ghosts and bats, and engaged the player in evasive actions (escaping traps and enemies) rather than confrontations. The games relied on the imaginative capacity of the players, and the illustrations in the game boxes were important to help contextualise the game's atmosphere.

In the 1990s, with better 3D graphics, game developers could finally produce an appealing visual scenery for games, which reinforced the immersion of the player. In this decade, games as *Alone in the Dark* (1992) and *Clock Tower* (1996) were released. Some important features from these games were the puzzle-solving, third-person camera with static placement, trapped characters, a menacing and haunted atmosphere, and inventory management. Many such games - including *Resident Evil* (1996) – also included armed combat. Building on this, from the middle of 2000s to the beginning of the 2010s, the horror genre in gaming distanced itself from its literary origins, and first-person shooters became popular, such as *F.E.A.R.* (2005) and *Dead Space* (2008). Even with an aesthetically ominous ambience, those games lacked suspense and investigation, however, leaning on jump scares, monsters, and violence. In response, games like *Amnesia: The Dark Descent* and *Outlast* (both 2013) brought back puzzle-solving and evasive actions to avoid combat, while redefining the first-person camera to a produce more emotive approach, in order to provoke fear, rather than simply act as a window for shooting.

Following this pattern, *Layers of Fear* is a new-generation horror game that dialogues with classic elements, such as the investigative narrative and the haunted house, while offering a

refreshing gaming experience through the possibilities opened up by interactive narrative, dynamic level design, and an excellently realised setting, accomplished though a mixture of Victorian decoration and psychedelic elements, such as spinning and endless rooms. The depiction of deteriorated environments where we can see the distortion and corruption that characterises the daily life of a monstrous reality is a classic feature of horror games, and one that is revisited in recent offerings. The player experiences this environment from a first-person perspective, from which they confront a threatening space, where the sensation of vulnerability is overwhelming. The most recent games mentioned above, with the exception of *Outlast*, all follow this pattern, and are also united by the environment in which they are set; in each of these games, the action happens in what is established as the player's home. The house, a supposedly safe space and a shelter for the individual, becomes instead a threatening one, from which the players need to escape.

In *Layers of Fear*, the player takes on the role of a tormented artist searching for a way to produce the perfect masterpiece. As in many ghost stories, such as Bram Stoker's 'The Judge's House' (1891) or Oscar Wilde's 'The Canterville Ghost' (1887), our journey takes place entirely within an elegant Victorian house, and the player is positioned as the Artist (our main character). The house is slowly twisted by fear, decay, and a menacing presence. It becomes clear, however, that this presence is not in fact supernatural, but a metaphor for the main character's soul. What is more, the game doesn't involve the player in scenarios in which they are chased; instead, we are presented with a series of forbidden rooms that the player needs to unlock in order to understand and help the protagonist. The transit through the house is the game's greatest appeal. As the name suggests, we pass through environmental layers that describe memories, entering deeper and deeper into the Artist's mind. These layers are represented through the house itself, which is full of images of his past and twisted by his interior ghosts and guilt.

The game constructs a dynamic environment through triggers and the first-person perspective; while walking through scenery, a player often wonders, 'was there a door here before?'. Memories can be tricky and the house hoodwinks us by transforming itself. In one of the game's most tense moments, the player is confronted with the ambiguous sentence – '[d]on't look back' – painted on a wall above the door, as the Artist walks through a long corridor. These mechanisms of employing non-static spaces serve the game well, masking the linear storytelling and causing discomfort and apprehension, key sensations to enhance the suspense. The dynamic

rooms prevent the player from moving too fast and losing track of the story, as it is needed to investigate the scenery, and, since the player never revisits exactly the same room, the experience of searching for information and items never becomes repetitive. Overall, the pacing is neither too quick nor too slow, keeping the player motivated, as well as offering a helpful number of breaks in different environments.

This game setting is quite similar to many classic works of gothic literature (and their cinema adaptations), such as Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), Edgar Allan Poe's 'The Oval Portrait' (1842), and, more recently, Stephen King's *The Shining* (1980).[1] The similarity with the latter in terms of setting is noteworthy: the space of the Overlook Hotel in *The Shining* is subverted by the haunting visions of ghosts and the inhospitable climate, while in the game, the protagonist experiences hallucinations and must navigate the ever-changing scenery. An identical family structure also features in both texts: here, the father is also an artist suffering from a creative block, and is again accompanied by his wife and their child. However, it is useful to begin by analysing the artist-focused plot as presented in the game, before moving on to examine the family relationship. Literature and film have long been preoccupied with the tortured (male) artist's or genius's quest for perfection, often leading to the unravelling of his mind. There are many interpretations of this, as in the game *Alan Wake* (2010), along with movies like *Loving Vincent* (2017) and *The Imitation Game* (2015). In these stories, the creativity and highly developed intellect of the artist are accompanied by mental illness and suffering, which are often problematically glamorised in a way that implies that genius cannot exist without pain.[2] At first glance, *Layers of Fear* might also appear to trivialise the tortured-artist trope, but the game adds more complexity through ambiguity and through the relationships between the characters.

This complexity is aided by the fact that *Layers of Fear* is, besides a horror game, an exploration and discovery one. With an empty house and a silent protagonist, all narrative is constructed almost exclusively through interaction with the scenery, as well as newspapers, letters, and drawings. The game doesn't use cinematographic sequences; the player controls the camera and exploration, and is responsible for tying the story together. We don't know the

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[1] See Mateja Ilišin, *Gothic Elements in Stephen King's The Shining* (unpublished dissertation, Josip Juraj Strossmayer University of Osijek, 2015).
[2] This trope is also termed 'True Art is Angsty' by *TV Tropes*. See <http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/TrueArtIsAngsty> [accessed 23 April 2018].

Artist's name; neither do we know when the story takes place. However, the game tells us who the protagonist is via its smallest details, such as the camera's tilt while the player walks – as if he is limping – and the dry beating noise of a cane, suggesting that the Artist has a physical disability. The constant sound of his steps is also reminiscent of a beating heart, a common trope in the horror genre. Many clues and scenery elements, some literal and others more subjective – like letters from the Artist's friends, an old school report, a broken phonograph, and baby shoes – lead us to believe that the protagonist has serious issues with his family, is an alcoholic, and is the victim of some sort of mental illness that causes hallucinations and paranoid behaviour. The environment provides additional clues that reveal his personality. Most of his drawings found during the game portray some of his obsessions, such as his drawings of rats, which emphasises his paranoia around pests. We can also infer that he has a physical disability by finding a cane tucked into a painting in the scenery, and also a diagram of a prosthetic leg. At his studio, where the game really begins, we discover his greatest desire, as we uncover a blank canvas and a message saying '[g]et it right this time': it is clear that the Artist is chasing perfection.

Conventionally, stories about artists undergoing mental suffering portray the suffering as fuel for creativity; here, however, the Artist's mental illness is actually a central reason for his failure. His wife is described as his muse and also a talented musician. When she suffers an accident and becomes disfigured, the Artist's obsession with perfection begins to wear upon their relationship, as we learn mostly from old newspapers that describe the accident, while the failure of their conjugal life is portrayed through the game's visual and textual narratives. The game itself can be understood as the retelling of their past, being constituted of fragments of their history, communicated to us in a variety of ways. It is hinted that, after the accident, he thought that he had lost his source of inspiration and couldn't paint beautifully anymore, which lead to a series of rejections. His lack of productivity is connected to his hallucinations and obsessive behaviour, but it is not clear if the rejections triggered the manifestation of his mental illness or the contrary, the mental illness caused the artistic failure. Either way, he couldn't deal with it and blames his spouse for what is going wrong. The Artist is not a kind man; the game hints that, much like Jack Torrance, he blames his family for his lack of productivity and artistic failure. He can't accept himself and begins to mistreat his wife and child, while also projecting himself onto the child, forcing the infant to train for an artistic career. The main character, like in many gothic stories, is therefore also the villain, as in Poe's 'The Black Cat' (1843). There is subtle evidence

that he physically injured his child, and his ultimate sin was to urge his wife to commit suicide, which she does, as we see by the presentation of their bathroom with a bloody knife and flashes from his memory in which we see him being aggressive towards his wife. We access these memories through spoken lines, documentation, and ghostly phone calls suggesting that his wife wanted the divorce because of his violent behaviour.

The strained relationship between the characters is reinforced by the visual composition of the game, most evidently by the choice of paintings scattered around the rooms of the house. The paintings are all from different periods, varying from the beginning of fifteenth century, with the gothic painter Jan van Eyck, to the end of nineteenth century, with William Merritt Chase, and their themes are intimately linked to the story.[3] Most of the paintings are self-portraits and family paintings, though a few depict hell. The first category of painting we can associate with the Artist's ego, while the others speak directly of his family dynamics and mental health. His wife's suicide and losing custody of his child mark the downfall of the Artist. The opening of the game dramatises his attempt to atone by painting his *magnum opus*. In the process, the Artist almost becomes a sort of Dr Frankenstein in his insane and grotesque quest to bring his wife back to life through his art. In order to advance in the game, the player must gather bizarre items to complete his masterpiece, working in iteration loops through the house, loops that always culminate in the *atelier*. First, the player must collect a scrap of skin that serves as canvas; then, a vial of blood used as dye; a box of bones and a lock of hair that functions like a brush; a finger which is the 'final touch' to the piece; and finally, an eye, referred to as the 'audience', must be obtained before the player can finally complete the masterpiece and the game. The painting process is portrayed like the decomposition of a corpse, but at the same time, as the Artist paints, the picture becomes a rotten body being reconstructed. This freakish ritual gradually degrades the mansion, which becomes increasingly dirty and messy, and the rooms lose form to the point where the architecture becomes nonsense, as a reflection of the artist's mind. Subsequently, the last version of the house, with thick black paint on the walls, like tar, and even floating furniture, barely resembles the one in which the player begins the journey.

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[3] Most notable are Jan van Eyck's *Arnolfini Portrait* (1434), Lavinia Fontana's *Portrait of Antonietta Gonzalez* (1595), Francisco de Goya's *Bandido asesinando a una mujer* (1800) and Augustus Leopold Egg's *Past and Present, No. 1* (1858).

Depending on how the player interacts with the house and the ghost of the Artist's wife (by confronting or avoiding her), they will be confronted with one of three finales, each with a distinct painting as the finished product. In the 'Neutral Ending', the Artist paints a portrait of his wife that quick degenerates, and it is revealed that he has a room filled with similar paintings, indicating that he keeps painting in an eternal cycle. In the 'Selfish Ending', he paints a self-portrait that ends up in an art gallery; and in the 'Selfless Ending', he paints a portrait of his wife and child but burns it with the house, and the Artist throws himself into the fire.[4] Each ending represents a way of dealing with guilt, and comments on the Artist's character. It is noteworthy that the only ending where he doesn't either live in suffering or die is the one in which he is rewarded with success, but at the cost of his family's suffering (the Selfish Ending). All three endings are intriguing and compelling; however, when the player achieves one ending, he is encouraged by curiosity to become the Artist once again and to return to his studio and start the process all over again: the game is, in effect, an endless cycle. Here, we – the players – stand in the role of the lunatic Artist himself, in search of perfection. In the shoes of the Artist, we are pushed repeatedly towards madness, driven to forget the many hours already played, in the hope of a better resolution this time, either by trying to reach the other finales or by looking for hidden mementos. The game therefore can be seen as acting as a cathartic mechanism, but total abstersion is unreachable.

Even if presented initially as a straightforward tale about a mad artist, the game sustains itself well through careful manipulation of its game design, producing an admirably complex story. All of its elements merge perfectly into a puzzle constructed of storytelling and ambiance, making the setting an ideal one for suspense and horror. The overuse of jump scares can be repetitive and the lack of more challenging puzzles may not please everyone, but nevertheless, *Layers of Fear* offers a good gothic-horror story, with enjoyable gameplay for those willing to play it.

Clara A. Pimentel and Philipe de Freitas Melo

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[4] This terminology is used by the game community. See
<http://layersoffear.wikia.com/wiki/Layers_of_Fear_Wikia> [accessed 26 October 2018].

CONTRIUBTORS

Shauna Louise Caffrey is an Irish Research Council Postgraduate Scholar at the Department of Music, University College Cork. Her research focuses on the relationship between witchcraft, magic, and music on the seventeenth-century stage. She was the recipient of the Mahaffy Memorial Prize from Trinity College Dublin in 2017 for her original research into the origins and appearance of witchcraft in Henry Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas*, and recently completed her MA in Music and Cultural History at UCC. She is founding member of experimental music group Analog On, and performs regularly as a dancer. Her other research interests include gender in popular music, creative practice, and film music.

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Mehdi Ghassemi is Adjunct Lecturer in English at the University of Lille where he previously completed a doctoral thesis on the works of John Banville and Jacques Lacan. His research explores the intersections between subjectivity, masculinity and style in contemporary Irish fiction and psychoanalysis. His publications include 'Authorial and Perceptual Crises in Banville's *Shroud*' (2015), 'Uncanny Corporeality in John Banville's *Eclipse*' (2016), and 'Aesthetics of Hysteria in John Banville's *The Book of Evidence*' (2018). He has also co-edited *La Représentation du Corps dans La Littérature* (2016). His forthcoming publications examine ekphrasis, femininity, and style in Banville's *The Sea* and *Ancient Light*.

Charlotte Gough is a first-year PhD student at Manchester Metropolitan University, UK. She received both her BA in English Literature and MA in Film Studies from the University of Manchester, as well as the prize for Outstanding Academic Performance at her Masters graduation. Her current thesis work examines the interrelationship between masculine crisis and satanic panic, and its representation in American gothic cinema of the 1980s and 1990s. Her research interests include the occult in popular culture, subjectivity, and trauma, with an emphasis on gender and psychoanalytic theory, in horror and fantasy film. To date, she has presented papers at conferences and symposiums themed around horror film, gothic studies and American studies at the Universities of Edinburgh, Sheffield, and Lancaster respectively, as well as the 14th annual International Gothic Association conference, 2018.

Angela Elisa Schoch/Davidson is an MA student at Sacramento State University in California. Her interests include contemporary-legend study; she is currently editing an article on the reception of Alvin Schwartz and Stephen Gammell's *Scary Stories to Tell in the Dark* series and the ostensive environment of the 1980s. Additionally, she is researching the use of the Gothic mode in the works of modern Indigenous authors. Much of Mrs Schoch/Davidson's work is funded through the CSUS Pre-doctoral Program. She enjoys long walks with her male consort, the comforts of the dark, and the minute rustlings of insects.