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Introduction

In a chapter dedicated to twentieth-century gothic — or, more accurately, the death of gothic by the end of the twentieth century — Fred Botting attributes the success of gothic terror and horror to ‘things not being what they seem’.¹ The irony of this reasoning when read alongside the apparent death of gothic is crucial. To apply Botting’s logic to his own argument, perhaps gothic has not died by the end of the twentieth century, but reformed into something else. By not appearing as classically gothic at first glance, this revision may in fact promise a horror or terror that will be inherently effective specifically because of this disguised gothicism, because of it not being what it seems. This promise is delivered by the fiction of Bret Easton Ellis. Ellis has not been canonised as a gothic writer alongside Edgar Allan Poe, H. P. Lovecraft, or Stephen King; however, the critical and popular reception of Ellis’s novels indicates a chain of gothic themes and motifs underwriting his work. Both Joanne Watkiss and Maria Beville discuss the centrality of *Lunar Park* (2005) to postmodern horror as an emerging subgenre; Barnes and Noble warn their readers against Ellis’s ability to ‘shock and haunt us’ with *Glamorama* (1998); and Michael Thomson calls the 2000 cinematic adaptation of *American Psycho* (1991) ‘the best monster movie in years’.² It is thus clear that certain elements of Ellis’s work adhere — or, at very least, tip their hat — to established tropes and images within classic gothic.

¹ Fred Botting, *Gothic* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 170. In the 2014 second edition, Botting has since acknowledged the existence of ‘globalgothic’ in which the gothic mode is applied to the multimedia, technologically inter-connected, and financially fragile modern day. See *Gothic: Second Edition* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2014), p. 19. However, I will draw on Botting’s original conclusions regarding twentieth-century gothic throughout this article, as they are contemporary to the publication of *American Psycho* and thus contextually relevant to an emerging gothic subgenre.

Yet gothic as a mode is generally understood as highly decorative, decadent, and rooted in archaic settings and emotive terror.\textsuperscript{3} To classify Ellis’s novels as specifically gothic texts is, then, to contradict the accepted critical approach to his writing as part of what is known as ‘blank fiction’, which is, by definition, emotionally disconnected, prosaically minimalist, and quintessentially postmodern. James Annesley explains blank fiction or ‘Generation X’ writing as variously ‘the response to an “apocalypse culture”’; an ‘atomised, nihilistic worldview’ articulated by ‘slackers’; and ‘the product of a postmodern condition’ which reflects ‘the material structures of late twentieth-century American society’.\textsuperscript{4} That said, the implication of a literary movement that expresses pessimism towards the end of the century and is, simultaneously, concerned with the materiality and social hierarchy of that age, is that this almost directly reflects a number of key factors that define classic gothicism. Catherine Spooner’s research specifically acknowledges the relationship between gothic and end-of-century concerns, highlighting a resurgence of interest in gothic themes upon the approach of the millennium.\textsuperscript{5} Furthermore, the preoccupation of gothic with class structures is long established within the canon, from Poe’s Prince Prospero sacrificing peasants to save himself in ‘The Masque of the Red Death’ (1847), to Bram Stoker’s Count Dracula (1897) as a specifically titled monster of European aristocratic heritage. Conversely, elements of the gothic can be traced throughout the blank-fiction canon; this is particularly evident in the ritualistic violence of Dennis Cooper’s \textit{Closer} (1989), the threat of the urban in Jay McInerney’s \textit{Bright Lights, Big City} (1984), and the psychological demons examined by Gary Indiana’s \textit{Three Month Fever} (1999). Blank fiction can thus be read as the evolution of the gothic within a commercial age, in which the economic and social hierarchy of aristocratic villains translates as a focus, and in some cases a dependence, on a highly commodified and globalised culture. That these villains appear, as a result, to be part of our own society rather than archaic throwbacks subsequently makes them more relatable and therefore, more effective as gothic villains enacting the uncanny as both recognisable and alienating entities. This raises questions of the gothic’s adaptability and its place within modern culture. Thus, if blank fiction is related to the gothic, Ellis, as arguably the most prominent and dominant of the Generation X literary ‘brat pack’, and \textit{American Psycho} (1991), as his most infamous


novel to date, are at the forefront of a turn in the gothic tradition as it reacts to — and against — the contemporary world.6

It is here that this study turns to discussions by Jacques Derrida, Richard Godden, and Paul Crosthwaite, on the conceptualisation of finance as spectral, to suggest that American Psycho as representative of contemporary gothic literature is in fact haunted by fears surrounding modern financial systems and, more specifically, late capitalism. Fredric Jameson’s definition of late capitalism underwrites the superficiality, fragmentation, and marketability of the postmodern experience with the globalisation of a purely referential and increasingly electronic financial system in the latter decades of the twentieth century.7 Following the close of the gold window in 1973, the American dollar was no longer exchangeable for its equivalent value in gold; instead, the bearer presenting a ten-dollar bill to the bank would receive in its place an identical ten-dollar bill. The transition of American currency from a representation of a tangible commodity into a purely promissory speech act meant that money became, in Annesley’s words, ‘derealised’, both a social reality and materially insubstantial in its lack of reference to anything solid or ‘real’.8 This idea of finance as being dually there and not there — in essence, being phantom-like — is read by Godden and Crosthwaite as the gothicisation of American finance. Godden’s discussion of money as rendering the reality of production and labour ‘invisible’ implies a ghostlike quality undermining or haunting both paper and electronic monetary systems.9 Crosthwaite goes a stage further in likening ‘cybercapital’ to monsters, vampirism, and necromancy in its ability to destroy lives, to maintain value and vitality across time, and in its self-resurrection from plummeting markets and depression.10 In both cases, the initial link between finance and the gothic is attributed to Derrida’s Specters of Marx, in which Marx’s image of ‘the spectre of communism’ haunting Europe is used to argue that capitalist finance and the figure of the ghost work from the same ontological position of absent presence.11 That, for Crosthwaite, this spectralisation of finance becomes further exaggerated by the computerisation of financial systems, links back to Jameson’s discussion of the referential quality of the

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6 Annesley, p. 2.
8 Annesley, p. 17.

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electronic, postmodern world that he defines as late capitalism. With money now existing as ‘mere electronic pulses’ with ‘no material instantiation at all’, Jameson’s portrait of a shallow, commodified existence powered by a superficially representative market suddenly evolves. If the financial system of late capitalism is structured upon ghostly, monstrous, and vampiric representations of money that, in their lack of material referents, effectively haunt the post-gold-window economy, then the postmodern society reflective of late-capitalist finance must also be haunted by similarly gothic figures of superficiality and phantom existence.

Ellis is, then, a writer of postmodern blank fiction which is interpreted as exhibiting gothic characters and effects. As such, he appears to counter-answer Botting’s claim of the gothic’s death after the release of Francis Ford Coppola’s *Bram Stoker’s Dracula* in 1992. Through investigation of the gothic and financial elements of the novel, this study proposes that *American Psycho*, and the contemporary American gothic of the 1980s-90s brat pack by extension, is not merely haunted by fears surrounding the financial. More importantly, it will suggest that the presence of specifically financial fear actually accelerates the qualities of the gothic, resulting in an intensified subdivision of the genre. This subgenre, which here will be called ‘late-capitalist hyper-gothic’, translates as an exaggeration of classic gothic tropes and effects that, as a direct result of the referentiality of late-capitalist finance, are articulated through a Baudrillardian hyperreality. This hyperreality emerges as a specifically gothicised blurring of fantasy and reality that stems from the materiality of modern life juxtaposed with phantom financial structures which are at once there and not there, and which therefore serve to haunt and undermine these material structures. The result is a branch of gothic that is both elevated to an extreme and communicative of a highly mediated realm created by late capitalism that is reflective of postmodern hyperreality. In exploring this proposed hybridity, the consumer habits of Patrick Bateman, and criticism surrounding the apparent insubstantiality of his character, will be assessed alongside stereotypes of the vampire in order to establish Bateman as a late-twentieth-century gothic villain. With reference to both Bateman’s violent attacks on his commodified environment and the detrimental effect of this environment on Bateman as it steadily progresses into hyperreality, this study demonstrates the relationship between gothic convention (here exemplified by the figure of the vampire) and late-capitalist commercialisation. It is as a key example of this late-capitalist hyper-

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12 Crosthwaite, p. 186.
gothic that this study presents Ellis’s *American Psycho* as central to the cultural evolution of a contemporary American gothic created by the blank-fiction brat pack.

**American Psycho**

The vampire, as stock character of gothic narratives since the early nineteenth century, owes its most recognised traits to John William Polidori, whose 1819 tale *The Vampyre* set a number of stereotypes that have since been embodied by many subsequent literary vampires. Polidori’s Lord Ruthven, infamously based on Lord Byron, rejects the dark, overweight, bestial creatures of European folklore in favour of pale, attractive, aristocratic rakishness. A nobleman, Ruthven is characterised by his ‘winning tongue’, ‘irresistible powers of seduction’, and the ‘sensation of awe’ he triggers in others. Coupled with a hypnotic gaze and what is identified by Conrad Aquilina as a ‘paradoxical obsession with destroying the object of his desire’, Polidori establishes the Byronic vampire as a figure externally emblematic of social and sexual desirability, while internally corrupted by a compulsion to degrade, dehumanise, and eventually destroy his victims. Described in these terms, it is not difficult to place the protagonist of Ellis’s *American Psycho* within Polidori’s parameters of the gothic vampire. Although not specifically titled, Patrick Bateman’s wealth and elevated social status, resulting from his role on Wall Street, puts him in an equivalent aristocratic position above the poor and homeless of 1980s New York. Furthermore, the doubling of Bateman’s character as ‘at the same time, both wealthy executive and brutal killer, seemingly “charming” date and sexual partner from Hell’ (emphasis in original), recalls both the attractive and threatening sides of Ruthven’s personality. Bateman’s slaughtering of women with whom he has had sex just moments before similarly demonstrates the need to destroy the desired victim that is at the heart of Polidori’s gothic monster. Bateman is thus ‘every inch the romantic hero: handsome, with a fit, toned body and impeccable taste’, who is then gothicised by the demonic compulsions lurking beneath the desirable façade. The shared economic privilege of Ruthven and Bateman is key to their dually gothic/romantic status, as it allows both to transcend the social boundaries of their respective environments, a recurrent

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17 Helyer, p. 728.
element of both romantic and gothic characterisation.\textsuperscript{18} Ruthven, as a titled villain, is not subject to the rules of his house but is able to set, and therefore bend, these rules as he wishes. While Bateman cannot create his own laws outside of those already in place within 1980s New York, he does have enough economic power to buy his way around these laws without getting caught; having money to pay for power tools, a second apartment, and the silence of infrequent survivors is key to his predatory success within the novel.

Simultaneously a ‘total GQ’ playboy (emphasis in original) and the nocturnal predator of New York streets, Bateman functions as an ‘anti-Batman’ who attacks rather than saves the city’s destitute and vulnerable.\textsuperscript{19} In a curious coincidence, the actor Christian Bale, who would go on to play Batman in Christopher Nolan’s 2005 revision of the franchise, played Patrick Bateman in Mary Harron’s 2000 adaptation of \textit{American Psycho}. Given this, the impression granted to cinema-goers might be that the two characters are indeed alternate personalities within the same body. This motif of the dual personality is inherent within Ellis’s novel itself, in which Bateman’s public persona, the equivalent Bruce Wayne side of his identity, is not constructed out of any individual attributes but solely based on brand power. He is understood — and understands others — not by his behaviour but based on the products he uses and the labels he wears:

Price seems nervous and edgy and I have no desire to ask him what’s wrong. He’s wearing a linen suit by Canali Milano, a cotton shirt by Ike Behar, a silk tie by Bill Blass and cap-toed leather lace-ups from Brooks Brothers. I’m wearing a lightweight linen suit with pleated trousers, a cotton shirt, a dotted silk tie, all by Valentino Couture, and perforated cap-toe leather shoes by Allen-Edmonds. (pp. 30–31)

Here, the comparison of labels serves as a replacement for any emotional inquiry into Price’s behaviour. Bateman feels no compulsion to read into his friend’s mood and is instead satisfied reading the labels of his own clothing. Accordingly, Alex E. Blazer argues that the public version of Bateman ‘is nothing more than an advertisement, an illusion, a mask under which no human character dwells’:\textsuperscript{20} Emotionally robotic and often mistaken for others, the lack of humanity, personality, or individuality beneath the commodified surface of Bateman’s character is, for Blazer, demonstrative of a superficiality made extreme. Bateman is two-

\textsuperscript{20} Alex E. Blazer, ‘Chasms of Reality, Aberrations of Identity: Defining the Postmodern through Bret Easton Ellis’s \textit{American Psycho}, \textit{Americana: The Journal of American Popular Culture}, 1.2 (2002), n. pag.
dimensional with ‘no layers [or] sense of depth’, his identity solely constitutive of brand labels that, as commodified symbols, do not refer to anything substantial or ‘real’.\(^{21}\)

This depthlessness is, for Smith, both characteristic of the décor and decadence of gothic stereotype, and symptomatic of the postmodern condition.\(^{22}\) Just as the gothic monster is simply a foil to the protagonist without any psychological explanation given for the monster’s behaviour, Smith interprets the image culture of the postmodern late twentieth century as being without reference to anything real. This constitutes a purely superficial reality based on surface aesthetic rather than ontological depth. Jameson claims that this surface aesthetic is the product of the intense commodification of late capitalism.\(^{23}\) At the point where almost every aspect of modern culture is marketed and purchasable, Jameson argues that the value of the brand exceeds the value of the product itself, resulting in a desire for representation rather than the marketed item. In this way, Bateman’s public identity, constructed of and defined by the empty symbols of late-capitalist brand fetishism, is reflective of his surrounding culture and therefore, a performance or masquerade of the emptiness of late capitalism. The desirable surface of Bateman’s character is thus a front constructed from superficial branding assumed for the benefit of others. That this front hides Bateman’s lack of personality — read by Blazer as a lack of humanity — again aligns him with the split personality of Polidori’s Byronic vampire, the charismatic exterior put in place to disguise the inhuman monster beneath.

Bateman himself is made aware of his own superficiality each time he is misrecognised as a different character in the novel, such as when he notes, ‘Owen has mistaken me for Marcus Halberstam […] he also has a penchant for Valentino suits and clear prescription glasses’ (p. 89). Having religiously followed the trends dictated by the media, the fashion industry, and his contemporaries, Bateman is subsequently unable to construct successfully an individual, recognisable identity from commodified brands. Any persona he attempts to create does not reflect Patrick Bateman but is repeatedly misread as Marcus Halberstam, Simpson, Hamilton, Davis, Baxter, and numerous others throughout the text (see, for example, pp. 89, 141, 48, 179, 195). Derrida’s reading of the commodity as a mirror that, in no longer communicating a labour value equivalent to market value, ‘does not reflect back the expected image’ is crucial here.\(^{24}\) For Derrida, the commodity-as-mirror distorts the onlooker who, expecting to see a representation of their own labour and therefore their

\(^{21}\) Blazer, n. pag.
\(^{22}\) Smith, pp. 8–9.
\(^{23}\) Jameson, pp. ix–x.
\(^{24}\) Derrida, p. 195.
position within the market, ‘can no longer find themselves in it’. In other words, the commodified brand, as an empty symbol, does not reflect the labour input of the product itself but is instead representative of a figurative lifestyle or ideal, and therefore does not reflect the reality of the product it claims to signify. Corresponingly, Bateman, as Martin Weinreich argues, aims his ‘consumerist gaze’ at the ‘signifier rather than the signified’, basing his identity on the empty symbol of the brand name rather than his personal use of the actual product. This means that he essentially looks to create his public persona from his reflection in the commodity-as-mirror, which is itself devoid of reflective truth or meaning. Despite Bateman’s highly detailed descriptions of the branded items that constitute his external appearance, the fact that he is continuously misrecognised means that others are unable to see Bateman’s true self reflected in the commodity-as-mirror. Thus, Bateman is effectively, like the gothic vampire, without a reflection, a motif that becomes literalised during Bateman’s morning routine: ‘I urinate while trying to make out the puffiness of my reflection in the glass that encases a baseball poster hung over the toilet’ (p. 26). Here, looking into an advert for a sporting event, Bateman is unable to see an accurate image of himself reflected back. This at once demonstrates his vampiric insubstantiality and, additionally, highlights Bateman’s failure to achieve Jacques Lacan’s mirror stage in which the individual recognises and identifies their reflection as a representation of themselves and is thus granted ‘mastery of his bodily unity’. Bateman is therefore denied bodily unity by his inability to perceive his image reflected in the commodity-mirror, and is subsequently a perverse shadow of the Byronic identity that, in becoming commodified through Polidori’s text, culturally obscured the true personality of Byron himself.

That Bateman records himself murdering one woman and subsequently watches the tape as he murders another later in the novel, can then be read as an attempt to compensate for this lack of reflection by ‘watching himself perform, over and over again, almost as if through a mirror’. As Bateman describes the event,

I’ve situated the body in front of the new Toshiba television set and in the VCR is an old tape and appearing on the screen is the last girl I filmed. I’m wearing a Joseph Abboud suit, a tie by Paul Stuart, shoes by J. Crew, a vest by

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29 Helyer, p. 735.
It is not clear here whether Bateman is describing the version of himself on tape or what he is wearing as he watches the tape. The creation of a replicated self-image through video thus acts in place of the reflection he lacks as a purely commodified identity, and demonstrates Bateman’s awareness of his own insubstantiality. That this replacement reflection is created not just with a video camera but a specifically named ‘Toshiba’ again demonstrates Bateman’s reliance on branded commodities for the validation of his fragmented, depthless self. Bateman’s conscious use of the commodity in the construction and attempted confirmation of his identity is, then, to return to Blazer’s analysis, comparable to the blood that nourishes the vampire of classic gothic texts. If, in Blazer’s reading, Bateman is without humanity because of his lack of identity, his attempts to counteract this through the consumption of commodities — in order to construct identity — then mirror the vampire’s drinking of blood to sustain life, or the appearance of humanity. Bateman’s feelings of anticipation and abated desire leading up to and following his consumption of branded items underline his vampiric dependency on the commodity. Just as Stoker’s Count Dracula appears ‘as if his youth had been half restored’ once his thirst has been quenched by ‘gouts of fresh blood’, Bateman cures the ‘existential chasm’ within himself by going ‘toward the Clinique counter where with my platinum American Express card I buy six tubes of shaving cream’ (p. 179). Here the question of Bateman’s existence is answered by purchasing commodities (typically with anti-aging properties) in the same way that Dracula’s human appearance is restored by drinking blood: ‘the cheeks were fuller, and the white skin seemed ruby-red underneath’. Rob Latham understands the vampire in contemporary contexts as ‘literally an insatiable consumer driven by a hunger for perpetual youth’, whether this be through the physical consumption of human fluids or the purchase of multiple anti-aging facial products.

However, Bateman’s vampiric consumption of commodities is not limited to his wardrobe, favourite restaurants, or morning regime. Alongside the branded items he relentlessly catalogues, Bateman treats women as purchasable goods, leaving a barmaid a ‘big tip’ purely because she is ‘hot-looking’ (p. 56), and buying the services of escorts and

31 Stoker, p. 67.
prostitutes: ‘I dial the number for Cabana Bi Escort Service and, using my gold American Express card, order a woman, a blond who services couples’ (p. 170). For Bateman, the classic gothic heroine, whose virginity is interpreted as sexually alluring in the eyes of predatory villains, is transformed into the figure of the prostitute who, rather than merely representing sexual attraction, actually makes a business by selling it. The sexual tension between Dracula and Lucy Westenra, who is found ‘unclad’, ‘half reclining […] her lips parted’, breathing ‘long, heavy gasps’ following her encounter with the vampire, is not only more explicit in Bateman’s world but is also inherently tied to financial transaction. He tells the reader, ‘[Sabrina’s] hair is brownish blond, not real blond, and though this infuriates me I don’t say anything because she’s also very pretty; not as young as Christie but not too used up either. In short, she looks like she’ll be worth whatever it is I’m paying her by the hour’ (p. 171). Bateman is therefore not merely a sexual predator and consumer of women but a purchaser of commodified flesh; in other words, a customer. In each instance, Bateman’s vampiric consumption of the entity that — temporarily — restores his identity is inextricably linked to marketability and financial exchange. He is therefore a late-capitalist revision of the classic gothic vampire, what will be termed here the commodity vampire: a creature not only constructed of but sustained by the power of the brand label as empty signifier.

Bateman’s performance of this role is evident in his adoption of advertising rhetoric and compulsion to catalogue the products he uses. In the chapter ‘Morning’, the excessive number of beauty products used by Bateman to maintain a youthful appearance is reminiscent of the uncanny agelessness of the vampire and additionally, for Ruth Helyer, reflective of ‘the over-ornamentation so characteristic of earlier Gothic writing’:

Vidal Sassoon shampoo is especially good at getting rid of the coating of dried perspiration, salts, oils, airborne [sic] pollutants and dirt that can weigh down hair and flatten it to the scalp which can make you look older. […] Never use cologne on your face, since the high alcohol content dries your face out and makes you look older. […] Then apply an anti-aging eye balm (Baume Des Yeux) followed by a final moisturizing ‘protective’ lotion. (pp. 26–28)

The ‘relentless commodification’ of late capitalism and its effect on ‘all levels of social life’ is made clear here through Bateman’s internalisation of the language of brand advertising. This additionally demonstrates the intense hunger for these commodities that is ever present within Bateman; not one product but thirty are needed every morning to prepare him for the

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33 Stoker, p. 113.
34 Helyer, p. 736.
35 Annesley, p. 8.
day. The fact that this extensive list of facial and hair products is devoid of any description of Bateman’s actual appearance again reinforces Blazer’s interpretation of his lack of humanity and lack of reflection, a result of his purely commodified exterior. Like the vampire, whose gothic villainy is defined by his blood-drinking, Bateman is monstrous specifically because of his commodity consumption, while simultaneously unable to recover any sense of humanity from this consumption. He is thus trapped in a perpetual cycle of his own late-capitalist monstrosity, his vampiric hunger abated but never cured by his consumption of the commodity. Bateman’s ability and desire to consume so excessively are interpreted by Annesley as an assertion of ownership over the commodified environment and, subsequently, Bateman’s own commodified identity. The ability to purchase and therefore stake claim over almost every aspect of late-capitalist culture means that Bateman is able to solidify his dominance over the otherwise empty symbols that constitute his public persona. Consumerism thus becomes, for Bateman, an oxymoronic validation of the identity made questionable specifically because of his commodity consumption. Just as the vampire asserts his power over his victims by satisfying a dependency on blood that, in itself, highlights the creature’s weakness, Bateman’s thirst for the commodity brand and the commodified body underlines the cyclical nature of his identity crisis. If Bateman’s existence is, on the one hand, problematised by his internalisation of the commodity and, on the other, generates social dominance through continuous commodity consumption, at what point does Bateman’s vampiric thirst for the brand become satisfied?

It is at this point that the intensifying effect of late-capitalist finance on the gothic becomes clear. The presence of the ever-hungry Bateman in a culture in which everything, from toothpaste to the human body, has been commodified, translates into a perversely purchasable buffet to which there is no end. Furthermore, that Bateman is unhindered by time or financial restraints means that his consumer desire can run riot without limitation. Spending his time in the office watching The Patty Winters Show, reading sports magazines, and booking tables at high-end restaurants, Bateman is rarely shown actually working, yet is still able to afford the items and experiences that satisfy his consumerist compulsions: ‘I put a Paul Butterfield tape in the cassette player, sit back at the desk and flip through last week’s Sports Illustrated’ (pp. 65–66). Ernest Mandel describes this imbalance as ‘surplus value’, created by either an increase in productivity, an increase in labour intensity, or the ability to produce the ‘value-equivalent of wages […] in a smaller fraction of the working day’ with no

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additional effort from the labourer. Arguably, Bateman’s position at Pierce and Pierce — a triple pun on sexual penetration, violent stabbing, and the vanquishing of the vampire by multiple staking — falls into the final category, providing him with a steady inflow of money without demanding an equal labour output. Bateman is thus left with plenty of free time to spend roaming the city in search of victims; this would initially suggest that his thirst could be easily quenched, given the opportunity to consume ever-available commodities at all times. However, the construction of his identity from commodities makes his personality so fragile that it demands constant reaffirmation and, therefore, continuous consumption in order to keep it alive. Devoid of any labour-identity, Bateman’s ‘reflection’ in Derrida’s commodity-mirror — itself already inaccurately representative — is doubly distorted and therefore increasingly undermined by the vacuity of the labels used by Bateman to construct a public self. The presence of surplus value, along with the prevalence of the commodity in late-capitalist culture, subsequently destroys any sense of achievable end-point or limit to consumption. Bateman’s vampiric thirst is thus almost unquenchable and therefore an extreme intensification of that experienced by Polidori’s gothic creature or Stoker’s predatory Count.

Subsequently pushed to the margins of acceptable social conduct in search of satisfaction, Bateman’s vampirism finds expression by taking his consumerist impulses to the absolute extreme. This is evident in Bateman’s dismemberment of the victims he had previously purchased based on the value of their commodified appearances. These episodes see him literally reduce his sexual conquests to their component parts, taking late-capitalist consumerism and commodification to its most brutal extreme: ‘[w]hat is left of Elizabeth’s body lies crumpled in the corner […] she’s missing her right arm and chunks of her right leg. Her left hand, chopped off at the wrist, lies clenched on top of the island in the kitchen […] her head sits on the kitchen table’ (p. 291). Bateman’s mutilation of his victims is, for Georgina Colby, a division of the already commodified whole ‘into a multiplicity of parts […] effectively increas[ing] the number of commodities that surround him and hence his dominion by those objects’. Not satisfied by merely using women as purchasable objects, Bateman is compelled to commodify further the already commodified body, in an attempt to assert a personal dominance over the items that define his identity. This can then be read as evidence of the hyper-gothic within Ellis’s text. Bateman’s violence becomes extreme here in

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direct response to his lack of labour identity, itself a result of his position within brand-driven late-capitalist culture. The effect of this specifically financial element of Bateman’s identity is the exaggeration of his villainous trait, that is, his vampiric need to consume and control. That Bateman goes on to eat the girl, literally consuming the reduced component parts of her body and drinking her blood, demonstrates the insatiability of his appetite for the commodity, while literalising the gothic vampire’s hunger for human fluids: ‘I want to drink this girl’s blood as if it were champagne’ (p. 334). In reaching this extreme in reaction to late-capitalist commodification, ‘the word consume is thus used [by Ellis] in all of its possible meanings: purchasing, eating and destroying’. 39 Furthermore, the detailed descriptions of violence mirrors Bateman’s endless cataloguing of product features and designer brands; the interchangeable dead-pan tone used by Ellis in either scenario demonstrates that Bateman is ‘unaware of the difference between commodities and human life’. 40

Thus driven to commit murders that are fuelled by a seemingly unlimited financial capacity for escorts, alcohol, and power tools, and become progressively more horrific, Bateman literalises the desire of the Byronic vampire to degrade, dehumanise, and destroy. Bateman’s victims are not only treated as objects but are quite literally degraded into non-human entities through dismemberment to become mere parts, any sense of individuality or identity lost in the physical deconstruction of the commodified human body. In response to the explicit detail of Bateman’s narration of his crimes, Helyer claims that Ellis’s text ‘removes many unknown elements and defuses much of the mystery of violent death’. 41 For Helyer, the removal of the psychological mystique that characterises much of the classic gothic canon creates an intensified sensationalism that subsequently heightens the gothic threat in Ellis’s text. In providing every gory detail of his victims’ deaths, ‘Patrick replaces the Gothic dark passages and castle rooms with female internal organs and genitalia’, 42 leaving the reader with no illusions about what Bateman is doing, and therefore providing nowhere to hide from the violent horror of the scene. The intense detail provided within these passages serves to increase the reader’s ability to visualise the action (thus appearing to make it more realistic), and simultaneously distorts the reality of the scene by providing an over-magnified perspective. As a dually real and unreal portrayal of heightened gothic violence, Bateman’s murders again exemplify hyper-gothic. Bateman’s extreme re-commodification of the body, an attempt to assert a sense of identity denied him by the commodity-as-mirror,

39 Annesley, p. 16.
40 Annesley, p. 13.
41 Helyer, p. 733.
42 Helyer, p. 733.
thus acts as an accelerant to the gothic within the novel. The surplus value available from the reduced labour demand of Bateman’s Wall Street position intensifies his purchasing power in an environment where everything, including the human body, is purchasable. Bateman’s vampiric consumerism — the source of the gothic within the novel — is subsequently allowed to become extreme in a commodified environment ‘rapidly approaching overload’.  

This overload translates in the novel as a movement from gothic terror to gothic horror. As Beville explains, ‘terror, unlike horror, is regarded as bearing only a suggestion of the grotesque. In its obscurity, it stimulates the imagination, causing simultaneous fear and fascination.’ The extreme obscenity of Bateman’s crimes, described in immense detail, eliminates any obscurity regarding the state of his victims’ bodies. The bombardment of the reader with highly gruesome images subsequently transforms the feeling of terrified fascination commonly associated with classic gothic texts, into a horrified desensitisation that echoes the distortion of reality triggered by the postmodern hyperreal. Reduced to mere body parts — and thus made into symbols of human life rather than constituting subjects in and of themselves — Bateman’s victims become specifically grotesque bodies, defined by Spooner as ‘a body in progress: a bizarre, exaggerated, hyperbolic body, fragmented and dismembered, distinguished by its protuberances and orifices’. The classification of the grotesque body as definitively rather than merely suggestively grotesque — and therefore indicative of the presence of horror over terror — is thus dependent on its mutilation. Whereas the vampire’s nocturnal attacks hold an element of mystery and therefore intrigue the reader of the gothic, Bateman’s total dismemberment of the human body to the point of non-recognition repulses and subsequently repels Ellis’s reader. The resultant horrified rather than terrified reaction demonstrates that the gothic has been made extreme through the intense commodification of the human form. Furthermore, that Bateman does not just increase the number of orifices in the human body through his mutilation but, in one instance, actually collects them (‘in my locker in the locker room at Xclusive lie three vaginas I recently sliced out of various women I’ve attacked in the past week’ (p. 370)), again demonstrates Ellis’s presentation of the body as specifically rendered grotesque because of its commodification and purchasability.

The marketability of late-capitalist culture thus serves as an accelerant to the gothic within Ellis’s novel. Were it not for the unrestricted ability to consume, coupled with pressure

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43 Helyer, p. 733.
45 Spooner, p. 66.
to do so in all aspects of life, Bateman would not resort to butchering and eating the flesh of prostitutes in order to confirm his own humanity, nor would he store disconnected body parts in a locker as if they were suits in his wardrobe. Bateman is therefore emblematic of the vampire figure as constituted through the hyper-gothic, his actions conforming to vampiric stereotypes but made extreme on all levels to the point where he loses all self-control. Annesley’s discussion of Ellis’s fear of a world devoid of humanity as a result of mass commodification is subsequently bizarrely prophetic when read in terms of Bateman’s vampirism. Driven to murder due to his inability to reconcile his highly commodified identity, and allowed to do so because of his unlimited financial backing, Bateman’s destruction of the human body would indeed lead to a decrease in available human victims if left to continue unrestricted, and to a literal loss of humanity. Thus, as Annesley summarises, ‘Patrick Bateman’s murders are crimes for which an increasingly commercial and materialistic society must take ultimate responsibility.’

Conclusion
To read Ellis as a writer of late-capitalist hyper-gothic is to recognise his revision of classic gothic settings and characters, in conversation with some of the most influential texts of the gothic canon. By making his vampire feed on commodities, Ellis not only ensures that his gothic production is relevant to the late-capitalist reader but, significantly, strips back the archaic decoration that overshadows much of classic gothicism. By doing so, he reveals the threat at the centre of his fictional character; this threat is therefore given far more focus within Ellis’s text and appears more concentrated within Bateman’s character as a result. Ellis’s monster is not shrouded in darkness, disguised behind veils, or hidden in a subterranean dungeon, but is out in the open, at the centre of attention, looking just like everyone else, and is more frightening as a result. Furthermore, the financial context of Ellis’s gothic means that this fear is made extreme, in line with the intense marketisation of contemporary culture. Behind every transaction, valuation, or advertisement lies the threat of the gothic that is at once uncontainable due to its spectrality, and reproducible on a global scale. Indeed, the prevalence of gothicism across Ellis’s text demonstrates the ubiquity of this exposed fear and underlines its position within the contemporary gothic canon.

Furthermore, that the novel plays with the presentation of reality is crucial to its definition as hyper-gothic, and again situates it as a product of and response to the

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46 Annesley, p. 19.
47 Annesley, p. 13.

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postmodern age. The alleged survival of Paul Owen — who is ‘murdered’ by Bateman, only to be reported alive and well by other characters later in the novel — implies the possibility that the events of *American Psycho* are imaginary and that Bateman’s worldview is entirely hallucinatory (p. 338). Botting’s characterisation of gothic fear as ‘things not being what they seem’ is thus exemplified by Ellis’s work as hyper-gothic.\(^{48}\) The power of Ellis’s financial references, as accelerants to the scope and intensification of gothic in the novel, push this manifestation of the gothic beyond the boundaries of the apparently realistic setting it initially portrays, until all previous restraints on the plausibility of gothic fear dissolve. The result is a gothic which, on the one hand, attempts to replicate the reader’s reality to such an extent that every clothing label is named individually; and on the other, manipulates this reality to the point where nothing, not the subjectivity of the human body nor an individual’s perception of their own life, is what it seems. The effect of this is then, according to Botting’s theory, the successful creation of gothic horror and terror that directly follow the pattern established by the preceding gothic canon. In this way, Ellis does not merely incorporate the gothic within his work but is in fact central to the progression of American gothic literature into the twenty-first century.

Botting’s assertion that the gothic dies at the end of the twentieth century is thus answered by Ellis in his sourcing of fear from modern finance. While the notion that Ellis was consciously redefining modern gothic may be somewhat presumptive, it is clear that, in centring his gothic on spectral finance and the mediated postmodern world that can be read as Baudrillardian hyperreality, Ellis adjusts classic gothicism to fit the contemporary context. In doing so, he contributes to a newly emerging and distinct subgenre of gothic literature — that is, late-capitalist hyper-gothic.

\(^{48}\) Botting, p. 170.

Michael Cop and Joseph Young

A proper respect for the integrity of social history is one thing; a willingness to sacrifice what fiction clearly reveals about changing values to the historical test of altered practices is quite another. Cognitive dissonance ensures that cultural attitudes and social behaviour are not always in step, especially at moments of transition. In the early modern period, for example, when romantic love was increasingly seen as the proper basis for courtship on the stage, arranged marriages were still a common social practice. It is perfectly possible that parents could side with Romeo and Juliet at the theatre, while assuming the right to choose their own children’s marriage partners at home.

–Catherine Belsey

On 18 May 2004, Zachary Marsh published the first post on his personal blog in his LiveJournal account. Eighteen posts later, on 20 June 2004, Marsh revealed that he, like all members of his patrilineage from his great-great-great-grandfather onwards, was in fact a monster. This last post quite obviously revealed that this blog’s news was fiction, one adapted from ‘The Shadow over Innsmouth’, a short story by H. P. Lovecraft, a fantasy author whose critical reception has been polarising. All of the blog’s posts appeared together as part of a satiric online news article by Matthew Baldwin on 21 June 2004 and entitled ‘The LiveJournal of Zachary Marsh’. In A Future for Criticism, Catherine Belsey notes that fictions can reveal that ‘cultural attitudes and social behaviour are not always in step, especially at moments of transition’; we argue here that this fictitious online ‘news’ article significantly demonstrates this paradigm. Displaying the less critically esteemed features of blogs as sources for its humour, ‘The LiveJournal of Zachary Marsh’ satirises blogs precisely at the time when they were transitioning into a numerically significant popular medium of literary expression. By also using the content of a fantasy writer who has at times been critically panned as a hack, ‘The LiveJournal of Zachary Marsh’ further suggested a commensurate suspicion about blogs’ literary value. ‘The LiveJournal of Zachary Marsh’ is a timely and telling cultural artefact of a moment of transition because it demonstrates that

blogs had enough cultural capital for their purported literary value to be instantly recognised, yet easily satirised. That is, blogs were increasingly growing as a form of literary expression, but were not yet fully appreciated critically.

To demonstrate how ‘The LiveJournal of Zachary Marsh’ exhibits the tensions of a period of transition, this article first briefly locates this period of transition for blogs, identifying the adolescent growth-spurt when they grew in number from a few hundred into several million. Second, the article examines a fictional text that was produced within this period of transition, ‘The LiveJournal of Zachary Marsh’. As its title suggests, ‘The LiveJournal of Zachary Marsh’ pulls LiveJournal into its fiction — an actual blogging platform that was popular with teenage bloggers. ‘The LiveJournal of Zachary Marsh’ foregrounds the negative literary characteristics that one might expect to find in self-published teenage writings. The article also shows how ‘The LiveJournal of Zachary Marsh’ evokes H. P. Lovecraft’s lore for similar effect. This evocation is appropriate given that some critical assessment of this fantasy writer and amateur journalist has also often been dismissive. Finally, the article shows how the adaptation of both LiveJournal and Lovecraftian lore in ‘The LiveJournal of Zachary Marsh’ in the service of satire demonstrates that ‘cultural attitudes and social behaviour are not always in step, particularly at moments of transition’.

1. The Adolescence of Blogs

The blog is a literary form with a largely knowable, documented past. Indeed, the year of its inception and even some of the first bloggers can be identified. The advent of the first popular browsers in 1993 and 1994, Mosaic and Netscape, cleared the path for the wide and episodic digital dissemination of news of a more personal sort. For example, Justin Hall, the blogger subsequently suggested as ‘the founding father of personal bloggers’, started his personal blog links.net in 1994, revealing events in his life from his father’s suicide to his own romantic involvements. Blogs did not immediately proliferate from this point, though. Rebecca Blood, for instance, reported that ‘[i]n 1998 there were just a handful of sites of the type that are now identified as weblogs […] Jesse’s [James Garrett, editor of Infosift] “page of only weblogs” lists the 23 known to be in existence at the beginning of 1999’, but also

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suggested that the growth of the genre was well underway. In 2008, Jill Walker Rettberg could better recognise the rapidity with which blogs subsequently grew and situated her monograph in those terms, stating, ‘ten years ago, the word “blog” didn’t exist. Today, mainstream media routinely use the word without bothering to explain it. Weblogs have become part of popular consciousness with a speed that is remarkable by any standard.’ Walker Rettberg’s claim is statistically verifiable. For example, by September 2008, the blog-tracking site Technorati had indexed 133 million blogs. From zero to 133 million in the space of fifteen years: blogs had become a mature literary entity — numerically, at least — with remarkable speed.

A sampling of more quantitative and anecdotal evidence supports 2003–04 as the period in which blogs experienced their adolescent growth spurt. Technorati’s first ‘State of the Blogosphere Report’ illustrated blogs’ growth from the thousands into the millions in this period. In March 2003, Technorati was tracking fewer than two hundred thousand blogs; by September 2004, it was tracking over four million. By its statistics, the blogosphere had at least doubled in size once every five months between June 2003 and October 2004. Blogs’ growth into a popular literary medium and their relative newness can also be recognised in their adaptation into a more traditional print medium. On one hand, Salam Pax’s, Mimi Smartypants’s, and Julie Powell’s writings were widely read and were free to anyone with an internet connection; on the other hand, their respective blogs, ‘Where is Raed?’, ‘Mimi Smartypants’, and ‘The Julie/Julia Project’ were all adapted and re-mediated into books around this time: Salam Pax: The Baghdad Blog (2003), The World According to Mimi Smartypants (2004), and Julie and Julia (2005). Such re-mediation suggests that blogs were perceived to be profitable in print even though they were freely accessible electronically.

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9 When each one of these was adapted for print publication, it was changed either marginally or greatly from its electronic form. The most common change was to remove the standard narrative order of blogs (i.e. reverse chronological order — discussed below). For the popularity of ‘Where is Raed’, see Rory McCarthy, ‘Salam’s Story’, The Guardian, 30 May 2003, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2003/may/30/iraq.digitalmedia> [accessed 19 September 2014] and Kirsten L. McCauliff, ‘Blogging in Baghdad: The Practice of Collective Citizenship on the Blog Baghdad Burning’, Communication Studies, 62:1 (2011), 58–73 (p. 62). ‘The Julie/Julia
Such re-mediation also suggests a growing sense that some (at the very least economic) literary merit could be found in these freely published, increasingly numerous texts that reflected the rhythms of the diverse daily lives of the bloggers. For example, while the diary-type blogs of Salam Pax and Mimy Smartypants both recorded the quotidian nature of urban settings, Pax’s ‘Where is Raed?’ documented the difficulties of life in Baghdad whereas ‘Mimi Smartypants’ indulged in the problems and musings of urban America. ‘The Julie/Julia Project’ also emanated from urban United States, but it was a ‘goal-orientated’ type of blog, setting out to document the cooking of all of the recipes in Julia Child’s *Mastering the Art of French Cooking* within a year.\(^\text{10}\) While each of these three blogs documented the everyday experiences of the blogger, such disparate topics (life during the government of Saddam Hussein, first-world musings, or cooking goals) and divisions into types or sub-genres (diary-type or goal-orientated) are indicative of the diverse literary possibilities that the ever-increasing popularity of blogs would continue to usher in. 2003–04 were the years of transition from blogs’ naissance towards the maturity of which Walker Rettberg wrote.

Yet, as with many such transitions, the critical enthusiasm for the new genre did not necessarily coincide with its popular use. That is, blogs were sometimes perceived as an inferior literary product — perhaps because anyone *could* publish a blog and because many bloggers tended to forgo the more traditional editorial processes that had long moderated the quality of widely disseminated publications (in that bloggers often wrote, edited, and then published their own work). For example, the year after Walker Rettberg noted that blogs had become part of the popular consciousness, a sports-blogger (another subgenre of blog — the ‘topic-driven’ blog) named Jared Morris mused on the use of performance-enhancing drugs in American professional baseball, discussing the case of Philadelphia Phillies’ Raul Ibanez, a player who was having one of the best years of his career at age 37. Morris considered factors that may have contributed to Ibanez’s success, mentioning performance-enhancing drugs in the post.\(^\text{11}\) John Gonzalez, a columnist for the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, read the blog

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and challenged it the next day.\textsuperscript{12} ESPN, one of the largest sports media producers in the US, later quoted Ibanez defending himself and berating the blogger:

‘You can have my urine, my hair, my blood, my stool — anything you can test,’ Ibanez said, according to the report. ‘I’ll give you back every dime I’ve ever made’ if the test is positive, he added.

‘I’ll put that up against the jobs of anyone who writes this stuff,’ he said, according to the Inquirer. ‘Make them accountable. There should be more credibility than some 42-year-old blogger typing in his mother’s basement. It demeans everything you’ve done with one stroke of the pen.’\textsuperscript{13}

There are two points here that suggest that the medium itself was not yet fully accepted critically, even if it was increasingly common. The first is the anachronistic metaphor, ‘one stroke of the pen’. Ibanez was railing against an inherently electronic medium, but his phrasing suggests a residual way of thinking about the medium. The second and more significant point comes in the derisive suppositions about the socio-economic status of the blogger. ‘Some 42-year-old blogger typing in his mother’s basement’ certainly has pejorative connotations about bloggers and the work that they may be capable of producing. Regardless of how one judges the quality of Morris’s piece, it should be noted that he was 27 years old and a university graduate, a rather typical demographic for bloggers around that time.\textsuperscript{14} This gap between popular use and pejorative perception of blogs and bloggers is precisely what ‘The LiveJournal of Zachary Marsh’ straddles through its appropriation of LiveJournal and Lovecraft: on one side, simply because blogs proved recognisable enough to be satirised, ‘The LiveJournal of Zachary Marsh’ suggests the growing popularity of blogs; on the other side, ‘The LiveJournal of Zachary Marsh’ employs a combination of the blogging platform with an author who can hardly be seen as valorising, as we shall now see.


\textsuperscript{14} For example, Technorati surveyed 7200 bloggers the following year. Two-thirds of those respondents were male, 65\% were between the ages of 18–44, and, most tellingly here, ‘bloggers [were] more affluent and educated than the general population: 79\% [had] college degrees/43\% [had] graduate degrees; 1/3 [had] a household income of $75K+; 1/4 [had] a household income of $100K+’. David Sifry, ‘State of the Blogosphere 2010’, \textit{Technorati}, 3 November 2010, <http://technorati.com/state-of-the-blogosphere-2010/> [accessed 22 August 2014].
2. ‘The LiveJournal of Zachary Marsh’ and H. P. Lovecraft: Social Behaviour and Cultural Attitudes

Satire can only succeed when its audience sufficiently recognises the object of its derision. The appearance of ‘The LiveJournal of Zachary Marsh’ on 21 June 2004 in the ‘stories’ section of ‘The Morning News’ (in which ‘stories’, according to its masthead, included ‘Extremely humorous humor, and occasionally things less extreme. Fiction in a blue-moon and some non-fiction too’15) testifies to a period of transition where blogging was becoming an increasingly popular, recognisable social behaviour but was perhaps less critically appreciated. ‘The Morning News’, the electronic venue in which Baldwin published, initially self-identified as a weblog/zine, but, as its masthead reported,

In 2002, they relaunched The Morning News as a daily-published online magazine with a dedicated staff of some of the Web’s best writers (see below for staff bios). Since then, The Morning News has been consistently recognized as one of the Internet’s finest publications (e.g., the Columbia Journalism Review) and its readership has grown to include — we can only hope — you.16

Its link to the Columbia Journalism Review revealed in part why this electronic publication could not be called a blog: ‘The site is not a blog, insists Rosecrans Baldwin, the News’s twenty-six-year-old editor, since it uses different voices’.17 Between this quotation and the change in format and designation noted by the masthead, ‘The Morning News’ seemed to distance itself noticeably from the appellation of blog. An insistence on quality is also noticeable. For instance, it employed numerous positive phrases in the masthead: ‘dedicated staff’, ‘some of the Web’s best writers’, ‘consistently recognized as one of the Internet’s finest publications’, and ‘readership has grown’. The link to the Columbia Journalism Review itself suggests positive readership. The online magazine seemed to be distinguishing itself from the dubious qualities associated with much of the writing in the blogosphere — the very writing that ‘The LiveJournal of Zachary Marsh’ satirises. As the masthead goes on to put it, ‘[e]ach story we publish goes through multiple rounds of editing and one round of fact-checking. Writers are expected to work with the editors on revisions, for as many rounds as

Indeed, one of the objects of satire in ‘The LiveJournal of Zachary Marsh’ is a lack of editing, a lack not evident in the product that ‘The Morning News’ was then producing. As we shall see, the article’s satire comes from the blog’s under-edited posts that were located in a contemporaneous blogging platform popular with teens (LiveJournal) and that conveyed fictional content adapted from a story by a fantasy author whom criticism has sometimes portrayed as little more than a hack (Lovecraft).

As can be seen through a comparison of the two fictions, ‘The LiveJournal of Zachary Marsh’ clearly calls upon H. P. Lovecraft’s ‘The Shadow over Innsmouth’. The anonymous narrator of Lovecraft’s story is celebrating his ‘coming of age’ in 1927 with a tour of Lovecraft’s customarily gothicised vision of New England. Seeking a cheaper option than the costly train from the (real) city of Newburyport to the fictional town of Arkham, he learns of a bus service involving a stop in the semi-derelict Massachusetts fishing village of Innsmouth, a place of ill repute and a home of strange-looking, odorous locals. Enthusiastically seizing the opportunity to visit this provincial curiosity, the narrator alights in Innsmouth, and while investigating the decaying village, he hears a rambling story from the town drunk that reveals the genesis of the town’s reputation. The townsfolk entered into a pact with a race of immortal fish-demons in order to gain plentiful fishing and gold jewellery. The demons eventually forced the humans to interbreed with them, resulting in insane half-breeds who become increasingly fish-like as they age. After hearing this story, the narrator is accosted by locals and flees the town in terror, pursued by a mob of the mongrel fish-creatures. He escapes — only to discover later that Captain Obed Marsh, the Innsmouth sailor who instigated the pact and participated in its worst aspects, was his great-great grandfather. The story ends with the narrator beginning to acquire the ‘Innsmouth look’ himself.

Over the course of the posts in ‘The LiveJournal of Zachary Marsh’, Marsh blogs an exceptionally similar story, but with content and a register more appropriate to a twenty-first-century American teen. Marsh, a recent high-school graduate, relates that he has received a swimming scholarship to Miskatonic University in Arkham, another institution of Lovecraft’s

20 Obed Marsh and his offspring intermarried with the demons (p. 305), and their descendants manifested fish-like deformities (p. 288).
fictionalised New England.\textsuperscript{21} Hearing about his son’s scholarship and subsequent journey to his town of Innsmouth, Marsh’s father (who has not seen his son in ten years because he and Marsh’s mother had divorced) instant-messages his son and offers him an apartment and a job listing forty boxes of gold jewellery on eBay. A seemingly angst-ridden teen, Zachary Marsh blogs about the tedium of living in Innsmouth, hanging out with his friends, and taking offence to being called ‘The Lizard King’ on account of his peculiar looks. Eventually, through a local drunk, Marsh (like Lovecraft’s anonymous narrator) learns the history of Innsmouth, and, in the blog’s hurried final post, recognises his place in that history:

\begin{quote}
HOLY SHIT!!!!!!! there was just a knock at my door and i figured it was probably my dad so i went to answer it but when i looked through the peephole i saw there was this fucking monster outside, with like a hundred more on the street, and they all looked like the things that old drunk guy was talking about. i locked the deadbolt but the knocckign got louder and louder and now I think they are trying to break down the door!

at first i thought they were attacking, but the more i think about it the more i think i recognized the monster that was knocking. i think it’s my dad. and i dfon’t think they’re here to kill me i think they are here to WELCOME ME!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

the door is breaking there coming inside.. i have to hit post, no time to spellcheck. if anyone is reding this send help to 1465 babson street, innsmouth also, chekc out subservient chicken\textsuperscript{22} its hilarious lol\textsuperscript{23}
\end{quote}

Such writing is not far from a caricature of any one of the fact-skewed, ill-written blogs suggested by Ibanez’s socio-economic profiling of Morris (the blogger who mused about the possibility of performance-enhancing drugs in professional baseball cited earlier). Further, as we shall shortly see, the quality of Lovecraft’s writing has at times been treated equally negatively.

The choice of LiveJournal seems to satirise the social behaviour of a specific demographic, one perhaps not associated with the creation of ‘Literature’. Now largely supplanted by other platforms, LiveJournal once had significant currency among teenagers, particularly during the 2003–04 proliferation of blogs. For example, recognising that LiveJournal was popular among high-school and college students, Biz Stone noted that

\textsuperscript{21} In ‘The Shadow over Innsmouth’, as one might expect, the town folk are all exceptionally fond of the water ‘and swam a great deal in both river and harbour. Swimming races out to Devil Reef were very common, and everyone in sight seemed well able to share in this arduous sport’ (pp. 286–87).

\textsuperscript{22} ‘Subservient Chicken’ was a video advertisement campaign by Burger King that went viral in 2004.

'Blogger may have gotten all the hype, but LiveJournal was no slouch with the numbers, clocking in at over 1 million registered users in 2002, and more than 3.5 million registered users (and growing) in 2004.'\(^{24}\) In their random-digit telephone survey of 7,012 American adults between November 2005 and April 2006, The Pew Internet and American Life Project found LiveJournal to be the most popularly named blogging platform amongst bloggers (n=308), accounting for 13\% of bloggers surveyed. This percentage was higher among young bloggers: ‘nearly one in five of our 18–29 year old bloggers used LiveJournal’.\(^{25}\) Further, as Angela Thomas has demonstrated in examining fictional blogs, teenage writers used to use LiveJournal to publish role-play/fan fiction-style blogs whereby they assumed the personality of characters from established fictional worlds, such as characters from \textit{Buffy the Vampire Slayer}.\(^{26}\) The fictional Zachary Marsh fits well with many aspects of these social practices in that he is a recent American high-school graduate using one of the most popular free blogging platforms of his time. What is more, his contemporary real-life counterparts were blogging similar content as a form of fantastical escapism. These similarities alone make ‘The LiveJournal of Zachary Marsh’ very much a revealing artefact of how the literature of LiveJournal was perceived: that is, ‘The LiveJournal of Zachary Marsh’ seems to suggest that plentiful (perhaps under-edited) adolescent musings might provide surprising insight into an individual, but do not immediately provide well-crafted literature. The appropriation of Lovecraftian lore adds a further dimension to this dynamic.

From one critical point of view, H. P. Lovecraft would seem to deepen the nature of the implied literary critique of blogs that ‘Zachary Marsh’ undertakes, as Lovecraft himself engaged in alternative forms of publishing that were self-indulging or that avoided more traditional routes. From his early 20s, Lovecraft was involved in the amateur journalism movement, a literary phenomenon that existed for a century or so from around 1860. Amateur writers, most of them American, would produce articles and essays on topics that moved them. This work was then mailed to organised regional ‘manuscript bureaus’, which brought it to the attention of the amateur editors who would produce small mimeograph or carbon-


paper runs of promising material. These publications, mostly taking the form of small-scale literary journals, were then circulated to interested members via mailing lists. Lovecraft became involved in 1914, swiftly climbing the ranks of the movement.\footnote{S. T. Joshi, \textit{H. P. Lovecraft: A Life} (West Warwick: Necronomicon Press, 1996), pp. 98–101.} He served as an official for both of the associations which facilitated his hobby (the United Amateur Press Association and the National Amateur Press Association), contributing extensively to their official journals as well as editing his own, \textit{The Conservative}, from 1915–1923. He was primarily loyal to the UAPA, an organisation notionally more dedicated to literary pursuits than the competing NAPA, but he also joined the NAPA ‘as early as 1917’ and remained intermittently prominent within both groups for many years.\footnote{Joshi, p. 101.} Such support for the dissemination of amateur writing could fairly be seen as support for a print-era precursor of free blogging platforms. Had Lovecraft been born a century later, he would likely have had a LiveJournal account; indeed, he might have been a moderator.

As the following survey of the negative criticisms of Lovecraft’s works might suggest, the use of Lovecraft’s content in ‘The LiveJournal of Zachary Marsh’ likely reflected a negative contemporaneous cultural attitude towards blogs’ perceived literary value.\footnote{Similarly, when one considers American President George W. Bush’s frequent malapropisms and often perceived blundering, \textit{The Onion}’s satirical article ‘CIA Asks Bush to Discontinue Blog’ is also indicative of such an attitude. \textit{The Onion}’s article appeared a month after Baldwin’s. ‘CIA Asks Bush to Discontinue Blog’, \textit{The Onion}, 4 August 2004, \url{http://www.theonion.com/articles/cia-asks-bush-to-discontinue-blog,1200/} [accessed 29 September 2014].} Equally, the use of LiveJournal to present Lovecraft’s fictions could have reflected a long-standing negative critical attitude towards Lovecraft’s literary output. It is likely that the qualities that LiveJournal brings to Lovecraft and that Lovecraft brings to LiveJournal were mutually damning in this fiction — particularly when one recalls that ‘The LiveJournal of Zachary Marsh’ is a conspicuously poorly edited series of blog posts, but was published in an online magazine which stressed its strict adherence to close editing. It is difficult to imagine the marriage of LiveJournal and Lovecraft as anything but mutually derisive in this particular instance. Lovecraft’s work was essentially ignored in his lifetime, and some of the critical attention since his death has been less than sympathetic. Reading Lovecraft in 1945, Edmund Wilson famously stated that ‘[t]he only horror in most of these fictions is the horror of bad taste and bad art’. He continued,

One of Lovecraft’s worst faults is his incessant effort to work up the expectations of the reader by sprinkling his stories with such adjectives as ‘horrible’ ‘terrible’ ‘frightful’ ‘awesome’ ‘eerie’ ‘weird’ ‘forbidden’
‘unhallowed’ ‘unholy’ ‘blasphemous’ ‘hellish’ and ‘infernal.’ Surely one of the primary rules for writing an effective tale of horror is never to use any of these words — especially if you are going, at the end, to produce an invisible whistling octopus.  

Lovecraft’s style continued to be a subject of negative criticism. In 1962 Colin Wilson, purporting to admire aspects of Lovecraft’s work, nevertheless damned him as ‘one of the worst and most florid writers of the twentieth century’, ‘a bad writer’ whose worst stories devolve into ‘absurdity and bathos’. Lovecraft’s finer stories fair little better. ‘The Rats in the Walls’ is, for Wilson, ‘as clumsy as ever’, while his most famous work, ‘The Call of Cthulhu’, ‘is powerful and interesting in the first half, but tails off into vague horrors’. Likewise, ‘The Shadow Out of Time’, says Wilson, would ‘suffice to make Lovecraft a minor classic, if it were not so overwritten and full of unnecessary adjectives and occasional tautologies’.  

1975 saw the first major biography of Lovecraft, by L. Sprague de Camp. De Camp was less dismissive of Lovecraft’s prose, but he dwelt on numerous anecdotes that display Lovecraft’s personal pretensions, unprofessional behaviour, and reactionary social opinions. This appraisal obviously did little for Lovecraft’s reputation. Discussing Lovecraft in his survey of the American gothic tradition, David Punter also struggled to find constructive things to say about Lovecraft:  

Lovecraft is a literary sore point: ever since his death in 1937, his life and work have been submerged in a cultism which transcends anything lavished on Peake or J. R. R. Tolkien, yet the few critics who have bothered to spend any time reading him have been massively dissatisfied […] his writing is crude, repetitive, compulsively readable, the essence of pulp fiction. Most of the time he reduces Gothic motifs to a kind of mechanism; his place in the tradition is not as an innovator or even modifier, but more as a latter-day invoker of past horrors.  

Such thoughts are typical of one prominent critical perception of Lovecraft. This critical perception has often dismissed Lovecraft as a hack, naïve at best and offensive at worst, a man whose finite authorial powers could not support his literary ambitions. More sympathetic
criticism has only gradually dispelled such opinions. In 2004, the year ‘The LiveJournal of Zachary Marsh’ appeared, Punter’s opinions of Lovecraft were only slightly improved:

His fiction is one that is entirely concerned with the production of horrific effects […] his style is wordy, profuse, yet capable of producing a short sharp shock. He has sometimes been compared to Edgar Allan Poe, but he possesses little of Poe’s gift for shocking intimacy.35

Such assessments naturally precipitate a general perception of Lovecraft as a famously minor writer whose work is ripe for parody or satire, a perception that seems to be reinforced by ‘The LiveJournal of Zachary Marsh’. It would take the most ardent defender of Lovecraft (and, as we shall soon see, pro-Lovecraft criticism has also emerged) to see the marrying of Lovecraftian lore with the numerous banal posts and the lack of editing in ‘The LiveJournal of Zachary Marsh’ as enhancing critical appraisal either of Lovecraft’s or bloggers’ literary output. Indeed, one would not need to stretch too far to apply parts of the previously cited criticism of Lovecraft (e.g. ‘absurdity and bathos’ or ‘the few critics who have bothered to spend any time reading him have been massively dissatisfied’) to such posts as, ‘[w]ent to the store today, the cashier asked if I had any coupons but pronounced it like “QUEUE-pons”. There’s no “q” in “coupons” people!!’ (‘Zachary Marsh’), or

Sorry I haven’t updated in a while, not a whole lot going on since my car died and I’m stuck here, now. I was going to go to Elliot’s Tuesday but when I turned the key in the ignition: nothing. I guess I know where my first paycheck is going. Fuck.:(
More bad news: Creed Calls It Quits. It’s totally bummed. No, psyche, I’m just kidding. Creed sucks. (‘Zachary Marsh’)

Comprising such posts and suggesting the long tradition of Lovecraftian writing as modestly executed, ‘The LiveJournal of Zachary Marsh’ seemed to project a rather bleak critical outlook for blogs.

The dissemination of Lovecraft’s work, leitmotifs, and characters also seems to make them appropriate subjects for derisively humorous adaptation. His stories were initially published in pulp magazines such as Weird Tales (his chief outlet) and Amazing Stories, journals dedicated to little more than the generation of sales to a target demographic.36

Lovecraft himself was vocally critical of the formula-writing that he saw in the other material published in those forums, but submitted them there anyway, due to a shortage of alternative

36 Joshi, p. 296.
outlets and a lack of esteem for his own material, for which he seldom made great claims.\textsuperscript{37} The initial appearance of Lovecraft’s stories in pulp magazines eventually led to his monsters becoming some of the very stock characters about which he complained. This process began in Lovecraft’s lifetime when he endorsed other authors’ use of the names and indicia of his various demonic aliens, and indeed incorporated their ideas into his own subsequent work.\textsuperscript{38} Such cross-pollination, he felt, added verisimilitude to the works of all concerned. After his death, writers such as August Derleth produced numerous reiterations of Lovecraft’s leitmotif of sensible, respectable men becoming embroiled in mind-bending alien conspiracies.\textsuperscript{39} Derleth is the most prominent representative of a large group of ‘Lovecraftian’ writers who rework Lovecraft’s conspiracies with a straight face, unleashing them on characters of their own devising. The cross-species miscegenation of ‘The Shadow Over Innsmouth’ is particularly fertile in this regard. In 1953, for example, Derleth produced ‘The Seal of R’lyeh’,\textsuperscript{40} a story in which antiquarian Marius Phillips discovers his ancestral connection to the first mate of Obed Marsh, and therefore the Innsmouth cult that Marsh instigated.\textsuperscript{41} Derleth, Robert Bloch, Alan Moore and others similarly revisit Lovecraftian ideas such as the global machinations of the cult worshipping the monster Cthulhu or the glimpses of supernatural oddities offered in Lovecraft’s 1930 cycle of ‘pseudo-sonnets’ \textit{The Fungi from Yuggoth}.\textsuperscript{42} Other writers ape Lovecraft’s style, producing pastiches and parodies. ‘The LiveJournal of Zachary Marsh’ could straightforwardly be described as another example of this tradition.

It is important to note that Lovecraft has also always had his defenders. Victoria Nelson ties his reputation to a broader trend in American history to ghettoise fantasy into pulp media.\textsuperscript{43} She also notes that this habit has slackened since the 1960s, which may partly

\textsuperscript{37} Joshi, p. 491.
\textsuperscript{38} Joshi, p. 503–06.
\textsuperscript{39} Derleth was personally acquainted with Lovecraft and became his chief posthumous champion; it was he, for example, who coined the term ‘Cthulhu Mythos’, the widely accepted name for Lovecraft’s pantheon of monsters. Since his own death in 1970, Derleth has been criticised for this and other presumptions. See Joshi, pp. 645–46.
\textsuperscript{41} In Derleth’s story, the cult is introduced to Innsmouth when Captain Obadiah Marsh and his first mate Cyrus Phillips both take mysterious new wives (pp. 238–39). Derleth contradicts his source material here; Lovecraft’s story identifies Obed Marsh — note the ‘e’ — as the instigator, and his first mate, one Matt Eliot, as a dissenting voice who disappears after trying to rally opposition to the cult among Innsmouth’s Christian and Masonic establishment, before the interbreeding began (pp. 300–02). In Baldwin’s satire, Zachary Marsh has a young friend named Elliot who disappears (abducted by the monsters) after overenthusiastically singing the pop song ‘Faith’ at a karaoke event.
\textsuperscript{42} Joshi, p. 466.
account for the subsequent crescendo of pro-Lovecraft criticism.\textsuperscript{44} In 1976 Paul Buhle described Lovecraft as making noteworthy, original contributions to the tradition of Poe, while other critics cite similar connections with authors such as Beckford and Hawthorne.\textsuperscript{45} By the 1980s, writers such as Donald Burleson and S. T. Joshi were counter-balancing the dismissals of Wilson and Punter; Joshi’s 1996 biography contains chapter-length digressions emphasising the intellectual rigour of his subject’s work. Lovecraft’s work has become substantially more well-known as a result. Cthulhu, the most famous of his monsters, has been referenced in television shows such as \textit{South Park}.\textsuperscript{46} The monster’s intentionally unpronounceable name is now sufficiently commonplace to be recognised by modern spellcheckers. Even so, Lovecraft’s literary status remains unsettled. A volume of his fiction was published by the Library of America in 2005, but Steffen Hantke has queried the timing and editing of this book, which he suggests places Lovecraft in a position that ‘differs from conventional canonicity’.\textsuperscript{47} Lovecraft’s rehabilitation was well underway by the blog era, but his exact literary merit remains a ‘charged matter’ into the present day.\textsuperscript{48}

‘The LiveJournal of Zachary Marsh’ still seems to present Lovecraft and his creations as famously poorly written literature, choosing to marry them with a contemporaneous blogging platform geared towards a teenage audience. In doing so, ‘The LiveJournal of Zachary Marsh’ demonstrates a perception of blogs as forums for bathos and triviality, particularly when their content is presented as ‘news’. One can see such implied bathos in several posts (such as ‘which Muppet are you?’ or ‘I never thought of myself as a really good hugger, but a lot of people tell me that I am so I must be’), but it is perhaps most noticeable in the final post that we have previously noted, one in which the blogger faces potential death at the hands of a monster. The post stresses the magnitude of the events, foregrounding Marsh’s urgency in his desire to mark the moment and the intensity of his revelation. It begins with profane, exclamatory shouting (‘HOLY SHIT’) which gives way to revelatory shouting (‘WELCOME ME’). It suggests haste and therefore lack of editing (‘no time to spellcheck’) as well as the seriousness of the climactic moment (via dead-bolting the door and a call for

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{44} Nelson, p. 82.
\item \textsuperscript{46} ‘Coon vs. Coon and Friends’, \textit{South Park}, dir. by Trey Parker, 10 November 2010.
\end{itemize}
help). The post is punctuated with numerous exclamation points. Yet, despite the apparent importance of this moment to the rest of his (possibly very short) life, Marsh allows his final written thoughts to link to Subservient Chicken, a viral video meant to amuse. This post and final link raise questions as to what constitutes news and who is worthy of reporting it. News publishing in the pre-blogging era was often heavily mediated, going from an author through a general editor, copy editor, printer, and the like. Blogging eliminated most of these processes. Bloggers decide what is significant in the rhythms of their daily life and self-publish those insights however they see fit — as Ibanez most certainly seemed to have protested relative to Morris’s blog that conjectured about the use of performance-enhancing drugs in professional baseball. At any given moment, promoting a video advertisement campaign for Burger King may be as significant as discovering one’s monstrous heritage mere seconds earlier or greeting death seconds later. Indeed, such choice of what is important to publish freely and widely seems to have been part of the resistance to blogging in the first place. This final post in ‘The LiveJournal of Zachary Marsh’ in particular, a post that works as the punch-line upon which the satire ultimately hangs, seems to reveal the tension between cultural attitudes and social behaviour at this moment of transition.

3. What This Fiction Reveals
The satire ‘The LiveJournal of Zachary Marsh’ functions through adaptation in two ways, neither of which valorise blogging; rather, those two ways reveal how cultural attitudes and social behaviour were not quite in step in 2003–04. Firstly, as already mentioned, it adapts the content of Lovecraft’s story. It takes an old tale and makes it contemporary. However, rather than having a blogger who contributes to the understanding of real, supposedly newsworthy events (such as Salam Pax in Iraq, for example), it has an angst-ridden teenager with largely first-world, middle-class problems. The derisory humour of the piece partially stems from the marriage of Lovecraft’s debatably terrifying revelations with a supposedly typical teenage blogger’s ham-handed attempts to record banal events as newsworthy. The

49 This is not an uncommon occurrence for Lovecraftian lore in the digital age. For example, another Lovecraft story comically adapted is ‘The Call of Cthulhu’, ‘The Adventures of Lil’ Cthulhu’, a flash animation, re-imagines Lovecraft’s monster Cthulhu as the infant protagonist of a quasi-educational children’s cartoon. Or again more recently, the moderator for the Lovecraft subreddit (/r/Lovecraft) has repeatedly commented on the overabundance of comic fare posted there: ‘Practically everyone likes lulz. That said, not everything should be lulz. This has all been said before, and yet we still end up removing an average of about one post each day (sometimes more) simply because the subject matter is light, comedic, of little to no real tangible relevance to Lovecraft or Lovecraftian horror (tentacles alone do not a Lovecraftian reference make)’, suggesting that those in search of lighter fare go to /r/cthulhu. Cthulhufhtagn. See ‘Some clarification about /r/lovecraft’, Reddit, 22 June 2012, <reddit.com/r/Lovecraft/> [accessed 9 September 2014].
confirmation of the existence of Lovecraft’s fish-demons — the climax of Lovecraft’s story, deflated in the eyes of many critics by sixty pages of heavy-handed foreshadowing — is further let down in Baldwin’s re-mediation through references to memes and adolescent hugging. ‘The LiveJournal of Zachary Marsh’ evokes parallels between Lovecraft’s and the average teen blogger’s reputations as overenthusiastic writers of top-heavy prose.

Such satire, though, might both miss and hit the point. Rachael Mizsei Ward argues that comic extrapolations of ostensibly horrific literature serve a valuable purpose. She notes in particular the rendition of Cthulhu (the most famous of Lovecraft’s mind-bending materialist demons) as a plush toy available for sale on numerous websites. Such material representation of this terrifying monster has parallels with Baldwin’s article. The toys pursue comedy value by depicting Cthulhu — a mountain-sized, man-eating demon who induces catatonic psychosis by his mere presence — as a helpless, childlike creature with stubby, useless limbs and a blankly cheerful facial expression. Noting the parallel with the Kewpie dolls popular in Lovecraft’s lifetime, Ward argues that the Cthulhu plushies are similarly subservient to their consumer’s interpretations; their blankness becomes a canvas for whatever connotations the consumer wishes to endow them with. As Lovecraft is an author of fantasy and science fiction stereotypically associated with ‘geek’ subcultures, Ward argues that these toys should be seen as ‘secret handshakes’ of a sort, allowing people to ‘express affiliation with geekdom’. A negatively polarised position on geekdom might see marginalisation instead of affiliation in such associations. It might see an image of computer literacy, awkwardness, arrested development, and social marginality — almost precisely the sort of image Ibanez evoked with his aforementioned dismissal of bloggers living in their mother’s basement, and perhaps a similar image suggested by Zachary Marsh (who is computer literate, needs free accommodation provided by a parent, has physical characteristics for which he is mocked, and so on). The digital age has seen various formerly mocked attributes of geekdom enter the cultural mainstream. Lovecraftian pseudo-mythology and blogging are among those attributes; if the satire of ‘The LiveJournal of Zachary Marsh’ was impossible in 1994 because blogs were just being born, it likely would have lacked much comedic impact in 2014 because blogging had become far more critically embraced. For example, one could argue that the computer-illiterate are now the socially marginalised. ‘The LiveJournal of Zachary Marsh’ is representative of its moment, when these two cultural

51 Mizsei Ward, p. 105. ‘The LiveJournal of Zachary Marsh’, being replete with allusions to Lovecraftian lore that would be wholly lost on an uninitiated reader, is itself another excellent example of such a ‘handshake’.
phenomena were both well known enough to be lampooned without explanation because they had not entirely shed the critical and social stigma with which they had initially been burdened.

Secondly, the satire of ‘The LiveJournal of Zachary Marsh’ functions by subverting the normative literary characteristics of blogs, showing again how cultural attitudes and social behaviour were not quite in step in 2003–04. There are two characteristics in Jill Walker’s contemporaneous definition of ‘blog’ in the Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory that bear on the discussion here, both of which were adapted in the service of this satire. First, blogs were usually published by an individual (recall that this was one of the reasons that ‘The Morning News’ gave for eschewing identification as a blog) and could therefore be exceptionally personal, but the standard expectation was that they were ‘non-fiction’.

In this matter, blogs and news articles should have been on the same side of literary taxonomic binaries: fact over fiction, history over fabrication, and representation over fantasy. As a supposed item of news (even if satirical), ‘The LiveJournal of Zachary Marsh’ initially seemed to support fact, history, and representation, but inevitably subverted them. Its news wasn’t really that Zachary Marsh was an alien; its news was a representation of the perception that blogs could be questionably factual, have overt subjectivity, and represent fantastical or less traditionally newsworthy content. That is, ‘The LiveJournal of Zachary Marsh’ presented these taxonomic binaries as laughably blurred. Second, blogs are also frequently updated (in that they comprise frequent posts) with those updates appearing in reverse chronological order over time; the most recent post to be composed eventually appears as the newest, top-most post on the webpage. The next post might not take that position for minutes, hours, or days — whenever it is eventually composed and posted. ‘The LiveJournal of Zachary Marsh’ does begin with a sense of its ending, but that sense comes from meta-narrative provided by Baldwin as a (mock) news reporter:

This morning the authorities entered the home on Babson and found it deserted, the floors slick with mud and seaweed. On the computer was the LiveJournal of Zachary Marsh, with a notice reading ‘Update Successful.’ (‘Zachary Marsh’)

Noticeably, this meta-narrative is written in the form of a lede — it contains information tailored to pique interest followed by a temporary silence to propel the reader forward. ‘The

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LiveJournal of Zachary Marsh’ then eschews reverse chronological order, presenting all of the posts from first to last as one would present the gradual building of forensic evidence that leads to solving the crime. The temporary silence created by the meta-narrative now becomes relative to how quickly the reader can read the whole blog (from first to presumably last post) rather than to how much real-life time passes between yet-to-be-created posts. A reader of ‘The LiveJournal of Zachary Marsh’ does not need to wait weeks, days, or minutes for the next post to appear. For that matter, the reader does not even need to wait the mere seconds that it might take to click on links to archived posts. Rather, ‘The LiveJournal of Zachary Marsh’ as an article collates all of the posts together into one fixed document. That is, there seems to be a tacit expectation of residual pre-blog reading habits that will help this particular satire to function. The punchline of ‘The LiveJournal of Zachary Marsh’ really only has punch because the blog’s most recent post is positioned, not at the top of the page and the beginning of the ‘narrative’ as blog-convention would demand, but rather at the end.

‘The LiveJournal of Zachary Marsh’ marries the perceived negative characteristics of Lovecraft (possibly a hack) with LiveJournal (a platform often associated with teenage writing) and allows the writing to seem un-edited (at least in terms of obvious orthographic or grammatical errors). It also marries residual ways (completely collected and fixed text) and emergent ways (individual posts, though their reverse chronological order is subverted) of experiencing type-written text. Further, such marriages are performed by an article published in an online magazine that made positive claims towards literariness while distancing itself from its previous designation as weblog/zine. Together, such characteristics are what make ‘The LiveJournal of Zachary Marsh’ a valuable cultural artefact. These characteristics display ‘how cultural attitudes and social behaviour are not always in step at moments of transition’. ‘The LiveJournal of Zachary Marsh’ as satire tacitly acknowledges that blogs were a sufficiently recognisable news-making literary enterprise, but underscores blogs’ somewhat parlous reputation for doing so; it subverts blogs’ reverse chronological order to present the overtly subjective and obviously fantastical content of the final post of a blog as a punch-line. It demonstrates that in 2004 this medium could be subject to ridicule, just as Lovecraft’s fiction has at times been. The medium was still in the process of earning the gravitas and currency with which it has gradually been attributed. Ultimately, ‘The LiveJournal of Zachary Marsh’ reminds us of adolescence in general — a period of sharp growth and commensurate struggle to establish the qualities for which one will be valued in later life.
Trafficking in Death and (Un)dead Bodies: 
Necro-Politics and Poetics in the Works of Ann Radcliffe

Carol Margaret Davison

At the conclusion of his essay ‘The Melancholy Briton: Enlightenment Sources of the Gothic’ (2009), Peter Walmsley states that

Ann Radcliffe’s [The] Mysteries of Udolpho (1794), with its unquiet graves, its terrors of entombment in a foreign land, and its complex negotiations with Catholicism, partakes of a tradition of nationalist discourse about death that reaches back through [Laurence] Sterne and [Edward] Young, claiming the melancholy of the bereaved and the serious propensity to live with death in view, once again, as the peculiar property of the British psyche.¹

Apart from this single, overarching claim, Walmsley offers no examination of Radcliffe’s masterpiece as read through the lens of what may be referred to as the Death Question. Piggybacking on his astute observation that the gothic emerges out of a ‘wider [, national] discourse of death’ and that it evidences the ‘obsession with death’ that Marilyn Butler rightly claims as prevalent in literature produced between 1760 and 1790, I would suggest that there is a great deal at stake, particularly in regard to national identity and its religious inflections, in Radcliffe’s engagement with the Death Question.² Under that aegis may be placed the issue of our social duty towards the dead, the existence and status of the afterlife, and modes of mourning and memorialisation. In its representation of a transitional era characterised by a new culture of death practices, Radcliffe’s The Mysteries of Udolpho foregrounds the fraught inter-generational politics between the living and the dead (who often remain undead) as they, effectively, negotiate a new social contract reflective of national values. The Mysteries of Udolpho also supports Thomas Laqueur’s claim that cultural

representations of death reflect how ‘one kind of world is transformed into another’, thus contributing to the establishment of the modern secular order.³

According to Tony Walter in his work devoted to our contemporary ‘revival’ of death as a crucial topic for social consideration and discussion, ‘[t]he Age of Reason shifted death from the frame of religion into the frame of reason, from the frame of sin and fate to the frame of statistical possibility.’⁴ This seismic shift, however, was not without its significant aftermath, as renowned thanatology historian Philippe Ariès makes clear in his magisterial work The Hour of Our Death. In his view, the advent of secular modernity and the unsettling of religious certainties alienated us from an earlier familiarity with death that he calls the ‘tame death’, when death’s unknowns were mitigated by communal rituals that assuaged the grief of the mourners and ensured the deceased’s transition to eternal life. Thus did the Enlightenment engender what Elisabeth Bronfen astutely describes as ‘a double gesture of denial and mystification’,⁵ as death became defamiliarised despite the efforts of science and medicine to ‘naturalize’ it.⁶ Death, the ‘most persistent and indifferent’ adversity faced by humanity, according to sociologist Zygmunt Bauman in his illuminating book Mortality, Immortality, and Other Life Strategies (1992), proved to be, therefore, unmasterable by the Age of Reason. Using notably gothic rhetoric to describe it, Bauman deems death the ‘guilty secret’ and ‘skeleton in the cupboard left in the neat, orderly, functional and pleasing home modernity promised to build’.⁷ This description places gothicists in well-travelled terrain, for death serves as the quintessential emblem of the Freudian uncanny: while being ‘of the home’ and familiar, it also remains secret, concealed, and unfamiliar, shrouded in mystery. The cultural schizophrenia that resulted involved, especially in works of Romanticism, the denial of the death of the self, a shift perhaps best captured in a line from Edward Young’s renowned Christian consolation poem Night Thoughts (1742–5), that reads, ‘[a]ll men think all men mortal but themselves’.⁸ This significant cultural transition also evidenced the recognition and exultation of the death of the Other, an Other who, due to our acute anxiety about the status of the corpse as corruptible and depersonalised, was transformed into the Beautiful Other who remained incorruptible and identifiably individualised.

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Although ultimately unrepresentable, death was a major topic of enquiry in Enlightenment discourses, especially those of a socio-political and theological cast. Enlightenment philosophes repeatedly underscored the civil and ecclesiastical exploitation of the fear of death as a means of social control, while a cultural epistemology grounded in a new relationship between the living and the dead, one religiously and nationally inflected, punctuated the works of Anglo-American radicals.⁹ The necrocracy (dominion by the dead) famously identified by Edmund Burke in his Reflections on the Revolution in France as characterising the British constitution — ‘an entailed inheritance’ that grips the state and its citizens in a type of ‘mortmain for ever’ — was condemned by such thinkers as Thomas Paine and William Wordsworth as a type of ‘necrophiliac abomination’.¹⁰ Their writings suggest that they favoured Thomas Jefferson’s philosophy, as articulated in a letter to James Madison in 1789, that ‘the dead have neither powers nor rights over the earth’ which ‘belongs in usufruct to the living’.¹¹

Fuelled by what Horace Walpole described in The Castle of Otranto (1764) as an ‘engine of terror’ and, more specifically, according to Burke’s meditations on the sublime, the terror generated by ‘an apprehension of pain or death’, gothic works like Ann Radcliffe’s The Mysteries of Udolpho registered these debates about inter-generational power politics.¹² As Wamsley notes, ‘[t]he Gothic novel explores Burke’s urgent sense of the fragility of civilization and of the ghastly evidence, just across the Channel, of an utter betrayal of the dead’, a terrifying prospect represented in The Mysteries of Udolpho in the form of withholding respectful memorialisation, a prospect that might best be symbolised by an unmarked grave.¹³ Further to this, many gothic works — ars moriendi-influenced cautionary tales — tapped death-related mysteries, and meditated on death and death practices as both a signpost of civilisation, in keeping with the work of Giambattista Vico, and a safeguard of that civilisation and its history, in keeping with the work of Robert Pogue Harrison.¹⁴ Echoing Burke’s notion of an existing social contract between the dead and the living,

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¹³ Wamsley, p. 53.
Harrison maintains that ‘humans bury not simply to achieve closure and effect a separation from the dead but also and above all to humanize the ground on which they build their worlds and found their histories’.  

Produced at a point of anxious historical transition between religious certainties and rational, sceptical empiricism, gothic works like Matthew Lewis’s *The Monk* (1796) also manipulated the Death Question as a filter through which to view and engage with issues of personal/socio-political inheritance and national identity politics.

The rich and complex thanatological semiotics of *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, in combination with the configuration of, and power politics between, bodies — dead, living, uncanny, spectral, and living-dead — promote a new social contract in the British body politic that is decidedly Protestant in its make-up. This contract seeks to temper and ideologically reconfigure as atavistically Catholic what Peter Walmsley has described as the dark side of the British national character — ‘the Briton as pathologically melancholy, incapacitated, and obsessed about the past’. While *The Mysteries of Udolpho* attests to the significant ‘shift in attention to the feelings of the bereaved’ that occurred in the mid- to late-eighteenth century, there is also an undeniable gender-based aspect to Radcliffe’s agenda of temperance that will be examined below. She purposefully grafts elements of the conduct guide onto her female-gothic novel, a canny incorporation given the concurrent popularity of that form, coupled with the fact that an entire chapter in the original fifteenth-century *Ars Moriendi* was devoted to appropriate deathbed conduct for relatives and friends of the dying.

In response to the popular representation of young women as excessively melancholic that Angela Wright has identified in the literature of Radcliffe’s era, *The Mysteries of Udolpho* takes as one of its primary goals the reining in of excessive sensibility, which it associates with both Catholic superstition and mental disorder. Dale Townshend’s provocative and viable Lacanian assessment of the ghosts in Radcliffe’s *The Mysteries of Udolpho* as symptomatic of ‘failed’ or ‘inadequate’ mourning should, I believe, be further qualified in terms of that novel’s socio-historic contexts. ‘Failed’ mourning in Radcliffe’s novel involves excessive, unregulated emotion that is coded as Catholic, its terrifying ghosts both titillating emblems of what is repeatedly characterised as a dead religion or perverse

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16 Walmsley, pp. 40–41.
necrocracy in thrall to death, and remnants of an archaic era that return in uncanny forms to ‘haunt’ the smug certainties of rational modernity. In contradistinction, ‘successful’ or ‘adequate’ mourning in *The Mysteries of Udolpho* involves self-regulation, and an attendant lack of haunting by terrorising ghosts, and is figured as Protestant. As Francis Young has rightly noted, ‘[t]he titillating horrors of European Catholicism became central to the “Radcliffian Gothic” of the 1780s and 90s’; 20 which, like the gothic more generally, as Diane Hoeveler has cogently illustrated, ‘was committed, even if ambivalently, to chart the evils of the old world of Catholicism, communalism, feudalis m, and the rise in its place of the Protestant subjects’. 21 Finally, as will be discussed briefly, Radcliffe advocates a noteworthy religiously inflected shift in modes of mourning and memorialisation away from those coded as Catholic that are designed to invoke terror, towards those coded as Protestant in their compartmentalisation, domestication, sanitisation, and sentimentalisation, that are designed to alleviate terror. This shift is, rather significantly, in keeping with the late-sixteenth-century historical setting of *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, when France was engaged in religious wars over the threat of Protestant accession to the throne.

Like Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, a later literary masterpiece influenced by *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, Radcliffe’s novel therefore assumes a greater thematic cohesion when read through the lens of the Death Question, a subject whose centrality is signalled in the opening chapter when the young Emily suddenly loses her beloved mother after she contracts her husband’s illness while nursing him. Emily’s traumatic loss of her mother is amplified when her father succumbs to death only months later during a trip undertaken to assuage his grief. Calm in the face of his impending death, St Aubert — a man well versed in loss after the devastating deaths of two young sons — prepares his daughter, on the cusp of womanhood, for life alone. 22 In a classic *ars moriendi* dialogue that reprises the principal Christian message of graveyard poetry *vis-à-vis* the afterlife, St Aubert reminds Emily of the naturalness of death in which ‘there is nothing new, or surprising, since we all know, that we are born to die; and nothing terrible to those, who can confide in an all-powerful God’ (p. 76). Underscoring the fact that he is dying in peace and will be spared the sufferings of old age, St Aubert counsels his daughter to retain her fortitude in the face of life’s misfortunes, and to endeavour to chart a well-balanced course between excessive feeling and reason (pp. 81–82).

Emily’s two opposite responses to death, during this scene and her father’s subsequent burial, register the internal battle at the centre of her narrative of development. On the one hand, St Aubert’s lessons prove invaluable during Emily’s subsequent trials, serving to complete his lifelong preparation of his daughter for what Radcliffe suggests is a Good Christian Death, which involves a peaceful, ‘conscious and lucid’ passing amidst loved ones, on the heels of an ethically upright life. Although Emily is described as sobbing compulsively at her father’s deathbed, Radcliffe underscores the fact that St Aubert’s peaceful resignation, coupled with his ‘faith and hope’ (p. 81) in a post-mortem reunion with God, in whom he counsels his distraught daughter to trust, lend her some consolation. Although Radcliffe makes no reference to the Resurrection, in this instance she echoes a centuries-old idea that a Christian fearful of death dishonours Christ’s sacrifice and denies the truth of the Resurrection.

Emily’s other response to her father’s imminent demise, however, involves raw, unadulterated terror and is more complex, transmogrifying as it does from ‘terror for her father’ when she first realises he is fatally ill (p. 65, emphasis added) to trauma in reaction to what is figured as his uncanny corpse on his deathbed with its fixed ‘countenance, never till now seen otherwise than animated’ (p. 83). Despite a subsequent waking dream in which St Aubert signals his ascension to heaven, Emily’s act of gazing on his corpse with what Radcliffe notably describes as ‘a mixture of doubt and awful astonishment’ (p. 83, emphasis added), followed by her breakdown just prior to his burial when she realises she will never again see him animate and in the flesh, attests to a serious anxiety about mortality. The episode involving Emily’s final, poignant visit to her father’s grave (pp. 90–91) prior to her departure from the region, magnifies this anxiety while referencing the novel’s foremost object of terror — a black veil — that Radcliffe subsequently cunningly employs to tap Emily’s psychic state, in particular her deep-seated fears about mortality. Deciding to make her final farewells at her father’s grave privately — so that ‘she might not be interrupted, or observed in the indulgence of her melancholy tenderness’ (p. 90) — Emily waits for midnight and the prearranged arrival of a nun who guides her into a private church side-door and then leaves, ‘her black veil waving over the spiral balusters’ as she disappears into the darkness (p. 91) after warning Emily to avoid a ‘newly opened grave’ that she must pass on her way (p. 23)

24 This standpoint was reiterated by Reverend H. A. Paddon in his book Death Abolished; or, The Saint’s Deliverance from the Fear of Death (London, 1875), where he writes, ‘A Christian afraid of death!’ how ‘utterly groundless are such fears; and how greatly dishonouring to Him who took upon Him our nature, that he might deliver us from the fear of death!’ (p. 3, emphasis in original).
Quintessentially gothic atmospherics suffuse the rest of this narrative scene, which nicely prefigures the symbolic descent and journey into the underworld that Emily will undertake in the rest of the volume: with moon-light streaming ‘through a distant gothic window’, Emily sidesteps the open grave while overhearing monks ‘chanting the requiem for [the] soul’ of one of the convent’s friars buried there the evening before (p. 91).

As Emily’s mixed responses to her father’s death evidence, her anxieties about mortality are essentially two-fold and anachronistic. The first involves death in general and the prospect of spiritual transcendence, given the possibly irreparable breach introduced between the material and divine worlds in the wake of modernity; the second a more immediate, personal concern about the prototypically gothic ‘sins of the fathers’ and the status of her father’s soul. While Emily may not be haunted like Hamlet by the apparition of a vengeance-seeking, purgatory-bound paternal ghost — the idea of purgatory being an unsavoury and antiquated Catholic conception for Radcliffe’s readership — she is haunted by the spectre of her father’s dishonourable conduct and status in the afterlife. This is particularly evident after she witnesses his emotional distress while contemplating the miniature of an unidentified woman shortly after her mother’s death (p. 26), coupled with the suspicious, dying promise he elicits from Emily that she locate and destroy, without examination, a carefully hidden packet of papers (pp. 77–78). This scene of haunting tells the reader everything s/he needs to know about the value the middle classes placed on sexual chastity in Radcliffe’s day and its importance to Emily’s story more generally.

Emily ports these two radically different responses to death — one positive, the other negative — into her subsequent harrowing encounters in Italy, a journey figured by Radcliffe as a type of underworld descent where Emily, fittingly clad at the outset in ‘mourning dress’ (p. 121), is plagued by ghosts and corpses — some real, some imaginary — that either signify or trigger her various deep-seated death-related anxieties. In this psychomachia-style narrative, Radcliffe chronicles an internal battle, therefore, between what is, effectively, Emily’s ‘Protestant’ self that strives to retain her fortitude and remain peaceful in the face of death and other threats to her honour and inheritance, and her terrified, superstitious ‘Catholic’ self that renders her vulnerable to various violations — emotional, physical, financial, and otherwise. Despite experiencing several serious traumas, however, Emily

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25 According to Young, ‘[t]he belief that Catholics were obsessed with purgatory lingered into the eighteenth century […]. However, for educated Catholics, the association of purgatory with ghosts was something of an embarrassment. English Catholic writers on purgatory made mention of ghosts, and even many Continental authors, steered clear of them. Protestants were troubled by the continuing importance of ghosts in peoples’ lives; blaming Catholics for this externalized the phenomenon and made them feel better.’ See English Catholics, pp. 96–97.
remains determined in this gothic detective tale to uncover the mysteries behind the connected fates of the Marchioness de Villeroi and Signora Laurentini, and ultimately lay the plaguing spectre of her father’s dishonour to rest.

Foregrounding the conduct-novel component of her cautionary tale, Radcliffe promotes the Protestant middle-class mantra of self-regulation vis-à-vis both love and grief. According to Ariès, mourning was often regarded as ‘an extension of modesty’ by the European middle classes of the time. Radcliffe signals this dual emotional self-regulation of love and grief early on in the narrative, as Emily experiences the first stirrings of love when she meets her beloved Valancourt on the journey during which her father dies. In Emily’s subsequent separation from both men, Radcliffe rhetorically yokes two types of loss and mourning — that relating to love and that to death, both of which Emily experiences for the duration of her narrative trials in the face of which she must retain her modesty and gain fortitude without engaging, as the black-veiled nun and Signora Laurentini/Sister Agnes seem to signify, in emotional mortification. That Emily is ultimately reunited with Valancourt during an evening walk as she contemplates her father’s death (pp. 500–01) further connects these ideas, a conjunction that enhances the story’s affective powers, while tapping some dark social realities of Radcliffe’s era, including the ubiquity and unpredictability of death. Despite noteworthy population growth between the mid- and late-eighteenth century, which resulted in chronic overcrowding in towns, for example, diseases like cholera spread rapidly, capable of killing off healthy adults in a matter of hours. These morbid realities were registered both in some conduct guides and gothic tales, like the popular American story The Asylum; or Alonzo and Melissa (1811), where one lover undergoes the emotionally excruciating experience and test of his devotion of believing his beloved to be dead for some years before their astonishing reunion and marriage.

The more complex and political female-gothic aspects of The Mysteries of Udolpho grant expression to the potentially fatal terrors faced by women in love and marriage. Notably, mortal dangers abound in this story for both impassioned women embroiled in excessive and transgressive love affairs and for those femmes couvertes like the Marchioness de Villeroi who are forced into loveless marriages for the sake of money, where they are rendered powerless under the law. Mourning for both Valancourt and St Aubert, and anxious about her father’s spiritual status, the unmarried Emily confronts female-specific fears during

27 Radcliffe, pp. 240, 558.
28 Rugg, p. 217.
her dark Bildungsroman journey, fears that coalesce in her numerous and distressing encounters with both ghosts and corpses in Montoni’s prison-like Castle of Udolpho — a decaying (p. 470) and unchristian (p. 246), vice-ridden (p. 448) locale to which Emily feels her fate connected as if ‘by some invisible means’ (p. 250). Under prolonged duress and vulnerable to violation, her honour and inheritance under siege, Emily’s mind succumbs to superstition, phantoms (p. 329), and ‘supernatural appearance[s]’ (p. 356) in two locales that are, effectively, mausoleums. Thus are Radcliffe’s ghosts employed to probe and express psychological states, all of which are ultimately exorcised in the face of the explained supernatural. These include the wife of Montoni’s servant (who was killed when some of the battlements of the north tower of the castle collapsed on top of her) (p. 229–30); Signora Laurentini (whose dead body, Emily fears, is actually located behind the Castle’s mysterious black veil); Emily’s innocent aunt, the poisoned Marchioness (whose tragic betrayal and murder Emily uncovers only towards the novel’s end); and Madame Cheron (Emily’s negligent aunt who is incarcerated and dies while under her husband Montoni’s care).

While spectres unsettle a grieving Emily at every turn to the tune of hundreds of pages, two traumatic confrontations with gruesome corpses in Montoni’s castle subsequent to her exposure to her father’s lifeless body highlight the threat of death as a means of controlling women. In the first instance, a fearless Emily views the picture concealed behind the black veil (pp. 248–49), which she believes, upon observation, to be the actual corpse of Signora Laurentini, a victim of Montoni. This distressing episode leaves Emily senseless and is linked to a second corpse-sighting sequence where she, fearing for her life while frantically searching for her aunt whom she believes has been starved to death, explores a room containing instruments of torture where she discovers a notably ungendered bloody corpse extended across a low couch (p. 348). In a later, semiotically loaded scene, where the Marchioness’s beloved servant Dorothée shrouds Emily with the Marchioness’s black veil in her bedroom in Château-le-Blanc, Radcliffe cunningly weaves the novel’s various death-related mysteries together, as Emily remembers

the spectacle she had witnessed in a chamber of Udolpho, and, by an odd kind of coincidence, the alarming words, that had accidentally met her eye in the MS papers, which she had destroyed, in obedience to the command of her father; and she shuddered at the meaning they seemed to impart, almost as much as at the horrible appearance, disclosed by the black veil. (p. 491)

Exposure of Signora Laurentini’s diabolical machinations and the Marchioness’s murder resolves the mystery of the miniature and lays the spectre of St Aubert’s infidelity to rest,
alongside the ghosts of a Roman-Catholic past. In a similarly ritualistic manner, Emily’s grief, which Radcliffe describes as diminishing slowly over the course of her lengthy trials (p. 494), must be — and is — contained and St Aubert duly memorialised. In the process, Radcliffe gestures towards what Thomas Laqueur has nicely characterised as a new culture of death. In stark contrast to what has been called the ‘invisible death’ of the twenty-first century in which, as Harrison characterises it in his compelling study *The Dominion of the Dead* (2003), ‘the dead are simply dead [and] the living are in some sense dead as well’, Radcliffe divests death of its terror by combining a respect for the dead with new modes of memorialisation.²⁹ What Townshend has described in his provocative essay, ‘Gothic and the Ghost of *Hamlet*’, as Radcliffe’s act of secularising and psychologising a process of grieving that ‘consists more of memory, tears and deliberately commemorative acts than anything approaching the religious’ is actually, I would argue, an act of Protestantising the work of mourning.³⁰ As Roy Porter astutely notes about Enlightenment Britain, ‘[w]hat the political nation sought was a rational religion, involving the destruction of idolatry and priestly power. Enlightenment in Britain took place within, rather than against, Protestantism.’³¹ While, as Townshend maintains, ‘contrary to the neatness of Freud’s psychoanalytic model, mourning the dead in Radcliffean *[sic]* Gothic is never completed’, it becomes ritualised in new ways — sentimentalised and comfortably contained in newly landscaped cemeteries, the deceased memorialised by way of such objects as funerary miniatures.³²

This transition in material culture is signalled in *The Mysteries of Udolpho* by way of two items — the miniature possessed by St Aubert of his beloved sister, and the wax effigy of the corpse ‘decayed and disfigured by worms’ (p. 662) that Emily mistook for a picture, concealed behind the black veil. This latter item, a former *memento mori* and example, in the narrator’s words, ‘of that fierce severity, which monkish superstition has sometimes inflicted on mankind’ (p. 662), serves as a quintessential example of the gruesomely graphic *transi* tomb objects that were common in the late Middle Ages in Northern Europe. Funerary miniatures, or ambulant portraits, of deceased relatives, often mounted in black frames and embellished with pearls to signify the mourner’s tears, became more accessible to the middle classes in the eighteenth century when memorial jewellery was one of the largest categories of jewellery. This new material culture was a product of what Terry Castle has called the

²⁹ Harrison, p. 123.
³⁰ Townshend, p. 91.
³² Townshend, p. 93.
‘new-style devotionalism’ of Radcliffe’s era that was grounded in a spectralised mode of perception that benefited those on both sides of the grave. On the one hand, it saw through the ‘real person’ towards their perfect and unchanging spiritual essence, a ‘new immortalizing habit of thought’ that denied death by reconceptualising heaven as a site of post-mortem family reunion, an idea evidenced by Emily St Aubert’s various addresses to her dead father in times of trauma and need. On the other hand, this new style of devotionalism comfortably reaffirmed the existence of the mourner, as captured in the phrase coined by Castle, ‘[l]ugeo ergo sum: I mourn, therefore, I am’, to which should be added, to capture the comforting corollary, Luges, ergo, aeternas — ‘You are mourned, therefore you are immortalised’.

A one-woman Protestant Reformation in her promotion of a rationally enlightened response to death, bereavement, and conceptions of the afterlife, Ann Radcliffe promoted a Golden Mean in regard to attitudes towards and treatment of the dead in The Mysteries of Udolpho, one positioned between what she portrays as a perversive and superstitious Roman-Catholic necrocracy in thrall to the dead/undead, and a careless abuse and annihilation of the dead, as promoted in Anglo-American radical philosophy and exemplified by the highly publicised bloody and spectacular excesses and violations perpetrated against the dead during the September Massacres in the summer of 1792. Read through the lens of the Death Question, The Mysteries of Udolpho serves as a new type of Protestant consolation literature designed to divest death of its terrors, a literature that works from the premise that we are all mourners who, in our own turn, will require mourning. In case this narrative agenda is missed, Radcliffe’s closing address renders her primary artistic objectives and viewpoint about her readership clear: ‘And, if the weak hand, that has recorded this tale, has, by its scenes, beguiled the mourner of one hour of sorrow, or, by its moral, taught him to sustain it — the effort, however humble, has not been vain, nor is the writer unrewarded’ (emphasis added).

34 Castle, p. 136; and Radcliffe, pp. 214, 219.
35 Castle, p. 135.
36 Radcliffe, p. 672.
The Horrors of Scientific Investigation: Parasitic Mesmerism in Arthur Conan Doyle’s *The Parasite*

Laura Habbe

In *Degeneration* (1880) E. Ray Lankester seriously warns against the common presumption that all evolution means progress. In the final paragraph of his work he pleads for the fostering of scientific rationality to combat the danger of degeneration: ‘The full and earnest cultivation of Science — the Knowledge of Causes — is that to which we have to look for the protection of our race — even of this English branch of it — from relapse and degeneration.’¹ In Lankester’s opinion ‘Science’ is a universal remedy to ensure the progress of humanity. Arthur Conan Doyle played his part and created more than one scientifically minded character who answers Lankester’s challenge for the Anglo-Saxon race, including Professor Challenger and, of course, Sherlock Holmes, who has received the most popular and scholarly attention. Laura Otis believes that Doyle, a trained doctor himself, saw in his famous detective a way to alleviate a general fear of foreign infiltration and infection, both literally and metaphorically.² She suggests that ‘Holmes unmasks innumerable “curses”, reinforcing the empire’s confidence that its science and technology could overcome demonic threats associated with the people it was colonizing.’³ Indeed, much of Doyle’s writing is informed by racial and imperial prejudices prevalent at the time.⁴

Soon after he killed off Holmes for the first time in ‘The Final Solution’ (1893), Doyle created a like-minded character, Professor Gilroy in *The Parasite* (1894), whose scientific examination of the mesmeric enigma represented by Penelosa, a woman from the West Indies, closely resembles Holmes’s investigative method based on pure reason.⁵ Somewhat surprisingly — considering the usual pattern of the Holmes stories — Doyle, in

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³ Otis, p. 111.
⁵ In most editions the name is rendered as ‘Penclosa’. However, in the use of ‘Penelosa’ this article follows Catherine Wynne’s 2009 Valancourt edition which is based on the text of the British first edition published by Archibald Constable in London, December 1894.
this short novella, challenges Lankester’s belief in the unequivocal benefit of science for human progress. Through the character of Gilroy, the 1894 novella problematises Otis’s assessment of Doyle’s endorsement of the analytic method as it questions the firm belief in science as the means to combat foreign, even ‘demonic’ threats of degeneration and racial pollution, often associated with the colonised. In an interesting plot development, Gilroy’s rationality grows less and less effective when attempting to come to terms with Penelosa’s impenetrable and inexplicable hypnotic power. Instead, he experiences the horrors of losing control over his own will to this ‘parasite’, as he comes to call the elderly, unattractive, and even ‘deformed’ woman from Trinidad who represents the colonised Other in manifold ways.6 Thus, *The Parasite* presents an anomaly compared with much of Doyle’s work, as the rational hero is not victorious over the foreign threat in the end. In contrast to such champions of science, progress, and deductive reasoning as Professor Challenger or Sherlock Holmes, the ‘hero’ of this novella is helplessly at the mercy of an unfathomable woman from the colonies. Through her mesmeric control over him, he eventually experiences the degeneration of his intellectual abilities that Lankester dreaded, and does so not despite, but rather because of, his earnest cultivation of the scientific method which ultimately neglects all other aspects of human interaction.

Through Gilroy’s loss of selfhood, questions of free will and identity are raised and left unanswered by the novella. Doyle’s specific interest in these questions becomes clear in an unpublished essay, from which Pierre Nordon quotes:

> A man is impelled to do some act by the irresistible action of a hypnotic suggestion which may have been made some months before. Yet to him the action appears to emanate from himself and however outré it may be he will always invent some plausible reason why he has done it. [...] How can we tell that all our actions are not of this nature? What appears to us to be our own choice may prove really to have been as unalterable and inexorable as fate — the unavoidable sum total of suggestions which are acting upon us.7

Doyle clearly believed in the power of post-hypnotic suggestion, which was heatedly discussed in the periodical press in the 1890s. In *The Parasite*, he uses it as a gothic trope to explore the nature of human identity. Gilroy’s understanding of himself as scientist and rational man is seriously challenged by his encounter with Penelosa. This article therefore explores the ways in which this particular scientist is driven to madness and irresponsibility

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through his obsession with scientific investigation into an unknown and, as it turns out, unknowable power. It traces the decline of the protagonist from moral and professional certainty to the onset of insanity, and eventual moral and intellectual degeneration. Gilroy’s scientific rationality eventually produces the opposite of progress in Lankester’s sense. Lankester’s faith in the pursuit of knowledge as a panacea for degeneration is effectively turned upside down in Doyle’s novella, which serves as a startling critique of the tendency of materialist science to neglect the human aspect of research.

Mesmerism and its academic exploration are the central idea driving *The Parasite*’s plot. The eminent physiology professor Austin Gilroy is at first a thorough sceptic and only begins to believe in the power of mesmerism after witnessing Penelosa successfully hypnotise his fiancée Agatha. Now convinced of its power, Gilroy is eager to examine mesmerism in a series of experiments with Penelosa, offering himself as the subject, as he believes he could easily reach a sensational breakthrough and gain distinction in the under-researched field. The mesmeric sessions are extremely successful, and Gilroy only gradually realises that he has lost control over his own experiment and actions, and that Penelosa has fallen in love with him. He is horrified and, when the mesmerist experiences a moment of weakness which breaks the spell, he tells her how much he abhors her as a woman. From then on she is bent on revenge and slowly ruins his professional and even personal reputation by forcing him to ridicule himself in public and to commit crimes. She has acquired complete control over his will and can steer his actions even from afar. No matter how hard he tries to resist the impulses she sends, he is powerless. The final atrocity, in which he is set to destroy his fiancée’s face with acid, is only prevented by Penelosa’s sudden death and his release from her control.

Gothic tales using mesmerism or hypnotism — terms which were often used interchangeably — were abundant in the 1890s. The practice of mesmerism came to Britain from France in the 1830s and soon found vehement supporters and opponents in the medical profession. After a mesmerism craze in the second quarter of the nineteenth century, medical interest in particular began to decline, but public debate renewed its focus on the topic in the final decades of the century. The experimentations with hysterical women at the Salpêtrière under Charcot and wider investigations of hypnotism at the rival Nancy School had led to an increased acceptance of hypnotism as a scientifically valid practice among the British

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medical establishment. In the 1890s, it was widely discussed in the periodical press, and most attention was dedicated to the assumed dangers of hypnotism for the subjects’ nervous system and its potential for criminal abuse. In turn, this provided plenty of material for literary exploitation, and the representation of hypnotism proved to be a useful imaginative tool for all sorts of moral and social commentary. At the end of the century in particular, discussions surrounding the relationship between hypnotism and crime had a great impact on popular fiction. In the last two decades of the nineteenth century, a great number of popular works on hypnotism, or mesmerism, and crime was published. Mesmerism clearly sold well. Daniel Pick suggests where this late-Victorian fascination with mesmerism might have come from: ‘[Hypnosis] complicated Victorian ideas about the nature of the self, the subliminal aspects of all relationships, the indeterminate border between covert command and creative collaboration, inspiration and interference, partnership and possession’ (emphasis in original). In Doyle’s novella, Gilroy only gradually and painfully realises the all-encompassing influence of mesmerism on each of his personal and professional relationships. Indeed, in much of the popular fiction of the time, mesmerism was used to address or raise questions of free will: who (or what) really determines our life? Apart from George du Maurier’s Trilby (1894), fin-de-siècle novels that immediately spring to mind are Bram Stoker’s Dracula (1897) and Richard Marsh’s The Beetle (1897). They all feature a villain — supernatural or otherwise — who abuses mesmerism to take control over the minds of others and completely obliterate their sense of self. The Beetle and Trilby were best-selling novels at their publication, and the persistent number of sales of Dracula up to the present day points to the overwhelming success of the theme of mesmerism in combination with gothic or sensational elements. According to Pick, du Maurier’s Trilby is often assumed to be the best-selling novel of the nineteenth century, to the point where the character of Svengali literally became synonymous with ‘evil manipulator’ in public usage.

In 1895, one year after the publication of Trilby, the literary critic Arthur Quiller-Couch commented sharply on the popularity of hypnotic fiction, which he could not

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12 Pick, p. 2.
‘abide’. In the essays, he complains that these tales all follow the same pattern, and that hypnotism eliminates free will, and thus any morality and human interest in a story. He continues,

Let us distinguish. Hypnotism is a proved fact: people are hypnotised. Hypnotism is not a delimited fact: nobody yet knows precisely its conditions or its effects; or, if the discovery had been made, it has certainly not yet found its way to the novelists. For them it is as yet chiefly a field of fancy. They invent vagaries for it as they invent ghosts.

However, Doyle’s depiction of mesmerism deviates from the common pattern that Quiller-Couch so abhors. Gilroy’s subjection is made the more prominent by the fact that all power within the novella emanates from a woman, who is old, unattractive, and foreign at that. Quiller-Couch trenchantly remarks, ‘the hypnotiser in these stories is always the villain of the piece. For the same or similar reasons, the “subject” is always a person worthy of our sympathy, and is usually a woman. Let us suppose a good and beautiful woman — for that is the commonest case.’ Both The Parasite and Doyle’s earlier short story ‘John Barrington Cowles’ (1884), which also uses mesmerism as a source of horror, are unusual in this point, because they share the motif of a dangerous and sexually voracious female mesmerist. In contrast to the male mesmerists of much of the fiction of the 1890s, Doyle’s female villains remain undefeated. Rational and scientific measures associated with the medical community, which was also dominated by men, fail against their strong mental powers. The interplay between exact science represented by the male characters and natural forces represented by the villainesses induces madness in the scientists. Their rational understanding of the world is unhinged and they cannot grasp the female power over their minds. The only escape is death, either of the victim or of the mesmerist herself, which terminates the mesmeric control. This gendered power reversal illustrates the imbalance in materialistic scientific research which Doyle came to criticise later in life. A purely rationalistic approach to science detached from

15 Quiller-Couch, p. 404.
human life, as represented by the male scientist Gilroy, cannot, Doyle implies, decipher or conquer all mysteries of life, such as Penelosa’s erratic and natural power.

Doyle’s scientific and investigative interest in questions of psychical phenomena is marked by two events in his biography. In 1891 he became a member of the Society for Psychical Research (SPR), and in 1916 he formally converted to Spiritualism. With his official conversion, he professed to be convinced of the possibility of telepathic communion with the dead and thus left neutral scientific inquiry behind. *The Parasite*, however, was written in the heyday of his involvement with the SPR, during which time his scientific curiosity influenced his writing. As he says in the collection of essays *Through the Magic Door* (1907), ‘[t]he mere suspicion of scientific thought or scientific methods has a great charm in any branch of literature, however far it may be removed from actual research.’

This is particularly true in the case of mesmerism, the alleged power of which he uses to great gothic effect in both ‘John Barrington Cowles’ and *The Parasite*. Whereas the short story is quite crude in its use of mesmerism, and also adds strong occult and supernatural elements to the powers of the mesmerist, *The Parasite* is scientifically well informed and up to date with the latest research on the topic. It is not at all ‘removed’ from actual research, since the scientific interest in the practice of mesmerism provides the basis for the entire plot of the novella. According to Nordon, Doyle had become very well read in supernatural phenomena by 1888; he was informed about the Nancy School as well as the work being done by Charcot at the Salpêtrière, and had read Alfred Binet’s and Charles Fére’s standard work *Animal Magnetism* (1887), to which he refers explicitly in *The Parasite*.

The text draws on scientific textbooks to demonstrate the validity of mesmerism as a science. Doyle has Gilroy read *Animal Magnetism* as a preliminary study of mesmerism before he seriously enters on his series of experiments with Penelosa. Moreover, Catherine Wynne draws attention to the last chapter of Binet and Féré’s work, which outlines the potential danger of criminal abuse, exactly the fate that is awaiting Gilroy. Binet and Féré claim,

*It is possible to suggest to a subject in a state of somnambulism fixed ideas, irresistible impulses, which he will obey on awaking with mathematical precision. [...] [T]he hypnotic subject may become the instrument of a terrible*

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19 Nordon, p. 151.
crime, the more terrible since, immediately after the act is accomplished, all may be forgotten — the crime, the impulse, and its instigator.\textsuperscript{21}

Both Gilroy and his fiancée Agatha experience exactly this when being mesmerised. This could have been a warning for Gilroy. Binet and Féré continue, ‘although the subject is quite himself, and conscious of his identity, he cannot resist the force which impels him to perform an act which he would under other circumstances condemn’.\textsuperscript{22} According to contemporary theory it is thus absolutely possible for Penelosa to prompt Agatha to break her engagement with Gilroy, and for Gilroy to ridicule himself in public, without anyone noticing anything odd about them. To convey the danger of hypnotic suggestion even more compellingly, Binet and Féré explain, ‘[t]he danger of these criminal suggestions is increased by the fact that at the will of the experimenter, the act may be accomplished several hours, and even several days, after the date of suggestion.’\textsuperscript{23} The experience of the novella’s characters confirms this belief in post-hypnotic suggestion. Gilroy is trapped in a spiral of terrible acts that he might commit unwittingly at any time. Not only does Doyle incorporate the names and theories of real scientists into his novella to give the power of mesmerism more weight, he also clearly panders to the public fear of the possible abuse of that power for malicious or criminal ends. What is more, in both ‘John Barrington Cowles’ and The Parasite, despite all the scientific grounding of the practice of mesmerism, the strange power proves scientifically uncontrollable and induces a sense of horror in the narrator investigating it.

Gilroy’s purely materialistic approach is depicted as impotent and actually endangers his sense of self. Gilroy examines the phenomenon of mesmerism in his diary, taking the reader with him on his journey from scientific curiosity into total loss of control over his willpower. Gilroy’s language is marked by his scientific approach to life and informed by the latest theories on hypnotism. He keeps name-dropping eminent scientists, and constantly refers to himself as a rational and well-educated academic who adheres to the strictest methodical principles both in his career and in his private life. His diary is an expression of this scientific spirit; he keeps it out of professional habit in order ‘to define [his] own mental position’ (p. 6). This strictly analytical approach to his own existence dooms him to experience the complete dissolution of his self in his experiments with Penelosa. Although she has no abstract understanding of her own power, it is not any less effective. Of course, in Gilroy’s view, her claims about the power of mesmerism are simply ‘the gossip of a woman’,

\textsuperscript{22} Binet and Féré, p. 373.
\textsuperscript{23} Binet and Féré, p. 373.
which ‘cannot claim any scientific weight’ (p. 15). He is about to learn that there are powers which are uncontrollable by academic analysis and classification. This increases the horror of his experience, as mesmerism crushes both his worldview and his willpower.

In Wynne’s introduction to The Parasite she suggests that

Miss Penelosa, for all her quasi-vampiric proclivities, is not supernatural. She probes the boundaries of psychic knowledge, penetrates a scientific community, and in the process destabilizes one of its elite for sexual gain. The novella traces prevailing nineteenth-century tensions concerning the boundaries of orthodox science, as ‘other’ knowledge, ranging from ‘semi-science’ to ‘charlatanry’, threatened medical authority.24

Gilroy is the perfect representative of this medical elite and has submitted his entire life to the dictates of what he understands science to demand of a serious investigator. The ensuing conflict between Penelosa’s will and his idea of himself is already indicated in the novella’s early pages. Gilroy briefly mentions Claude Bernard, the representative figure of materialism in science, and firmly places himself as one of his followers. His fiancée calls him a ‘rank’ materialist, and he confesses that ‘[a] departure from pure reason affects me like an evil smell or a musical discord’ (p. 5). Gilroy articulates a rationalistic, even cold and unemotional approach to life, and this is how he aims to investigate mesmerism as well. There is not an ounce of spirituality in him. Doyle came to criticise just such an attitude in scientists in a speech given to medical students in 1910. In ‘The Romance of Medicine’, he remembers his own days as a medical student:

We looked upon mind and spirit as secretions from the brain in the same way as bile was a secretion from the liver. Brain centres explained everything, and if you could find and stimulate the centre of holiness you would produce a saint — but if your electrode slipped, and you got on to the centre of brutality, you would evolve a Bill Sikes.25

Gilroy thinks in similar terms about mesmerism, viewing it as a field to be mapped out as easily as a brain. He somewhat ashamedly admits a ‘highly psychic’ quality in his material make-up due to his dark complexion (p. 5), reflecting the commonplace racial prejudice that believed that Celtic and less purely Anglo-Saxon types were more susceptible to mesmeric influence. He relies on his scientific training and education to counteract this vulnerability

and believes himself sufficiently equipped to explore this new, as of yet unrecognised, scientific field of mesmerism.

He is so eager to exploit Penelosa’s power for his own scientific advancement that he entirely disregards her as a human being with her own wishes and agenda, as all he is interested in is earning his Fellowship of the Royal Society. His arrogant attitude towards her ‘insignificant’ presence and ‘retiring’ manner proves to be his downfall (p. 7), as soon as Penelosa takes control of the experiments for her own aims. He ignores all signs that he is entering a dangerous realm well beyond his knowledge or control. When he first approaches Penelosa with the idea of executing a series of experiments with himself as the subject, she refuses him; but when he expresses his eagerness, she changes her mind and informs him, ‘[i]f you make it a personal matter, [...] I shall only be too happy to tell you any thing you wish to know’ (p. 16). He is so blind that he does not realise her personal, probably emotional, interest in him. Even when fellow scientist Charles Sadler, whom Penelosa also pursued as a romantic object for a brief period, tries to warn him about her, Gilroy puts it down to scientific jealousy. All he is interested in is his scientific breakthrough, and Gilroy becomes obsessed with defining the workings of mesmerism, focusing solely on ‘[r]esults, results, results — and the cause an absolute mystery’ (p. 18). His singular concentration on knowledge for knowledge’s sake misses the point of scientific research, which should strive for the advancement and betterment of humanity. In his address to the medical students, Doyle himself warns against such a fatalistic approach to finding the causes of things: ‘Not only have we never got to the end of any medical matter, but it is only the truth that we have never got to the beginning of it. It will help to keep you humble if you remember how largely the very words we use, Life, Matter, Spirit, and so on, are mere symbols of the real meaning of which we know little.’

Gilroy would have benefitted from his creator’s insight, as he neglects the ‘real meaning’ of life, the human side. As Pick notes in the remark quoted above, mesmerism fascinated the Victorians because it pervaded all areas of life. Research into this field bears on human emotions and spiritual affinities as well as actions, all of which Gilroy completely ignores. Too late he realises his grave mistake, acknowledging that ‘[i]n my eagerness for scientific facts I have been foolishly blind to the human relations between Miss Penelosa and myself’ (p. 21). Gilroy has, up until this point, closely associated his scientific worldview with his sense of self, and this lack of human interest not only contributes to his failure as scientist but also leads to the unhinging of his mind.

The hold that Penelosa has over Gilroy’s mind actually drives him close to insanity; by this point in the narrative, when he has realised her complete power over him, nothing is left of his rational scientific superiority. This occurs because his thirst for scientific distinction leads Gilroy to irresponsibility: he agrees to sittings with Penelosa without a chaperone, and thus sets in motion a spiral of disappointed desire and feelings of rejection on the mesmerist’s part, which almost destroys him. He does not realise for a long time that the experiment, even though instigated by himself, is entirely controlled by Penelosa and that he has lost any control over his own mind. He has acted irresponsibly because he opens up his mind to the West Indian without perceiving her own motivation for the series of experiments (sexual or at least romantic attraction), or even wasting a single thought on it. From then on, he presents a danger not only to himself and those close to him but to the community at large. As a consequence of his recklessness, Gilroy loses control over his actions; under Penelosa’s influence he professes his love to her, punches Charles Sadler, and tries to rob a bank. Once he realises that he has, albeit unconsciously, displayed signs of affection for Penelosa, he is horrified at this dishonourable act towards his fiancée. It is only when he really understands the magnitude of Penelosa’s sway over him that he finds relief and no longer feels the weight of responsibility for his actions. Nevertheless, he senses that he has sunk from the high moral and intellectual standard he expects from himself. He perceives it as personal weakness and thinks of himself as being a slave to her will. Ironically this subverts the relationship between coloniser and colonised, and shows how easily an arbitrary scale of racial and, in late-nineteenth-century understanding, moral superiority can be overturned. In Doyle’s earlier story ‘John Barrington Cowles’, the mesmerist Kate Northcott, of undefined origins and with close connections to India, undermines male confidence as a colonial Other in a similar overturning of a moralised racial hierarchy. The only fiancé out of three who does not commit suicide after coming into too close contact with her, Archibald Reeves, becomes a ‘degraded creature’, finding escape in alcoholism.\(^27\) In each text the mesmerist provokes an extreme reaction in her victim which leads to degeneration from their codes of conduct and high principles. This loss of control over his own actions accelerates Gilroy’s decline into madness in ways that are in keeping with contemporary theories of the dangerous effects of mesmerism on its experimental subjects.

Binet and Féré consider questions of criminal responsibility, and propose that offenders who have acted under hypnotic influence ‘should be treated like insane

When Penelosa seeks her revenge after being spurned, Gilroy’s irritation first increases to hatred and then his mental state begins to decline. He is driven closer and closer to insanity by his hatred for this ‘she-devil’ and his judgment becomes impaired (p. 40). Mesmerism was indeed widely believed to be a morbid state and to upset a subject’s nervous system severely. Thus, medical men frequently proposed in the press that ‘the dangers of mesmerism are numerous and far-reaching, that hypnotism has far more serious drawbacks than ordinary treatment; in that it deeply, and possibly permanently, alters the nervous system, the character, feelings, &c., of the patient’. Gilroy experiences a similar effect on his nerves and feelings. At first, before he completely understands the hold Penelosa has over him, he simply wonders, ‘[w]hat is the matter with me? Am I going mad?’ (p. 23). He also realises that he could not confide in anyone because ‘[t]hey would set me down as a madman’ (p. 25). He fears that colleagues will subject him to the same cold scientific curiosity that he has hitherto displayed towards Penelosa; he does not want to be exhibited like ‘a freak at a fair’ (p. 34), and he criticises his colleague Wilson, who also investigates psychic phenomena, for having lost sight of human beings: ‘Every thing to him is a case and a phenomenon’ (p. 34).

Eventually, he and others actually think of him as being mad. Gilroy identifies Penelosa as the cause of this, and vows, ‘I will not leave her behind, to drive some other man mad as she has me’ (p. 42). He begins to harbour violent thoughts, such as, ‘I could have taken the crutch from her side and beaten her face in with it’ (p. 32); his body reacts physically to the mental stress with ‘hiccough’ and ‘ptosis of the left eyelid’ (p. 32); and his nerves suffer from the pressure. When he finally realises the danger he has put Agatha in, he collapses: ‘At the thought of what I might have done my nerves broke down and I sat shivering and twitching, the pitiable wreck of a man’ (p. 46). Henry Maudsley emphasises the importance of nervous balance for mental sanity:

Whatever opinion may be held concerning the essential nature of mind, and its independence of matter, it is admitted on all sides that its manifestations take place through the nervous system, and are affected by the condition of the nervous parts which minister to them. If these are healthy, they are sound; if these are diseased, they are unsound. Insanity is, in fact, disorder of the brain producing disorder of the mind; or, to define its nature in greater detail, it is a disorder of the supreme nerve-centres of the brain — the special organs of mind — producing derangement of thought, feeling, and action, together or

28 Binet and Féré, p. 375.
separately, of such degree or kind as to incapacitate the individual for the relations of life.\textsuperscript{30}

Gilroy finally realises that he is ‘out of all touch with [his] kind’ and surrenders to this incapacitation (p. 39); at first, he considers suicide but then settles on murdering Penelosa as the only solution, at the same time renouncing all that is important to him in life: his career, his social position, and his fiancée. Maudsley identifies the weakening of the moral sense as one of the earliest indications of insanity: ‘One of the first symptoms of insanity — one which declares itself before there is any intellectual derangement, before the person’s friends suspect even that he is becoming insane — is a deadening or complete perversion of the moral sense.’\textsuperscript{31} In the nineteenth century, moral insanity became a popular concept, and a means to classify people of unimpaired intellectual faculties as insane. As James Cowles Prichard suggests, ‘[t]his form of mental derangement has been described as consisting in a morbid perversion of the feelings, affections, and active powers, without any illusion or erroneous conviction impressed upon the understanding.’\textsuperscript{32}

Penelosa’s effect on Gilroy has devastating consequences for his conscience, as he realises that ‘[s]he has made me as desperate and dangerous a man as walks the earth. God knows I have never had the heart to hurt a fly, and yet if I had my hands now upon that woman she should never leave this room alive’ (p. 42). Maudsley discusses the conscience in \textit{Responsibility in Mental Disease} (1874): ‘Let it be noted how [the conscience] is perverted or destroyed sometimes by disease or injury of the brain. The last acquired faculty in the progress of human evolution, it is the first to suffer when disease invades the mental organization.’\textsuperscript{33} Indeed, a ‘parasite’ — the morbid state of hypnotism — has invaded Gilroy’s mental organisation and has induced his mental deterioration. Gilroy’s deadening of feeling and need for rash action results in his rationalising his conviction that murder is necessary for Agatha’s and the world’s safety. He even calls it his ‘duty’ (p. 47). His moral compass has degenerated and he becomes insane; Gilroy is punished for his scientific greed in the end by

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{32} James Cowles Prichard, \textit{A Treatise on Insanity and Other Disorders Affecting the Mind} (London: Sherwood, Gilbert, and Piper, 1835), p. 12.
\end{thebibliography}
the loss of his self-respect, sense of honour, and sanity. Even the final ‘redeeming’ act of taking revenge on the one he believes responsible, which would have returned the power of agency to him, is denied to him by her natural death.

The prudent and rational scientist has found the limit to scientific curiosity in his own person; he does not conform to his exacting expectations anymore. George M. Gould, an American opponent of the fashion of mesmeric performances, notes that ‘fascination [with hypnotism] gives prompt way to disgust when it is seen that what really takes place is only the most brutalizing of crudities — a relapse to the mental and social conditions of animalism and barbarism’. Mesmerism prompts degeneration, according to Gould; Reeves’s alcoholism in ‘John Barrington Cowles’ and Gilroy’s aggression seem to correspond to this theory. This racially informed ‘atavistic return to primitive and savage mental states’ connects Gould’s anxiety with prevalent fears of degeneration, most emphatically voiced by the previously quoted Lankester in Degeneration. Referring to the white races of Europe, Lankester warns that ‘[i]t is possible for us […] to reject the good gift of reason with which every child is born, and to degenerate’. Loss of the power of reason is a symptom of degeneration from which both Reeves and Gilroy suffer. The ‘full and earnest cultivation of Science’ which Lankester would like to see as a protection against degeneration has, on the contrary, led to precisely this state in Gilroy’s case. His materialistic approach in experimenting with an unknown power demands the price of his reason.

By making his scientist surrender his reason to Penelosa, Doyle addresses the question of free will and human identity. Gilroy is deprived of all footing in his life once he loses the power to control his actions, and consequently he loses his sense of self. His experience of degradation, even degeneration, seriously questions the existence of a stable identity for him. Very often the idea of the self is identified with ‘soul’ in the novella. The soul is fragile and needs protection, as Gilroy immediately realises when he witnesses Agatha’s hypnotisation. He instantly exclaims (in his diary), ‘[b]ut her soul! It had slipped from beyond our ken. Whither had it gone? What power had dispossessed it? I was puzzled and disconcerted’ (p. 10). Gould agrees with this assessment of mesmerism: ‘Disguise it as one may, the hour’s amusement has been at the expense of nothing less than the Disintegration of a Soul, and the Dissolution of Personality.’ In relation to his own exposure to mesmerism, Gilroy does not see the same need for protection, however. His sexist beliefs

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35 Gould, p. 2173.
36 Lankester, p. 60–61.
37 Gould, p. 2173.
support the assumption that his will is stronger than any woman’s. Nevertheless, watching
Agatha, he receives a first glimpse of mesmerism’s power to destabilise a definite sense of
selfhood. Quiller-Couch believes that this sense of loss translates to the reader as well: ‘I
think my first objection to these hypnotic tales is the terror they inspire. I am not talking of
ordinary human terror, which, of course is the basis of much of the best tragedy. […] But the
terror of these hypnotic stories resembles that of a child in a dark room.’ Mesmerism
provokes something beyond ordinary terror; it questions the limits of our self and suggests a
frightening permeability of our mind. The terror of a child in darkness denotes the experience
of fear of the unknown, the feeling of utter helplessness. Indeed, Gilroy describes this exact
feeling in very similar terms: ‘I tried as I watched to preserve my scientific calm, but a
foolish, causeless agitation convulsed me. I trust that I hid it, but I felt as a child feels in the
dark’ (p. 10). Already, at his first encounter with mesmerism, his scientific certainty is
unsettled, but he chooses to ignore this.

In his materialist mind-set, he does not expect the unsettling consequences of
allowing another will into his psyche; he only sees things in their biological context,
neglecting all other aspects of life, and exhibiting exactly that sort of behaviour that Doyle
warns against in his 1910 speech to the medical students. Doyle challenges his listeners:
‘There is another fact which life will teach — the value of kindliness and humanity as well as
of knowledge. That is exactly the point which the intellectual prig has missed. A strong and
kindly personality is as valuable an asset as actual learning in a medical man.’ Gilroy also
misses the point of kindliness and humanity in his dealings with Penelosa. Had he not at first
ignored her so cruelly and then spurned her yearning for love, he — applying Doyle’s own
dictum — might not have suffered so much. Penelosa abuses her gift for her own benefit, but
Gilroy is too focused on himself to realise the possibility of human failure. The Parasite
exposes scientific arrogance at its worst and shows how easily a rational man can be turned
into a madman.

In Memoirs and Adventures (1924), Doyle judged The Parasite to be ‘very inferior’. According to Wynne, Doyle’s novella was considerably less popular than Trilby, which was
also published in 1894, and suggests that this might be due to du Maurier’s more
conventional depiction of ‘mesmeric subordination’. Indeed, Doyle later suppressed the
novella from listings of his published work, and Stephen Knight believes that this is not

38 Quiller-Couch, p. 403–04.
39 Quoted in Anon., ‘St Mary’s Hospital: Introductory Address on “The Romance of Medicine”, p. 1066.
because its critique of mesmerism ‘clashed with his later spiritual beliefs’, suggesting instead that ‘it may have been a bit too overt for comfort in the threats its hero encounters’. Doyle reverses the ordinary power structures in both scientific research and mesmeric performance in allowing the subject of the experiment, a woman, to seize control of the proceedings. *The Parasite* renders the Doylean hero unusually ineffective in his attempts to conquer this evil woman and, in doing so, it presents a surprisingly early critical view of materialism in science. Gilroy’s search for abstract knowledge to gain academic praise is severely chastised; for all his scientific knowledge, Gilroy is powerless against the dangers of mesmerism, degeneration, and insanity. The gothic element of undefeatable mesmeric power is not presented as supernatural, but serves to expose the impotence of a close-minded and purely positivist understanding of the world. In Doyle’s words, ‘rank’ materialism proves ineffective without ‘kindliness and humanity’.

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43 See Knight for a discussion of the ways in which the use of mesmerism and Gilroy’s eager exploration of it could also be read as a metaphorical code for forbidden sexual desire of the Other.
‘A Very Primitive Matter’: John Wyndham on Catastrophe and Survival

Miles Link

Contemporary environmental anxieties present the perfect chance to revisit British science-fiction writer John Wyndham’s Cold War-era stories of mutations, climate change, and nature revenging itself on humans via carnivorous plants. Wyndham himself would hardly have been surprised at his continued relevance. Indeed, his body of imaginative fiction — from his most famous work *The Day of the Triffids* (1951) to, as discussed below, 1953’s *The Kraken Wakes*, 1955’s *The Chrysalids*, and 1957’s *The Midwich Cuckoos* — argues that our reactions to disaster should be guided by the evolutionary truths imposed by nature itself, however obscured those truths have become by everyday life. At the height of his popularity in the 1950s, Wyndham’s speculations drew deeply from a tradition of British adventure literature and its accompanying preoccupation with the character traits of survival and dominance. At the same time, Wyndham wrote in the aftermath of a cataclysmic world war and in the context of a worsening threat of nuclear death and social collapse. He consciously placed this state of affairs in tension with the tranquil life of affluence that the post-war West had supposedly achieved. Thus, as an author concerned both with his own historical moment and with the ultimate survival of the human species, Wyndham offers works rich in symbolic potential.

In this article, I examine the fantastical creatures in Wyndham’s novels as beings that do more than present the negative of post-war life. Instead, through their symbolic multiplicity — their lack of a stable meaning — Wyndham’s creations fracture the certainty of that life. By arranging these encounters with beings that puncture the coherence of the social totality, Wyndham urges readers to see themselves not as members of a vast complex of institutions and organisations, but as lone individuals, rising and falling by their ability to survive. Wyndham advocates the power of the individual as an adaptive creature, stifled by the post-war edifice of the cradle-to-the-grave British welfare state. As he blends Cold-War politics and imaginative elements, Wyndham consistently reaches to images from natural
selection, in a bid to awaken in the reader the principles of survival, which have been momentarily usurped by a massified society that rewards weakness.

This essay therefore evaluates Wyndham’s ideology of nature, as well as his status as a writer of gothic-inflected science fiction with an ‘evolutionary’ perspective. Specifically, Wyndham deploys the language of Darwinian struggle as a reaction to post-war society. That is, Wyndham utilises such language only to the extent that he opposes the mass organisation of people around the mid-century ideal of a comfortable, domesticated existence. His idea of humans’ relationship to nature does not quite match that of the ‘inextricable web of affinities’ offered by Darwin, which emphasises species’ interdependence.¹ Instead, for Wyndham, nature hands down an imperative that affects species and individuals: Wyndham first asserts that societies are compelled to follow nature’s logic of survival, contrasting the single-minded ‘survival instinct’ governing wartime Britain (for example, in its mobilisation of women in masculine roles) against what he sees as a postwar society of leisure. Yet ‘evolution’ in Wyndham’s sense also directs individual’s actions: the ‘honesty’ of following evolutionary precepts is repeatedly contrasted against the pretence of respectable society, its class divisions, and its sexual mores, as shown in examples below.

Really, Wyndham is interested in the possibilities that emerge when such social pillars have toppled. In his most significant novels, Wyndham expands upon the challenge posed by philosopher Hannah Arendt, in the wake of the Second World War. She writes, ‘[i]ntellectually […], America and Europe are in the same situation: the thread of tradition is broken, and we must discover the past for ourselves.’² For Wyndham, however, truth resides in the primeval past, rather than in the lost wisdom of any forgotten civilisation. The perception of existence as an eternal struggle, as conceived of by Wyndham, frames Arendt’s question in terms of how to live not only in the aftermath of a world-wide cataclysm, but also in the very real anticipation of the next. Even so, Arendt’s characterisation of ‘the true forerunner of modern mass man’ as the individual, who finds themselves ‘in open rebellion against society’, aligns exactly with Wyndham’s project of stripping away the assumption of permanence attached to mass society.³ In the aftermath of a systemic collapse, humans must ask themselves how best to align with the truths of survival. In his fiction, such acts take on the character of pioneers taming their surroundings, in a world returned to the wild.

³ Arendt, p. 199.
Such meditations are far more radical than Brian Aldiss’s notable characterisation of Wyndham’s works as ‘cosy catastrophes’. The discussion below begins by examining the context in which Wyndham wrote, and what the mischaracterisation of the ‘cosy catastrophe’ fails to describe in his works. To recover Wyndham’s radical perspective, I turn next to the monstrous beings that populate his fiction — aliens, mutations and ‘triffids’ — and explore how their presence breaks down the coherence of civilised life. Finally, I discuss how Wyndham calls, paradoxically, for readers to cultivate themselves as evolutionary individuals: lone survivors in a mass society. The discussion below centres largely upon Wyndham’s most prominent novel, *The Day of the Triffids*, but my argument touches on Wyndham’s novels of the 1950s generally. What emerges in an examination of the real danger underlying Wyndham’s ‘cosy’ catastrophes is a deep opposition to polite society, and an appeal for readers to view the world through the perspective of survival and domination instead.

**Re-Evaluating the ‘Cosy Catastrophe’**

Wyndham’s first broadside against the mass society, *The Day of the Triffids*, is ironically the very source of his characterisation as a writer of respectability and convention. The novel depicts humankind’s struggle against the ‘triffids’, seven-foot-tall poisonous plants that can walk by pulling up their roots and shuffling forward on three knobs protruding from a central bole at the base of their stems. They sting their victims with a lethally poisonous whip hidden in their flowers. After the victim’s body has begun decomposing, triffids feed on the rotting flesh. In the novel, triffids appear worldwide, suddenly, dramatically, and without explanation, in an unspecified time after the Second World War. By the time the story begins, however, the man-eating plants have faded to the status of a mere curiosity, even a fixture of backyard gardens. In their blending of the domestic and the fantastic, triffids fit comfortably into a tradition of fiction about malignant children’s toys and other tales of everyday things attacking people — the plot of Daphne du Maurier’s 1952 novelette *The Birds*, for example, which appeared only a year after *The Day of the Triffids*, essentially follows the same trajectory as Wyndham’s novel.

*Triffids*, however, combines the horror of an attack by an ordinary object with a second catastrophe: the appearance of a brilliant green comet over Earth that blinds all who look at it. Just to ensure that the parallel with the Cold War is understood, Wyndham’s survivors discuss at the end of the novel whether the ‘comet’ was really a natural phenomenon, or a malfunctioning space-based weapon that inadvertently wiped out
civilisation. Thus, rather than solely exploring the hidden menace lurking in quotidian life, Wyndham sets up a struggle on an evolutionary scale: their meagre defences removed, humans face extinction at the hands of the triffids. *The Day of the Triffids* is emblematic, in fact, of two issues that run parallel in the main body of Wyndham’s work: the dismantling of the sense of what is ‘ordinary’, and the recognition of existence as a universal struggle for domination. Wyndham is not interested in reconciling people to the workings of the organisations that produce the sense of the everyday (the novel notably begins in a hospital, a highly regimented institution that, following the blinding comet, has fallen into chaos). Instead he offers an argument for individual autonomy and the ruthless pursuit of survival.

*The Day of the Triffids* is narrated by Bill Masen, a biochemical engineer who extracts a valuable oil from the triffids. Masen, who is capable but not superhuman, is dropped into the middle of the book’s double catastrophe. His eyes bandaged following a triffid attack, Masen inadvertently escapes the effects of the comet, which radio reports confirm is seen worldwide. The spectators of the comet — that is, most of the human population — wake the next morning to discover that they are all blind. We follow Bill as he escapes from a quickly disintegrating London, and through the English countryside as he searches for a community that has a chance at long-term survival; this is by no means easy, now that triffids roam free across the landscape. Indeed, Masen spends the latter half of the book speculating at length on the best way to adapt human communities to the triffid threat.

*Triffids* thus sets out the major features of Wyndham’s post-war writing. His early career in pulp science fiction and detective stories fizzled with the onset of the Second World War and his recruitment into the Royal Signal Corps. He returned to writing after the war, this time finding commercial success. Nonetheless, he disliked the label of ‘science fiction’ being attached to his works. Wyndham preferred the term ‘logical fantasies’ — which, from a survey of his stories, could be said to consist of ordinary people in extraordinary situations that require them to reflect on their place in society, and what ‘society’ actually is. In this sense, the main project of *The Day of the Triffids* is to inject a sense of danger into what his work posits as the mundane existence of respectable post-war British society. The novel achieves this by a sustained act of inversion: early in the book, Masen, reflecting on the demise of modern civilisation, describes the whole industrial age — *our* age — as ‘utopian’:

Roads, railways, and shipping lines laced it, ready to carry one thousands of miles safely and in comfort. There was no need for anyone to take weapons or

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4 Robin McKie, ‘Don’t Ignore the Invisible Man’, *The Observer* (13 July 2003), 91 (p. 91).
even precautions in those days. You could go, just as you were, to wherever you wished, with nothing to hinder you. A world so tamed sounds utopian now.5

This presentation of modern life as utopian, and thus beyond the boundaries of what can be considered acceptably ‘real’, is consistent with Wyndham’s project, to which he continually returns: the dismantling of petit-bourgeois, ‘middle-class’ sensibilities and the promotion of a different set of truths, founded in the natural world’s competition for survival. Wyndham’s formula follows a person with no extraordinary powers of their own, as they narrate their encounter with some supposedly alien (and sometimes malevolent) being. Established authority figures working within science, politics, and the law resist any adaptation to the new situation, while academics enter to explain why humanity should be willing to adapt itself as a matter of survival. Wyndham’s works therefore repeatedly assert that life is an endless, violent struggle for dominance, a struggle which respectable society attempts to conceal.

Wyndham’s focus on the experience of ‘Middle England’ has led the science-fiction critic and scholar Brian Aldiss to identify in Wyndham an overweening sympathy for its aspirations and anxieties. In truth, Wyndham’s most characteristic approach is gentle and indulgent critique, or self-evident irony, rather than the apocalyptic bluster of, for instance, H. G. Wells, whose influence on Wyndham marks my analysis below. Aldiss notoriously labelled Wyndham’s disaster stories like The Day of the Triffids as ‘cosy catastrophes’, what he saw as a strain of ‘anxiety fantasies’ in which the protagonists witness the end of civilisation without experiencing any real danger. As Aldiss puts it, ‘[t]he essence of cosy catastrophe is that the hero should have a pretty good time (a girl, free suites at the Savoy, automobiles for the taking) while everyone else is dying off.’6

Aldiss’s description does resonate with other depictions of the apocalypse that are contemporary with Triffids. The deserted cities that feature in Wyndham’s Triffids or The Kraken Wakes display many parallels with the post-war apocalyptic imaginary, especially in cinema. Rudolph Maté’s When Worlds Collide (1951), Val Guest’s The Day the Earth Caught Fire (1961), and Byron Haskin’s 1953 film adaptation of The War of the Worlds all linger over images of the world’s metropolises left abandoned. While simultaneously calling audiences’ minds back to the destruction caused by the Second World War (The Day the

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The opening sequence of desolated London obliquely references Herbert Mason’s famous 1940 photograph of St Paul’s Cathedral rising above the smoke and fire of the Blitz, the disjuncture of a city without people illustrates the disjunction between mass society and the individual — ‘shoved hither and thither by forces and interests that I neither understood nor cared about’, as Bill Masen describes himself (pp. 47–48). Yet while Aldiss interprets these scenes of deserted cities as the expression of a more prosaic desire — to indulge freely in the creature comforts produced by the affluent society — they are really illustrations of how that society alienates its members from each other. In Wyndham’s comet-stricken London, this alienation is physically manifested in the population’s blindness. Masen, from a high-rise apartment, listens as, below, one of the blinded breaks out in a ‘freezing scream which seemed to revel horribly in its release from sanity’ (p. 78) — someone reacting, that is, to their total isolation from other humans, even in the midst of a crowded city.

The depiction of disease and worldwide pandemics, such as in George R. Stewart’s *Earth Abides* (1949), which features a man’s attempts to preserve civilisation in a plague-depopulated California, can also be linked into Wyndham’s meditations on post-apocalyptic survival in *Triffids*, even if the very ‘cosiness’ of pandemic-survivor stories is dependent on survivors who are immune from or escape exposure to the sickness. The orthodox ‘cosy catastrophe’, if the label can indeed be used coherently, certainly has associations with less ‘cosy’ tales, as well: Richard Matheson’s *I Am Legend* (1954), and its several film adaptations in 1964, 1971, and 2007, finds a lone man struggling to maintain sanity amidst the ceaseless night-time assaults of the undead. In all the above cases, any fleeting luxury pleasures enjoyed by the everyman protagonists are quickly set aside for the more serious business of survival: sports cars must give way to tank-tread all-terrain vehicles.

The description of *The Day of the Triffids* as ‘cosy’ is thus only accurate up to a point. It is true that Wyndham’s conceit leaves the world largely intact, a considerable advantage over, say, a nuclear confrontation. As one survivor says,

> From August 6, 1945, the margin of survival has narrowed appallingly. [...] In any single moment of the years since then the fatal slip might have been made. [...] But sooner or later that slip must have occurred. [...] How bad it could have been — well, there might have been no survivors; there might possibly have been no planet. (pp. 96–97)

In *The Day of the Triffids*, everything from the old world is left to crumble, and humankind must start over again. Yet the label of ‘cosy catastrophe’ suggests that a book like *The Day of*
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The Triffids is not to be taken too seriously, even as a critique of that crumbling world. Aldiss sized up Wyndham’s novels as ‘totally devoid of ideas’ but which ‘read smoothly, and thus reached a maximum audience, who enjoyed cosy disasters’.\(^7\) Similarly, a reviewer in 1951 declared Triffids ‘a good run-of-the-mill affair […] you will find some pleasant reading in this book, provided you aren’t out hunting science fiction masterpieces’.\(^8\) Such comments could explain Wyndham’s resistance to the label of ‘science fiction’. For Aldiss to dismiss Triffids as ‘devoid of ideas’ is to suggest that ‘science fiction’ should be judged by an author’s novelty productions (which, in the last analysis, is the creation of new commodities for sale), rather than according to how such works reflect and are reflected in social processes. Such criteria mean that novels such as Wyndham’s, which exploit the uncertainties of an established order by introducing an antagonist that confounds that order, will be left undervalued.

Wyndham’s ‘ideas’ do not seek to engage the reader through their novelty, but rather in their avowedly primeval truth. That is, Wyndham utilises the principles of evolutionary biology not just as a metaphor in his works, but as a motive force in the narrative. In this aspect he owes a great deal, in both the character of his stories and the lessons they impart, to H. G. Wells. Wells’s influence on Wyndham is stamped all over the latter’s writing, including their mutual willingness to destroy London repeatedly in their stories, as well as the veneer of scientific fact stretched over the imaginative fantasy of societal collapse, and above all the indefatigable conviction that the strongest shall survive. The Day of the Triffids, in fact, makes several references to Wells. Wyndham’s malevolent ‘comet’ has the opposite effect to Wells’s celestial visitor in 1906’s In the Days of the Comet, which magically enlightens all those who look on it. In addition, Bill Masen briefly discusses Wells’s 1904 short story ‘The Country of the Blind’, which features an explorer in the Andes mountains who discovers a lost tribe of sightless people. While the explorer Nuñez initially believes he will be able to overpower and dominate the tribe quite easily, the tribe is so well adapted to their environment that they end up overpowering him.\(^9\) Finally and most significantly, the first half of The Day of the Triffids more or less faithfully re-enacts Wells’s tale of Martian invasion, The War of the Worlds, from 1898. The purpose of Masen’s wanderings through a deserted London in Triffids is identical to that of the narrator’s in The War of the Worlds, scenes which function as demonstrations that the very heart of modern civilisation has

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\(^{7}\) Aldiss with Wingrove, p. 315.


stopped beating. There is also much foreshadowing of Wyndham in Wells’s assaults against middle-class complacency, and his intoning of the evolutionary imperative as supreme law. ‘We think’, wrote Wells in 1894,

> because things have been easy for mankind as a whole for a generation or so, we are going on to perfect comfort and security in the future. We think that we shall always go to work at ten and leave off at four, and have dinner at seven for ever and ever. [...] Even now, for all we can tell, the coming terror may be crouching for its spring and the fall of humanity be at hand.\(^{10}\)

From Wyndham, Masen’s similarly sobering conclusion, ‘[i]t must be, I thought, one of the race’s most persistent and comforting hallucinations to trust that “it can’t happen here” — that one’s own little time and place is beyond cataclysms’ (pp. 70–71), takes on an even greater significance in the aftermath of the Battle of Britain and in the context of a gradually escalating nuclear threat.

Importantly, Wyndham uses moments such as Bill Masen’s reflections on disaster to give weight to his arguments about adaptation, and to establish the pedigree of his writing (through, for example, his references to Wells). Wyndham’s greater purpose, however, lies in showing how disaster reveals an unresolvable lacuna in the total organisation society. Into this gap step the monsters that haunt Wyndham’s fiction — always present, yet strangely inscrutable.

**Consider the Triffid**

Any analysis of Wyndham’s monsters should start with his single most famous creation: the triffid. The novelty of Wyndham’s leafy literary antagonist is its resistance to a stable symbolic meaning. The triffid, as a manifestation of a range of personal anxieties (of the pressures of conformity, of sexual conflict) or as the marker of any number of insurgent post-war social movements (communism, anti-imperialism, or the generation gap) is able to escape any unified or definitive meaning by refusing to ‘speak’: triffids, along with Wyndham’s other monsters, are menacing for their refusal to communicate their intentions. It is necessary to explore the different symbolic dimensions of Wyndham’s creation, then, not to arrive at a single interpretation or an exhaustive taxonomy of the triffid, but to demonstrate why it is not satisfactory as a symbol of any one thing. In other words, we must explain why triffids are not simply the negative image of civilisation, and thus why they are not part of a

lament for that civilisation, in the style of Aldiss’s ‘cosy catastrophes’. By examining how the triffid functions in the novel’s conceptualisation of evolution and survival, what Wyndham proposes in place of the false solidity of technological society will become clear.

As outlined above, the triffid can be read as a threatening rupture in the world of the everyday. A great part of this threat derives from their very fertility: triffids can grow anywhere on earth with ease, and furthermore, like Wells’s Martians, they are ‘absolutely without sex, and therefore without any of the tumultuous emotions that arise from that difference among men’. The triffid is a threatening, asexual, self-pollinating, monstrous presence, quietly flourishing amidst humans whose gender relations amount to ‘a mess of myth and affectation’, as one character puts it (p. 149). Thus, in the face of the menacing fecundity of the triffids, we must ask in what kind of human sexual politics The Day of the Triffids is invested, since Wyndham has presented sexuality itself as a potential stumbling block to humanity’s survival.

In fact, the novel considers sex only in the context of reproduction. As the fictional sociologist Dr E. H. Vorless argues while addressing a group of survivors in the University of London, procreation is not strictly the province of the nuclear family. ‘The laws we knew have been abolished by circumstances’, he says of the comet catastrophe. ‘It now falls to us to make laws suitable to the conditions, and to enforce them if necessary’ (p. 101). Vorless thus outlines his group’s decisions. First, the majority of the blinded populace are beyond help, and should be left to die. Only blind women will be accepted into his group’s community, since they can still bear sighted children. Vorless proposes that the survivors adjust themselves to the business of repopulating the Earth: specifically, to maintain relationships of about three women to one man, in order to boost their population. He says,

In the time now ahead of us a great many of these prejudices we have been given will have to go, or be radically altered. We can accept and retain only one primary prejudice, and that is that the race is worth preserving. To that consideration all else will, for a time at least, be subordinate. (pp. 99–100, emphasis in original)

That said, the arrival of Josella Playton — a young socialite who misses the blindness-inducing comet because of a bad hangover, and who becomes Masen’s love interest — allows the novel to temper somewhat its assertions about the changeable status of sex in society. In fact, Josella’s relationship with Masen betrays the extent to which the novel in fact

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assents to the bourgeois values it otherwise rails against. Bill initially rescues Josella from a blind man who has tethered her to his arm. Bill’s attraction to Josella is based equally on her beauty and her ‘practicality’ (p. 80), while his attempts to rescue her from various dangers (rape, kidnapping, imprisonment) follow the contours of a solid romance-novel courtship. However, the ‘taming’ of Josella, of bringing her into the service of Masen’s needs, is not simply the reassertion of the breadwinner-housewife relationship. The book is dismissive of other survivors’ attempts to maintain pre-disaster gender politics at any cost; a male survivor bemoans that ‘there has been much too great a vested interest in dependence for women to dream of dropping it’ (p. 149). Instead, Josella is offered to Masen as a means by which rationality will remake the world.

Masen and Josella both acknowledge that it is much more important to consider sex in terms of its socially useful role, with sexuality subordinate to the primary concerns of survival. When confronted with Vorless’s plan for polygamy, the two reconcile themselves quickly to accepting other women into their relationship for the sake of maximising the group’s reproductive potential. ‘Josella […] Er — those babies. I’d — er — I’d be sort of terribly proud and happy if they could be mine as well as yours’, says Bill (p 103). Josella replies, ‘[y]ou won’t need to worry at all, my dear. I shall choose two nice, sensible girls’ (p. 105). However, the two are never actually confronted with the necessity of abandoning their monogamous pair bond, as they are separated from each other before they can sign up to Vorless’s commune. The novel contrives the course of events to ensure that it is never forced to act on its depreciation of romantic love as a luxury afforded to decadent, comfortable societies at the height of their delusions. Wyndham manages to assert that human sexual practices are mutable, without having to depict that change actually happening.

Sexual strife is not the only domain of conflict against which triffids appear to hold a significant advantage: the triffids’ sudden worldwide appearance transcends humanity’s messy and overlapping geopolitical conflicts. Considering the status of the triffid as an exotic imported species, it is possible to look beyond the bedroom for its conceptual origins: to Africa, Asia, and the islands of the Pacific, or in other words to the British and European colonies. Despite their probable Soviet origin, triffids are originally associated with tropical areas, because of their faster rate of growth there than in the temperate zones. Masen, explaining to the reader, makes an implicit connection between triffids and the strange beasts

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12 Masen speculates that the Soviets created the triffids through the bioengineering work of Trofim Lysenko, the Ukrainian geneticist who claimed to have developed a new agricultural science along Marxist-Leninist principles. The triffids’ spread worldwide is supposedly due to a failed attempt to smuggle their seeds out of Russia.
found in those European colonies that were either seeking or had sought independence when Wyndham was writing:

Triffids were, admittedly, a bit weird — but that was, after all, just because they were a novelty. People had felt the same about novelties of other days: about kangaroos, giant lizards, black swans. And when you came to think of it, were triffids all that much queerer than mudfish, ostriches, polliwogs, and a hundred other things? (pp. 31–32)

Reading *The Day of the Triffids* in colonial terms allows us to link Wyndham’s book into earlier ‘reverse invasion’ stories, a literary tradition that dates back to George Tomkyns Chesney’s 1871 work *The Battle of Dorking*, and which features London besieged by colonial competitors (such as Saki’s 1913 novel *When William Came*), or by the conquered peoples of the British Empire (such as P. Anderson Graham’s 1923 novel *The Collapse of Homo Sapiens*). The reverse invasion scenario was given a significant imaginative overhaul by Wells’s *War of the Worlds* (1898), which converted human invaders to Martian conquerors. Both Wyndham’s and Wells’s novels establish a strong parallel between the realm of natural selection and the realm of geopolitics, implying that the same rules govern each. As Masen declares simply, ‘[i]t’s an unnatural thought that one type of creature should dominate perpetually’ (p. 93). Here Masen comes close to concluding that, if triffids are indeed better adapted than humans, then the world belongs to them.

If the triffids themselves inspire unease and even dread, the most pressing danger in Wyndham’s novel comes from other human beings, and more specifically members of the working class. There are, importantly, two shambling masses in *Triffids*: the walking plants, and the blind, who grope their way en masse through London’s streets in search of aid. The hordes of blind are essentially just as dangerous as the triffids; they simply overwhelm the remaining sighted persons. Class divisions are immediately apparent in the blind’s sheer numbers, as well as their demands for help. As one such blind man says to Bill, ‘[s]o you can see, can you! […] Why the hell should you be able to see when I can’t — nor anyone else?’ (p. 54, emphasis in original). Without exception, the blind people who antagonise or distract Bill and Josella from escaping London speak in working-class accents. Meanwhile, more

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refined victims of the blinding comet meekly submit to their fate: the novel sharply contrasts a young woman in Kensington playing ‘We’ll Go No More A-Roving’ on a piano while softly sobbing, with a mob of drunk young men bellowing ‘Beer, Glorious Beer’ in Piccadilly Circus (pp. 42, 45). The only redemptive power the blind have in *Triffids* is to realise the futility of their situation and submit to death. One of the novel’s most striking images is the sight of the cars along the English country roads that have pulled off to the shoulder as their drivers went blind. ‘[T]he blindness seemed to have come upon the drivers swiftly’, says Masen, ‘but not too suddenly for them to keep control’ (p. 135). These drivers, considerately, have moved aside to let the rest of humanity pass.

In contrast to these members of the virtuous blind, it is significant that Masen repeatedly depicts crowds of people as just as monstrous as the triffids. He describes a group of blind people trapped in a stairwell: ‘The place looked — well, maybe you’ll have seen some of Doré’s pictures of sinners in hell. But Doré couldn’t include the sounds: the sobbing, the murmurous moaning, and occasionally a forlorn cry’ (p. 13). Such a description contributes to the attitude that the blind in *The Day of the Triffids* are being punished somehow for their sins, for indulging in the big, vulgar, ‘free’ entertainment of the comet’s light show the previous evening. However, if the suspicions that Masen raises at the end of the book are correct, then the comet was not ‘free’ at all, but rather a taxpayer-funded military exercise gone wrong, a space-based weapon that went off accidentally. In that case, the blind are being punished for looking to get something for nothing: free entertainment from the biggest air-show in history.

When considering the novel’s bias against the masses, it is important to remember that *Triffids* was written in the context of the establishment of a sweeping welfare state in Britain. The post-war Labour government had, in 1946, introduced payments for child benefit, unemployment allowance, and large increases in old-age pensions. Two years later came the establishment of the National Health Service. Amidst these reforms, there is a pervasive distaste for the emergent welfare state on display in *The Day of the Triffids*. Masen himself, resistant to offering aid to the blinded populace, asks, ‘[d]o we help those who have survived the catastrophe to rebuild some kind of life? — or do we make a moral gesture which, on the face of it, can scarcely be more than a gesture?’ (p. 85). Indeed, to make this gesture identifies one as a dreamer or ideologue: a considerable portion of the novel is taken up with the efforts of a working-class intellectual, Coker, to force sighted survivors like Bill to care for groups of the blind. Masen himself is handcuffed to a group and sent out to find
food. After the group begins dying of disease, he escapes; Coker eventually recants his plan as a sentimental dream. Evidently, the individual’s survival means that others must perish.

The challenge, then, of critically analysing the triffid is its manifold symbolic potential, both within the world of the text and the novel’s historical backdrop. It is this very lack of certainty, however, that is most terrifying about the triffid. In terms of the critical approach to monsters, the triffid is not, for example, a Freudian projection of a collective fear that is already present — such an explanation would spring from the assumption that the world is essentially knowable, even if the deeper truths about us lay concealed. As critic Steven Schneider explains,

Freud’s hypothesis, that a sufficient condition of uncanny experiences is the return to consciousness of repressed infantile complexes, has been famously, albeit rather loosely, adopted/adapted by film theorist Robin Wood: ‘One might say that the true subject of the horror genre is all that our civilisation represses or oppresses.’

Monsters, in this view, are our own fears returning to us; ultimately monsters are versions of ourselves. Instead, I would argue, the triffid does not embody any human understanding of the world. The triffid is not simply the negative image of what bourgeois post-war life values: it does not merely connote collectivity rather than identity, or evolutionary shift rather than stability. Instead, the triffid cancels the order upon which those values are built. In appearing as a force that nullifies individual agency (triffids do not seek personal enrichment; triffids will swarm the weak point of a fence until it breaks open), the triffids undermine the arrogance of bourgeois rationality, the conviction that nothing can exist beyond itself, and that its logic encapsulates all possible earthly motivations. Such a challenge explains the vehemence with which characters, including Bill Masen, deny that triffids can ‘think’ or ‘talk’. As Masen and a colleague say of the possibility, ‘“But it’s absurd. Plants talking!” “So much more absurd than plants walking?”’ (p. 36). If triffids do think or talk, it is not in a way that humans can understand.

The confrontation with this incompatible way of life is not an agreeable experience. The arrival of the triffids separates those who can adapt themselves from those who increase

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15 As expressed, for example, by Jeffrey Cohen: ‘The monster’s body quite literally incorporates fear, desire, anxiety, and fantasy […]. The monstrous body is pure culture’. ‘Monster Culture (Seven Theses)’, in Monster Theory: Reading Culture, ed. by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), pp. 3–25 (p. 4).
their efforts to contain the unbearable indeterminacy that the triffids represent (in sex, politics, and class, as outlined above). The metaphor of ‘blindness’ in *The Day of the Triffids* is thus much less complicated than it may appear. Society is divided between the people who can see the truth, and those whose vision is obscured by their own fantasies of respectability, or sexual politics, or the Cold War dependency on Americans as a global protector. Superior humans possess a character that is not tempered by politics, but is instead located in the strength and agency of the adaptive individual. The arrival of the comet is therefore a chance for these superior humans to rise above the masses. As a friend of Masen’s says, ‘[w]e aren’t out to reconstruct — we want to build something new and better’ (p. 220).

**The Chosen Few**

What sort of society, built on what values, does Wyndham imagine these superior humans would construct? In fact, Wyndham would develop the survivalist views put forth in *The Day of the Triffids* with his later novels. *The Chrysalids* (1955) reverses the withdrawal of a power in *Triffids* (sight), with the addition of a new power (telepathy). *The Chrysalids*, like Wyndham’s short story ‘The Wheel’, takes place in a nondescript village in Labrador, thrown back into a pre-modern lifestyle after a worldwide cataclysm. This tiny community hunts out and kills children with mutations and deformities, the lingering result of nuclear fallout. Eventually, some children secretly learn that they can communicate with each other using only their minds. They attempt to escape from their puritanical community and are eventually rescued by the emissaries of Sealand, a society that has advanced considerably with the aid of its citizens’ own telepathic abilities. Hesitant to leave his home, the narrator David asks an emissary from Sealand what will happen to his father, the village’s religious leader and an unforgiving enforcer of the laws against mutations. ‘Let him be’, is the emissary’s reply. ‘Your work is to survive.’ She continues,

> The living form defies evolution at its peril; if it does not adapt, it will be broken. The idea of completed man is the supreme vanity: the finished image is a sacrilegious myth. […] Your father and his kind […] have become history without being aware of it. […] Soon they will attain the stability they strive for, in the only form it is granted — a place among the fossils...

Wyndham would revisit the idea of an awakening superior generation in 1957’s *The Midwich Cuckoos*, filmed in 1960 by Wolf Rilla as *Village of the Damned*. *The Midwich Cuckoos*

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features another group of children with superpowers, the result of the mysterious visitation in an English village of a silver spaceship, which renders all inhabitants unconscious for a full day and leaves all fertile women pregnant. Here, Wyndham is again inflicting otherworldly intruders on an ordinary setting. As before, any ‘cosiness’ here exists only to be overturned; if *Triffids* charts the violent end of a decadent metropolis, then *Midwich* asserts that neither can any country idyll shelter humans from the struggle to survive.

In *Midwich*, the children born from the visitation mature unnaturally fast, are identical in appearance, and are all telepathically linked. Eventually they abandon the homes of their adoptive parents for a school run by the Ministry of Defence. For the most part, the children, like the triffids, remain silent about their motivations and their goals. However, a series of increasingly violent encounters with the villagers, in which the children telepathically force their attackers to turn their weapons on themselves, precipitates a final confrontation. The novel reveals the existence of other villages with similar children; the Soviet Union has preemptively destroyed its own brood when it became apparent that the children’s powers were too much for it to control. The Midwich children state quite plainly that the divide between them and humanity must ultimately grow into a full-blown war for survival. The children are a vulnerable minority now, but they declare with confidence that the weaknesses of liberal democracy will ensure their safety until they can mature.

The children claim that, unlike with the Soviets, the Western survival instinct has been ‘deeply submerged by convention’, as countries such as Britain labour under ‘the inconvenience […] of the idea that the State exists to serve the individuals who compose it’.\(^{17}\) One of the children states plainly, ‘[a]s a securely dominant species you could afford to lose touch with reality, and amuse yourselves with abstractions.’\(^{18}\) Here is an even less generous conception of Western society than the shuffling hordes of carnivorous triffids: the establishment of democracy is analogous to the overdeveloped antlers of the Irish Elk, an evolutionary embellishment that sentences its owners to extinction when conditions change. The democratic citizen is simply declared an *unnatural* being. As one of the Midwich children says,

> This is not a civilized matter […] it is a very primitive matter. If we exist, we shall dominate you — that is clear and inevitable. Will you agree to be superseded, and start on the way to extinction without a struggle? I do not think you are decadent enough for that. And then, politically, the question is:


Can any State, however tolerant, afford to harbour an increasingly powerful minority which it has no power to control? Obviously the answer is again, no.\(^{19}\)

As antagonists, the children occupy the same space as the triffids, an adversary that the mass society cannot conceptualise. The children, like the triffids, turn from inscrutable to hostile when it becomes apparent that their survival interest mutually opposes humankind’s. The essential dilemma of *The Midwich Cuckoos*, like Wyndham’s other works, is whether the characters will become conscious that society’s values and beliefs have been mooted by ‘an elemental struggle […] grim, primeval danger’.\(^{20}\) When this realisation comes, the solution becomes obvious. The children’s schoolteacher takes it upon himself to address the threat to humankind without sacrificing any villagers — he visits the children under the pretence of showing them a film, and blows up the school with a concealed bomb. If this is an act of heroism, it is also a final capitulation to the children’s logic.

*The Midwich Cuckoos* thus outlines in explicit terms a very real presage of conflict that runs throughout Wyndham’s works. *Midwich* was released in 1957, on the eve of a decade of powerful social change across Europe and America. Wyndham, predicting the end of a prevailing postwar social rigidity, introduces a group of enormously powerful telepathic children, who share a knowledge or ‘culture’ among themselves that is inaccessible to the adults, who look and act much older than their biological age, and who can brush aside any discipline that their adults attempt to impose. In a context of parents rearing children who had never known war, hunger, or compromise, and who were better educated, healthier, and more confident than the previous generation, *The Midwich Cuckoos* frames the coming decade of struggles and liberation movements as a generation gap, in which parents have developed a terror of their children. In addition, the depiction of a violent struggle against these children also foreshadows the brutality and the nihilism of the 1960s; the assassinations of political leaders; the wars and civil wars of newly-independent colonies; the measures taken by governments to retain their power and silence dissent; all of the factors of the competition for social domination. Wyndham’s conclusion that the strongest will survive unfolds here in the framing of the violence and upheaval of the immediate future as the kernel of truth within the fantasy of peace and stability sought by the survivors of the Second World War.

At such an historical moment, Wyndham claims that chaos and violence offer a chance for humanity to regroup and to reassert its strongest elements. The lack of sympathy

\(^{19}\) Wyndham, *Midwich Cuckoos*, pp. 198–99.

for the death of the weak renders Wyndham’s work highly resistant to the accusation that it narrates vague laments for law and order, as implied by the ‘cosy catastrophe’ label. Yet ‘strength’ here takes the form of an adaptive grace, rather than any superior force or technical mastery. That is, real power consists of the ability to adjust to sudden and dramatic changes in circumstances; Wyndham’s stories fit the profile of cosy catastrophe only in that their protagonists are naturally gifted. When his characters warn against being ‘blunted by rationality’, Wyndham is arguing that humans’ civilising force also closes the mind to the full possibilities of existence.\(^{21}\) The narrator of *The Midwich Cuckoos* tells himself,

[Y]ou cannot protest or argue these Children and their qualities out of existence. And since they do exist, there must be some explanation of that existence. None of your accepted views explain it. Therefore, that explanation is going to be found, however uncomfortable it may be for you, in views that you do not at present accept.\(^{22}\)

The unfailing target in these novels, then, is not so much the rationalist conviction that humanity possesses a method for submitting the universe to its will. Instead the focus of Wyndham’s attack is the unconscious acceptance that this method has already been applied, that its work has already been done, and that the universe is not just knowable but is already known. Wyndham’s target is not so much hubris as it is complacency. His vision is a direct challenge to the invitations of organisation society, what the cultural critic Lewis Mumford described as the ‘magnificent bribe’ of a life of material comforts in exchange for a ‘homogenized and equalized’ existence.\(^{23}\) Nowhere does Wyndham advocate a return to nature as such; in fact, he ridicules such primitivism in his short story ‘The Wheel’, for example.\(^{24}\) Instead he argues for the recognition of what is inescapably ‘natural’ in humankind: that is, the will to survive.

**Conclusion**

Wyndham offers a vision of civilisational assurances unravelling, and of individuals flourishing among the ruins of a carefully constructed hierarchy, as an invitation for readers to distance themselves from organisational thinking altogether. When Bill Masen attributes humanity’s success not to the brain but to the eyes — ‘[h]is civilisation, all that he had


achieved or might achieve, hung upon his ability to perceive that range of vibrations from red to violet. Without that, he was lost. I saw for a moment the true tenuousness of his hold on his power’ (p. 94) — Masen is also speaking, in miniature, of the entire human condition. Instead of what could be called the ‘organisation’ view of humankind, in which the co-operation of the body’s constituent parts leads to an overall achievement, Masen places this success on one part, the ‘visionary’, working all the time. The danger inherent in the construction of this success, the ‘true tenuousness’ of it, means that no entity can claim dominance except in relation to its ability to adapt, a process that changes the entity from within.

Wyndham’s discomfort with the strictures of science fiction, as well as his dismissal by critics who misread his books as ‘cosy catastrophes’, suggest that he was unable to prevail upon a time enamoured with ideas that differed so significantly from his own. The characteristic post-war persona was firmly embedded in organisations and hierarchies, and was far from the figure of the evolutionary survivalist. Here too Wyndham follows in the path forged by his great influence Wells, who loudly complained in his lifetime of being ignored as a social thinker, and who threatened that his epitaph would ‘manifestly have to be: “I told you so. You damned fools”’ (emphasis in original).  

Even so, Wyndham’s books have a predictive power all their own: not only in the anticipation of a violent social conflict just upon the horizon, but also in the reconceptualisation of the future as a place not of new things but of changed perceptions.

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Diabolical Crossings: Generic Transitions Between the Gothic and the Sensational in Dacre and Alcott

Elena Emma Sottilotta

To be a writer of fiction, for a woman, has never been a totally respectable occupation. Let her write a gentle and sensitive poem or so, perhaps [...] But to let the imagination fly is to allow it to fly into unwarrantable places, to contemplate the uncontemplatable.

−Fay Weldon¹

Although it has long been suggested that the gothic novel gave way to the Sensation novel, such a statement is not convincing if it is not supported by concrete literary examples. This article aims to identify that connection between the gothic and the Sensation genres through a comparative analysis of recurrent literary themes and tropes in Charlotte Dacre’s British gothic novel Zofloya; or The Moor (1806) and Louisa May Alcott’s American Sensation novel A Long Fatal Love Chase (1866). In order to trace the evolution of one genre into the other, this essay examines their interchangeable characteristics in Zofloya, a marginal and atypical female-gothic work, and in Chase, an exemplary but rejected work of Sensation fiction. Indeed, Zofloya and Chase pose problems of genre categorisation: although both works fulfilled readerly expectations of their genres, they also simultaneously transcended their respective generic boundaries.

In his essay on the Sensation novel, Patrick Brantlinger makes reference to Derrida’s theory on genre, stating,

Jacques Derrida argues that it may be ‘impossible not to mix genres’ because ‘lodged within the heart of the law of [genre] itself [is] a law of impurity or a principle of contamination’. Derrida suggests that the peculiar mark or structural feature that defines any genre can never belong exclusively to that genre but always falls partly outside it.²


The comparative analysis of Zofloya and Chase will demonstrate how ‘impossible’ genre purity is. By exploring convergences and dissimilarities between these two novels, it becomes clear that Zofloya actually contains some of the elements of the Sensation novel, acting as a sort of precursor of this genre, while, on the other hand, Chase features typical residual gothic elements, inscribing itself in the distinctively British literary tradition of this genre. Indeed, both Dacre and Alcott dealt with Sensational topics, but using the gothic mode, ‘combining the journalistic and the fantastic, the domestic and the exotic, realism and melodrama’. As such, Zofloya and Chase can consequently be considered as paragons of the ‘generic hybridity’ postulated by Lyn Pykett. The concept of ‘hybridity’, traditionally drawn from biological and evolutionary studies, in recent years has acquired a wide popularity in the field of genre theory, since it allows the various elements that contribute to the definition of a literary work to be embraced and taken into consideration, rather than simply classifying it into a single rigid frame. Bearing this in mind, the term ‘hybrid’ seems particularly appropriate if applied to the ‘strange cases’ of Zofloya and Chase. The ‘premonitory dreams’, the ‘hallucinatory or uncanny scenes’, the ‘depiction of extreme emotional states, such as hysteria, jealousy, sexual obsession’, the ‘representation of madness and other forms of social or sexual transgression or deviance’, are all components that Pykett described as characteristic of the Sensation novel, which can be extensively traced in the gothic novel Zofloya. Similarly, Chase contains traces of the gothic romance, marked by ‘a sense of excess and hysteria, of events escaping from their ordinary temporal bounds’.

In both literary works under consideration, the collapse of genre as a shaping principle determines a series of textual transgressions which go hand in hand with a transgressive representation of femininity. Consequently, this article has a double focus on genre and gender: the comparison between the two genres needs to be carried out through a gender perspective, since both gothic and Sensation novels have been regarded as feminine and consequently minor genres, set aside from the mainstream fiction of their time. The first section is therefore devoted to the exploration of the generic crossings between these two novels, while, in the second section, the focus shifts to a close reading of Zofloya’s and

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Chase’s female protagonists. As will be shown, Victoria, presumably the main character of the gothic novel Zofloya, is actually an exemplary Sensational heroine. Likewise, Rosamond is a modernisation of the female-gothic ‘damsel in distress’. Their transgressiveness not only reflects the novels’ deviation from their respective genres but also functions as a critique of patriarchal power.

What is Sensational about Zofloya and What is Gothic about A Long Fatal Love Chase?\(^8\)

With Zofloya and Chase, Charlotte Dacre (1771?–1825) and Louisa May Alcott (1832–1888) certainly meant to shock, amaze, and entertain their audiences. In this sense, both works can be considered as escapist literature, although this does not exclude the writers’ involvement with contemporary cultural and social issues. Despite being separated by a geo-cultural and chronological gap, Dacre’s and Alcott’s novels function as relevant examples of the influence of gothic fiction on the evolution of Sensation fiction. The techniques they employ to convey suspense and mystery throughout the novels, the twist and turns of their plots, the overtly melodramatic scenes, the excessiveness that pervades the depictions of their transgressive heroines and their spiteful demon lovers, are all elements linked to the gothic and Sensation fiction, genres which are interlaced and, at times, impossible to separate.\(^9\) As Pykett has observed,

Gothic and other women’s genres of the eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries offered a useful model for re-reading the women’s sensation novel which, like the Gothic, reworks the conventions and the assumptions of the domestic novel — ‘driving women to the importance of coping with enforced confinement and the paranoid fear it generates.’\(^10\)

Indeed, by drawing on the generic features of the two novels, it becomes evident, not only that each novel contains traces of the other’s genre, but also that both works share a preoccupation with the subordinate and oppressive condition of women in the nineteenth century. Gothic fiction, in the words of Susanne Becker, ‘because of its instant popularity with women both as writers and as readers, […] was early on seen as part of female culture

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\(^9\) As the close reading of the female characters in the second section will disclose, both Victoria and Rosamond exercise their transgression in an excessive way. The notions of ‘excess’ and ‘transgression’, as theorised by Susanne Becker in Gothic Forms of Feminine Fictions (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), pp. 21−40, effectively delineates their fictional development.

and as a “women’s genre”

Similarly, Sensation fiction, as Pykett has remarked, ‘was perceived as a feminine phenomenon [...]’

Although it was received as a spontaneous phenomenon by its contemporaries, ‘a new kind of fiction which appeared from nowhere’, the Sensation novel was in fact the result of a long evolutionary process, a reworking of themes approached by the gothic and other genres in which women engaged their writing.

It is certainly not a coincidence that both Dacre and Alcott used a pseudonym to sign their own works: Dacre resorted to ‘Rosa Matilda’, a sort of tribute to her literary source of inspiration, the femme fatale of Matthew Lewis’s The Monk; Alcott submitted, but never published, her novel under the name ‘A. M. Barnard’, a nom de plume which she had used to sign her previous gothic thrillers. The widespread stratagem of publishing anonymously or under a pseudonym allowed these and many other nineteenth-century women writers to give vent to their creative imagination, without succumbing to the anger of a male critic, who may have subjected them to censorship and public disapproval.

In spite of their anonymity, however, Dacre and Alcott were not exempted from this exposure. In 1806, Dacre was at the heart of a minor scandal that was stirring in the literary world of the time, following the publication of Zofloya, which critics called ‘an exhibition of wantonness of harlotry’. Sixty years later, in 1866, on the other side of the Atlantic, Alcott’s editor rejected Chase and prevented it from being published, ‘because it was too long & too sensational’. Alcott wrote this novel two years before the publication of her most renowned literary accomplishment, Little Women (1868), revealing her double identity as a writer. However, Chase did not meet the same good fortune as her masterpiece, and it did not make its appearance on the literary scene until 1995.

Zofloya, a gothic novel set in fifteenth-century Italy, narrates the story of Victoria, a duplicitous and transgressive woman, and charts her inner corruption, in a gradual escalation towards the darkest transgression of all, a pact with the Devil — here masked as Zofloya, a ‘Moorish’ servant — which leads to her final annihilation. Chase revolves around the relationship between Rosamond, an ambitious girl who lives on a remote island in England.

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with her grandfather, and Tempest, a wicked man who closely resembles Mephistopheles himself, who deceives her and then chases her across Europe, a chase which will end only with Rosamond’s death. The connection between these two works is reinforced by the presence of common extra- and intra-textual elements, which provide further evidence of the bond between the genres within which the writers worked. Both Dacre’s and Alcott’s novels dealt with sensational themes, which, as previously mentioned, in Dacre’s case provoked a literary controversy, while in Alcott’s case it determined the novel’s rejection, which remained unpublished in her time. Moreover, both narratives partake of gothic excesses, especially in relation to the vicissitudes of their atypical female characters; and both their novels are haunted by demon lovers, wicked male figures who subjugate, manipulate, and ultimately destroy their female victims.

Undeniably, in Zofloya and in Chase, love involves what is quite literally a pact with the Devil. Alcott, an admirer of Goethe, explores the theme of the demonisation of love, sharing with Dacre the interest in representing evil in its shape-shifting forms, in such a blatant way that she has been characterised as ‘a Mephistopheles sensation writer’ and Zofloya as a ‘dark Faustian romance’.\(^{16}\) In Chase, Tempest materialises out of nowhere after the resounding utterance of Rosamond’s ‘most intense desire’: ‘I’d gladly sell my soul to Satan for a year of freedom.’\(^{17}\) From the very beginning of their infatuation, Tempest simultaneously acts as the saviour of Rosamond, freeing her from her ‘dreary’ enclosure, and as her oppressor, becoming himself her ‘cage’.\(^{18}\) Tempest is initially depicted as ‘a man past thirty, tall and powerful, with peculiar eyes and a scar across the forehead’.\(^{19}\) His face is ‘menacing’ and ‘inscrutable’, his eyes ‘magnificent’, and his ‘mouth […] betray[s] a ruthless nature’.\(^{20}\) This physical description aims to enhance the darkness that surrounds this character, who, very curiously, ‘in the fitful light of the dusky hall’, so closely resembles the portrait of Mephistopheles that, by pure chance, hangs on a wall.\(^{21}\) The references to his diabolical nature recur throughout the novel: not only does he bear a most striking resemblance to Mephistopheles, but he is often addressed (and even addresses himself) as the

17 Alcott, p. 1.
19 Alcott, p. 3.
20 Alcott, pp. 5, 12.
21 Alcott, p. 5.
‘Evil One’, ‘Satan’, a wicked creature that ‘lead[s] the life of the Wandering Jew’.\textsuperscript{22} The writer charges Tempest with further gothic and supernatural overtones, prolonging her efforts to imbue Tempest’s figure with mystery. As Stephen King has commented, ‘Tempest is reticent about his past; he is magnetic and moody by turns, in the best Heathcliff tradition. He’s also a liar, but Rose is too fascinated — and too sexually attracted, Alcott hints — to care.’\textsuperscript{23}

Tempest shares with Dacre’s Zofloya the ability to manipulate and ‘passively’ cause death and destruction, a trait that is central to both novels and fatal to both heroines. Curiously, Tempest has the ability to appear every time Rosamond thinks about him, even ‘behind the grating’ of the confessional in the convent where she has taken refuge.\textsuperscript{24} Yet, rather than extending these ominous and startling appearances into the realm of the supernatural, Alcott always provides a plausible explanation for them, referring to the real vicissitudes that lead Tempest to make those fortuitous appearances. In other words, despite Alcott’s constant allusions to Tempest’s manipulative, sinister, wicked nature, she ultimately presents the ‘Faustian motif’ by suggestion only. In the end, unlike Dacre’s Zofloya, her anti-hero remains ‘simply a man without conscience’.\textsuperscript{25} On the one hand, this difference corresponds to a restriction put in place by the Sensation novel, set as it is in contemporary times, which consequently precludes a full triumph of the imagination, in contrast with the detached gothic novel set in the fifteenth century, where anything can happen. On the other hand, this limitation imposed upon the supernatural in the novel inevitably recalls the Radcliffian tradition of the ‘supernatural explained’, conventionally employed by women writing gothic fiction, in order to make their works less transgressive and more acceptable.\textsuperscript{26}

Moreover, Zofloya seems to have the power to read Victoria’s thoughts. However, unlike Alcott, Dacre stresses Zofloya’s supernatural ability: ‘your very thoughts have power to attract me’, says Zofloya to Victoria.\textsuperscript{27} Alcott’s timid diabolical allusions to Tempest’s diabolical nature do not stand comparison with the Moor, whose full satanic transformation is explicitly rendered within the plot by Dacre. Zofloya makes his first appearance in Victoria’s dreams, and not until the second half of the novel which bears his name, a title which

\textsuperscript{22} Alcott, p. 13.
\textsuperscript{24} Alcott, p. 169.
\textsuperscript{25} Alcott, p. 87.
\textsuperscript{27} Dacre, p. 181.
certainly aims to underline the importance of this character and creates expectation in the reader. His startling entrance in an oneiric dimension is an indication of the novel’s refusal to shy away from supernatural effects. His Moorish nature is immediately hyperbolised, with a strong emphasis on his ‘noble and majestic form’. As such, Zofloya’s exotic features, if compared with those of Tempest, configure themselves as part of his more outré, less easily explained characterisation. The orientalised ‘commanding’ figure of the extravagant Moor attracts Victoria’s curiosity; she is overtaken by this princely figure, unable to differentiate her excitement from fear, terror, and passion.

Zofloya, challenging the common perception of the female author as oriented toward a sense of virtue and morality, rejects the passivity of Ann Radcliffe’s heroines, opting for an active, ruthless female protagonist, who, as the novel progresses, becomes as diabolical as her demoniac counterpart, a mirror image of her demon lover. Zofloya and Victoria were tailored for each other: she needed him to accomplish her malicious deeds and he needed her, her soul, and her submission as a wife in hell. Zofloya is the perfect element to balance her nymphomaniacl ‘furor of conflicting passions’. She becomes his property precisely because she allowed herself to be manipulated by him: ‘yet hast thou permitted thyself to be led along! — thou hast damned thy soul with unnumbered crimes, rendering thyself, by each, more fully mine.’

Victoria personifies the denial of domesticity and family values. In Hoeveler’s words, she ‘embodies the earlier, uncivilized, aristocratic woman — vain, lustful, libidinously aggressive, actively and openly sexual and violent’. She strives to control, dominate, and exert her influence through sexuality and guile, in such an extreme way that her portrayal has been seen to be anti-feminist by modern critics. Indeed, as Carol M. Davison points out, ‘because of its unique and highly controversial nature’, Zofloya has always provoked ‘diametrically opposed claims’, with responses oscillating between considering it a proto-feminist novel on the one hand, and a misogynist work on the other. However, it may be more fruitful momentarily to set the gender issues to one side, or at least to consider this novel as remote from the Radcliffian tradition as possible, for to restrain it within Ellen Moers’s female-gothic model would be paradoxical and unrewarding.

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28 Dacre, p. 145.
29 Dacre, p. 144.
30 Dacre, p. 254.
32 Davison, p. 34.
disregarding Dacre’s status as a female author would deny the novel’s importance for its documentation of the struggle against patriarchal, preconceived notions of female sexuality. Instead, it is necessary to rethink the concept of female gothic, and to consider it as versatile — in other words, to rethink Zofloya as an unconventional, indeed Sensational, hybrid novel written by a woman, about the incompatibility between different forms of sexuality and a male-oriented society.

It is imperative, however, to clarify what is meant by the presence of elements of the Sensation genre in Zofloya, a novel which evidently precedes the advent of the genre by several decades. One of the main intents of the Sensation novel is to produce a sense of wonder, simultaneously to shock and amaze, to provoke its readers with transgressions against social, political, and religious values. ‘Stand[ing] midway between romanticism and realism, Gothic “mysteries” and modern mysteries’, the Sensation novel brings crimes to the foreground in detailed, journalistic descriptions;\(^\text{34}\) morality is questioned, while virtue dangerously vacillates towards the questionable path of vice; the concept of love is reformulated, as various combinations of bigamous, adulterous, homosexual relationships replace earlier models of courtly love. As Brantlinger observes, ‘[e]ven in those sensation novels whose plots do not hinge upon bigamy, there is a strong interest in sexual irregularities, adultery, forced marriages, and marriages formed under false pretenses’,\(^\text{35}\) in a literary fashion that reflected the rapidly changing patterns of Victorian society.\(^\text{36}\) The term ‘Sensational’ itself conveys the genre’s overt excessiveness. It is within these borders, and not within the paradigm of female gothic, that Dacre placed her novel Zofloya. Although it has been agreed that the novel may be seen as a reworking of Lewis’s The Monk — to the extent that contemporary reviews mention Lewis’s novel as the better effort\(^\text{37}\) — it should be noted that it is in Zofloya that one witnesses depravation as sensational. Indeed, depravation works as a mechanism aimed to disturb and, at the same time, to move the reader to a paroxysm of wonder, an ecstasy of emotions characteristic of a genre that was witnessing its first steps in the literary scene. The role played by writers like Lewis, or even de Sade, in the nineteenth-century literary craze for the shocking Sensational cannot be denied, since both writers most certainly contributed to this process of genre transformation. Yet, it is in Zofloya

\(^{34}\) Brantlinger, p. 3.
\(^{35}\) Brantlinger, p. 6.
\(^{37}\) See Appendix B in Charlotte Dacre, Zofloya; or The Moor, p. 262.
that the metamorphosis from the gothic to the Sensational starts to emerge fully, since the author uses the Sensational as a mechanism to manipulate plot and language in a ‘bombastic’ manner, turning the narrative into a ‘sensational tale of passion, jealousy and murder’.  

It does not seem preposterous or exaggerated to affirm that the label of female gothic can more rightly be applied to Chase than to Zofloya. Understandably categorised as a ‘Sensation novel’ and, eventually, as ‘crime fiction’, Alcott’s Chase clearly configures itself, however, as a homage to British gothic literature. Like her protagonist Rosamond on the boat named ‘Circe’, drifting towards the unknown with her heart full of expectations, in 1866 Alcott set out for a journey in Europe as a companion for an infirm American lady. In her Chase, Alcott revisits her own voyage to Europe, an endless source of inspiration, even a sort of fictional Grand Tour, and her coming back from the old continent with new life experiences, of which autobiographical references can be easily found in Chase. Indeed, so important was Europe to her vision for the novel that Alcott barely explored any theme connected with her American nationality in Chase.

Elaine Showalter stated that nineteenth-century ‘American women’s writing was influenced by the English tradition, but it also transformed and expanded that tradition in terms of its own historical, cultural and racial contexts.’ However, when it comes to the peculiar case of Chase, it is difficult to find traces of any textual reference to an American ‘historical, cultural and racial context.’ One of Alcott’s dearest and most strongly American themes, the Civil War, which ended one year before the book’s composition, finds no place in here. The book is set in Europe, featuring European characters enacting their fates within a non-American mind-set. As a matter of fact, Chase follows a conventionally ‘European’ plot, and an overtly gothic marriage intrigue. The text’s American origins are hinted at only in the depiction of Phillip Tempest, who, reminiscent of Charlotte Brontë’s Rochester in Jane Eyre (1847), is the quintessence of the ideals of freedom and individual independence, brought to their maximum excess. Tempest’s motto, ‘obey no law but one’s will’, implies that he embodies the concept of the self-made man, which was, at the time of the writing of Chase,

41 Showalter, Introduction to Scribbling Women, p. xxxviii.
42 Alcott, p. 8.
already present in the American collective consciousness.\textsuperscript{43} Being a self-made man was synonymous with the ideals of absolute independence and resourcefulness, albeit intended in a very positive sense. Undoubtedly, Tempest is an independent spirit who won riches and glory through hard work and perseverance. Yet, in \textit{Chase}, Alcott goes beyond the simplistic portrayal of a self-made man. Tempest is also deeply sceptical and believes that ‘[t]here is very little real liberty in the world’.\textsuperscript{44} His position is ambivalent, and, on many occasions, it can also be considered as representative of misanthropy, cynicism, and pessimism. His scepticism originates in the combination of two different conceptions of the masculine figure: in his fictional dimension, the character of the Englishman Tempest is the unacknowledged mixture of the American self-made man and the British Byronic hero. As such, the hybrid features that pervade the novel’s genre are reflected in the fictional development of its antagonist, whose resourceful spirit is undermined by his markedly gothic traits.

Tempest’s characterisation is just one example of Alcott’s usage of gothic literary tropes. Alcott’s fascination with the gothic has been cursorily pointed out by recent criticism, especially after the discovery of her double identity as a writer, half-devoted to the portrayal of morally edifying tales for children and girls, while secretly indulging in tales filled with mysterious settings, exoticism, and gothic trickeries. Rostenberg and Stern have affirmed that ‘Alcott might have become the American Mrs. Radcliffe had she not at length been diverted from her gory, gruesome and fascinating course.’\textsuperscript{45} In \textit{Chase}, the ‘sentimental mode’ which marked \textit{Little Women} is distorted by the presence of gothic motifs and atmospheres, resulting in a hybrid mode which bears the distinctive features of the gothic.\textsuperscript{46} The setting is reminiscent of Ann Radcliffe’s isolated landscapes, more Romantic in nature than something from its age. \textit{Chase} begins and ends on an island, remote and removed from the English countryside. This detached setting is one of the reasons why Rosamond feels entrapped by her grandfather, and can also be seen as the reflection of her own fears regarding his dominant nature. The setting is clearly an inter-textual reference to the island where Shakespeare’s \textit{The Tempest} is set, an allusion which is reinforced by the eloquent choice of

\textsuperscript{43} In 1858, Charles Seymour compiled a ‘collection of sixty profiles’ called \textit{Self-Made Men} (see Jim Cullen, ‘Problems and Promises of the Self-Made Myth’, \textit{The Hedgehog Review}, 15.2 (2013), 8–22 (p. 12)). At that time, the concept of the self-made man was also a recurrent theme in the most famous lectures by the African-American writer Frederick Douglass, of whom Alcott’s father ‘was a sincere admirer’ (see John Matteson, \textit{Eden’s Outcasts: A Biography of Louisa May Alcott and her Father} (New York: W.W. Norton, 2010), p. 90).

\textsuperscript{44} Alcott, p. 8.


\textsuperscript{46} Watson, p. 84.
name for Phillip Tempest. This is a primarily gothic location, mysterious and distant from the Massachusetts landscape which was more familiar to Alcott. The atmosphere around the island is equally awe-inspiring. From the outset the island is surrounded by a gathering storm, the sky described as ‘red’, with whispers of wind and flashes of lightning completing the picture.  

Further on in the novel an element of gothic mystery is added. Rosamond finds a grave which she initially believes to be the grave of Ippolito, the disguised son of Tempest. Alcott’s style suddenly becomes contrived, suspenseful:

Till midnight she remained quiet, then, anxious to profit by the moon, she nerved herself to the task and like a shadow crept through the silent house, glided along the dusky paths and struck away toward the distant olive grove. […] Nothing was stirring but the bats, no sound broke the hush but a late nightingale mourning musically from the rosy coverts of Valrosa.  

In the moment leading to the grave’s discovery, Rosamond plays the female-gothic heroine by feeling like ‘a hunted deer’ in a place described as ‘shadowy and still’, in a manner similar to the stereotypical ‘damsel in distress’, threatened by a male figure who should represent her shelter but, instead, symbolises her oppression. This theme recalls the treatment of the female figure in gothic classics like *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794). Furthermore, Rosamond’s discovery of the grave is made possible by the light of the moon, which cuts ‘through the swaying branches’ and illuminates it. The moon here acts as a curtain which, when opened, reveals the ghastly presence of an uncanny, mysterious element in the novel, a ‘low mound’ which is, in fact, a ‘new-made grave’. Finally, Rosamond releases a ‘cry of terror’ and experiences a ‘moment of horror’ (emphasis added), fully re-enacting the typical actions of a female-gothic heroine. As this suggests, location is central to the gothicisation of the protagonist. The delineation of the character in relation to the setting of the novel which has been examined so far ultimately contributes to the argument that Alcott borrows

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47 Alcott, p. 3.
48 Alcott, p. 107.
49 Alcott, p. 107. The full quotation reads: ‘Shadowy and still was the place as with a beating heart she passed through it, looking keenly about her. A sudden sound of footsteps made her start and spring away into the thick undergrowth, there to crouch like a hunted deer.’
50 Alcott, p. 108.
51 Alcott, p. 108.
from the gothic tradition, both in terms of literary tropes, writing style, and gender representation, an aspect which will be further explored in the next section.

From ‘hunted deers’ to ‘slumbering lions’: Portraits of Atypical Female Characters

As previously mentioned, the interchangeability of gothic and Sensational as genres in Dacre and Alcott’s works can be identified just as effectively through a close reading of their atypical female characters. Dacre’s Victoria and Alcott’s Rosamond both challenge classical representations of women: the Romantic ideal of the guiltless virginal maid, which includes the stereotype of the female-gothic ‘damsel in distress’, and the Victorian ideal of the ‘angel in the house’, the embodiment of an ‘innocent and unchallenging womanhood’. In *Chase*, the woman becomes the ground upon which the male figures, who are naturally predisposed to be deceitful, persecuting, and aggressive, exert their thirst for power. In *Zofloya*, the perspective is reversed: it is actually the female thirst for power that is depicted as predisposed to deception, persecution, and aggression. Yet both Rosamond and Victoria’s natures and behaviour can be defined as transgressive, if one considers Becker’s ‘twofold notion of “transgression”’:

> On the one hand, [transgression] refers to going beyond the norm — thus drawing attention to its limitations. On the other, it refers to an unknown world beyond these limitations, often referred to in (pejorative) ‘feminine’ terms like chaos, fantasy and dream.\(^{54}\)

Rosamond faces the limitations of the norm, due to her substantially fragile and virtuous nature, and partially due to a certain restriction imposed by the Sensation genre, while Victoria explores the ‘world beyond these limitations’.\(^{55}\) Indeed, Victoria is an active character who behaves transgressively, stepping outside the realm of the believable, partially because *Zofloya*, as a gothic novel set in the fifteenth century, indulges in certain liberties (two examples being the novel’s historical distancing and the fantastical events which occur in it) that would be implausible in a more realistic genre. It makes perfect sense, then, that the scope of transgression in *Zofloya*, particularly in the case of Victoria, goes beyond the border, regarding limitations as mere obstacles to a full triumph of the imagination. Its detached setting both in time and place allows for a transposition of the unreal into the real, a

\(^{53}\) Brantlinger, p. 12.
\(^{54}\) Becker, p. 39.
\(^{55}\) Becker, p. 39.
projection of ‘chaos, fantasy and dream’ into a world that is unfamiliar to the reader.\textsuperscript{56} Thus, the presence of the supernatural in the novel is entirely justified, acting as a transgression in a transgressive text itself. On the contrary, \textit{Chase} does not require a historical detachment from the reader’s reality, since it is set in contemporary times. The supernatural in a familiar world would be too unbelievable, which is why in \textit{Chase} its presence is dimmed, reduced to an afterimage, an insinuation that is never made fully concrete. As a result, the scope of transgression is lessened, leading Rosamond to break or bend the ‘norm’, but only within specific boundaries. Indeed, in attempting to run away from Tempest, she becomes a disheartened shadow of herself. Her condition reveals an unhealthy dependence on her oppressor, in a twisted game of attractions which culminates with her own death.

If Victoria’s transgression is unquestionable, and undoubtedly related to Becker’s latter notion of the term, Rosamond’s, although it fits under the former definition, is slightly less clear and needs to be located in its intra-textual context. As previously indicated, in several passages of the novel, Rosamond resembles a conventional female-gothic heroine, the stereotypical ‘hunted deer’.\textsuperscript{57} As Stern notes, it is clear that Alcott ‘dipped from time to time in the gore of the Gothic novel, whose ruined abbeys and frowning castles provided her with background touches, […] and whose unholy themes introduced her to pacts with the devil’.\textsuperscript{58} Rosamond mistakenly, and fatally, misinterprets Tempest as the way to release herself from a sad and lonely life, while unconsciously rushing towards her own death. Between this fatal meeting and her tragic end, a relentless sequence of adventures occupies the variegated scenes of the novel, which makes perfectly understandable why Stephen King defined it as ‘a wonderful entertainment’ and Christine Doyle as ‘an unabashed page-turner’.\textsuperscript{59} Rosamond’s adventures can be rightly linked to the ‘traveling heroinism’ that Moers theorises about Radcliffe’s heroines, through which ‘the Gothic novel became a feminine substitute for the \textit{picaresque}, where heroines could enjoy all the adventures and alarms that masculine heroes had long experienced, far from home, in fiction’ (emphasis added).\textsuperscript{60} Indeed, \textit{Chase} becomes ‘picaresque’ in the succession of events that repeat themselves \textit{ad infinitum}, in this ‘cat and mouse’ chase: she hides and disguises herself, he finds her, she runs away; she cloaks herself

\textsuperscript{56} Becker, p. 39.
\textsuperscript{57} Alcott, p. 107.
\textsuperscript{58} Rostenberg and Stern, p. 96.
again under a different identity, he tracks her down once more; and so on, until the catastrophic conclusion of her final attempt to escape.

From the very first pages, this ending has been prepared for, in that Rosamond is portrayed as a naive and melodramatic figure: often addressed as a child throughout the novel, she is an orphan who lives with her heartless and uncaring grandfather. While Emily in Radcliffe’s *The Mysteries of Udolpho* can always rely on the memory of her father’s benevolent and helpful guidance, Rosamond differs from her in that she lacks a positive role model. The absence of a family structure renders Rosamond the perfect prey of the ‘hunting’ instincts of Tempest. Like the overtly ironic depiction of the heroine of Jane Austen’s *Northanger Abbey* (1818), she often indulges in readings in which ‘the sinners are always more interesting than the saints’.\(^\text{61}\) Her ideas, as she will later explain, all come ‘out of books’, since she has ‘nothing to do but read’.\(^\text{62}\) As a result, she is well disposed to see in Tempest that ‘new hero who had come to play a part in the romance of her life’.\(^\text{63}\) Unfortunately, her expectations of a life marked by pleasures and happiness will be disappointed, as soon as she discovers the deceitful plan of Tempest: in a typical bigamous twist, which often recurs in the Sensation novels by Braddon and Collins, it is revealed that he already has a wife and a son.\(^\text{64}\) His marriage with Rosamond was, in fact, false and consequently their potential love story flows into a much darker, gothic plot.

Rosamond might, therefore, seem to be a weak and vulnerable woman, victim of doomed circumstances and of her own ingenuity. Yet her perseverance in escaping from Tempest, once she becomes aware of his treachery, and her ability to take advantage of the situations she will consecutively face, disguising herself in the most improbable costumes, complicate this simplistic judgement. As Blackford comments,

> The narrator’s representation of Rosamond results in an uneasy paradox. Rose is simultaneously a swashbuckling woman of the world, donning various disguises and even faking her own death, and a whiny child pleading for protection from various characters.\(^\text{65}\)

The textual, generic transgression, and the ensuing hybrid dimension of the novel, corresponds to the transgression of its female protagonist, as the former is intrinsically related

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\(^{61}\) Alcott, p. 9.  
\(^{63}\) Alcott, p. 17.  
\(^{65}\) Blackford, p. 5.
to the fictional development of the latter. As such, Rosamond is a hybrid character, a mixture of gothic and Sensational heroine. The crucial moments of this ‘love chase’ demonstrate that she is a tenacious, strong-willed woman, ready to fight for her own freedom. If, on the one hand, it is true that she is ‘a circulated object [...] gambled away in a vicious game of patriarchal exchange’; on the other, it cannot be denied that she plays the part of an ‘active heroine [who] takes daring walks on parapets, climbs across rooftops, cuts her hair and disguises herself as a boy, all to escape her pursuer’: Yet her outbursts of independence are undermined by her feelings for Tempest, feelings which she is ultimately unable to repress.

The demon lover’s humanised nature allows for a pathological distortion of love: Rosamond’s submission is counterbalanced by Phillip’s obsession. Despite the fact that Rosamond is completely aware of his ‘strong influence [and] unprincipled nature’, she cannot but love him. It then makes perfect sense to interpret her, as Blackford does, as ‘a prime example of the masochistic impulse that Michelle Massé traces in Gothic literature’. However, Massé states that, ‘[s]ealed within her enclosed space, [the subordinated heroine] nonetheless wants to act, speak, and be recognized as a subject.’ Interestingly, Rosamond is able to be ‘recognized as a subject’ only when she performs a part, when she becomes someone else, in a paradoxical split of identities, which includes, in one of Alcott’s most comical touches, a nun. Rosamond’s escape from her enclosure, the island where she lives with her grandfather, will eventually lead her to another, even worse ‘enclosed space’, a madhouse, a literary inter-textual reference to Brontë’s Bertha Mason. Tempest allows Rosamond to leave the asylum only on the condition that she will re-join him for the rest of her existence. She is unable to stand the obligatory tension between madness and submission. Her imprisonment in the asylum precedes the ultimate stage of the demonisation of love: in the end Tempest kills Rosamond, though unintentionally, during the last of her many attempts to flee from him. ‘Like a fallen spirit shut out from eternal life’, Tempest, once he has realised his mistake, departs from his miserable earthly life, committing suicide and pronouncing the final resounding words, while holding his dead Rosa: ‘Mine first — mine last — mine even in the grave!’

66 Blackford, p. 21.
67 Doyle, p. 216.
68 Alcott, p. 182.
69 Blackford, p. 5.
71 These controversial strategies of disguise are fairly typical of Alcott. Her novella Behind a Mask, or Woman’s Power, also published in 1866 under the pseudonym of A. M. Barnard, revolves around this theme.
72 Alcott, p. 346.
Rosamond’s death might be interpreted as the conclusive element in the ‘process of liberation’ that covers the entire novel. In the act of dying, she is finally freeing herself from Tempest’s obsessed pursuit. Her death is also, inadvertently, an act of destruction: by dying, she kills her demon lover, whose existence is meaningless without her. Yet, examining the novel as a whole, and reflecting specifically on the novel’s beginning, Rosamond’s death can also be considered part of an inevitable ‘process of imprisonment’ that began with her first encounter with Tempest and ended with her melodramatic demise. She is punished for repudiating her virtue and accepting vice: death is connected with her shameful original wish, acting both as a liberating and punishing force.

Gorsky, reflecting on the social function of the woman in the nineteenth century, affirms that ‘the archetypal good woman starts as a virtuous, obedient daughter and ends as a submissive wife and nurturing mother’.  

Rosamond, as an orphan and as the ward of an unsympathetic, older man, is not able to play the first role, and refuses to play the second, by acting as a transgressive character. Her transgression, though, is purer and nobler than Victoria’s. It is not a transgression for transgression’s sake, but it rather configures itself as the ultimate effort to survive against the continuous attempts at subjugation carried out by Tempest.

The evident contrast between Alcott’s Rosamond and Dacre’s Victoria fortifies the idea that, in the gothic heroine, or anti-heroine, duplicity is a way for the woman to fight against her socially prescribed roles, a way that may be used as a defence mechanism or, indeed, as a weapon. Victoria, being ‘sexually promiscuous, passionately aggressive, openly adulterous’, proves that a female-gothic anti-heroine can assume the stage as the main character and overcome, and even murder, the stereotypical heroine, symbolised by her ‘domesticated’ double, Lilla.  

Admittedly, this opposition between the good heroine and her evil counterpart already existed in gothic literary classics such as Radcliffe’s A Sicilian Romance and The Mysteries of Udolpho, where ‘an allegorical presentation of the good and evil impulses of the soul by means of separate characters’ can be found. However, as Adriana Craciun states in her introduction to the novel, typically, the evil counterparts were nothing but ‘secondary characters, dark doubles of the central heroines’. In Zofloya, by contrast, the classical heroine/villainess dichotomy is reversed. The novel’s female

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74 Hoeveler, ‘Charlotte Dacre’s Zofloya’, p. 198.
75 DeLamotte, p. 108.
76 Craciun, p. 11.
protagonist manipulates, cheats, disguises herself as a pure, virginal maid, murders, and lies. Her behaviour contrasts with that of the ‘embattled heroine’ that Craciun mentions as characteristic of Radcliffe, for it suggests an alternative view of the concept of woman.\textsuperscript{77} Lilla, with her ‘angelic countenance, slightly suffused with the palest hue of the virgin rose’, is both an acknowledgement of the stereotyped Radcliffian female-gothic heroine and a denial of the necessity of such a figure, since it proves that there are other models of behaviour open to fictional heroines.\textsuperscript{78} Her death therefore has a double meaning: on the one hand, Victoria murders Lilla because she represents what Victoria herself cannot be, that is, a subservient, virginal, womanly heroine; on the other hand, Victoria murders her because Lilla represents what she must not be, which is ‘the ultrafeminine ideal’, a mere object at the hands of men.\textsuperscript{79}

While Victoria is an anti-heroine in the gothic mode, she is, at the same time, therefore, a Sensational heroine, because she does not conform to an existence as a helpless woman, although her upbringing was dedicated to the nurturing of this idea. After her mother Laurina abandoned him to pursue her adulterous passion with Count Ardolph, her father, the Marchese, created in Victoria the virginal image of an idol. Even though he recognises ‘the wrong bias of her character’, the Marchese places Victoria on a pedestal and worships her, convincing himself that the problem will be fixed with time.\textsuperscript{80} This self-persuasion allows for the failure in Victoria’s education to reach its highest point, while this idolisation is essential to the birth of evil in her heart. In fact, Victoria sees, in the Marchese’s idolisation, something to disobey, something to disagree with; something, in sum, to transgress. She becomes the opposite of an idol as the story proceeds, and her gradual descent into the demoniacal world of transgression moulds her into an androgynous figure. In this metamorphosis from ‘beautiful and accomplished as an angel’ to one who is ‘proud, haughty […], of a wild, ardent and irrepressible spirit’ can be noticed not only the ‘language of excess, extravagant, ornate, embellished, [that] knew no bounds’ that would be attributed, in the mid-nineteenth century, to Sensation novels, but also a treatment of the female body that is, in itself, excessive.\textsuperscript{81}

As Craciun observes in her discourse on ‘corporeal deformation’ in \textit{Fatal Women of Romanticism}, Victoria’s body suffers mutations throughout the novel: at fifteen, she is described as a woman of angelic beauty; years later, she becomes more masculine, and

\textsuperscript{77} Craciun, p. 11.
\textsuperscript{78} Dacre, p. 144.
\textsuperscript{80} Dacre, p. 48.
\textsuperscript{81} Dacre, p. 40; and Pykett, \textit{The Nineteenth-Century Sensation Novel: Second Edition}, p. 70.
conforms less closely to the stereotyped ideal of the female body.\(^{82}\) It is implied that she cannot conform physically to the shape of a feminine woman, if she indulges in a behaviour that is anything but feminine. And the more transgressive Victoria grows, the less feminine is the gothic mode, and the closer it resembles the male gothic of Lewis. In this process of transgression and transformation, the female gothic disappears, abandoning the narrative entirely by the end of the novel, where the succession of murders, suicides, and deceptions becomes too great to be contained within it.

Victoria, as a character, also surpasses gender expectations, in that she refuses to be controlled or, indeed, to control a single subject. The process of transgression as a result of the need to overcome idolisation continues in Victoria’s relationship with Conte Berenza, albeit reframed. Their relationship begins with Victoria as the ‘oppressed’ and Berenza as the ‘oppressor’. His dominant ‘fierté’ is joined by an impulsive need to discipline Victoria’s faults. Yet his intent is revealed to be counter-productive.\(^{83}\) To subdue this oppression, Victoria has to reconsider her instruments of power. Once she becomes in control of the relationship, she starts regarding Berenza as a mere source of gratification: she lets herself be courted, willingly becoming the object of his attention. Moreover, her feelings are described in a symbolically masculine way. She rejects the emotions conventionally attributed to women: what Berenza arouses in her is not love, but ‘envy’ and ‘ardent, consuming desire’.\(^{84}\) She is compared, not to a lioness, but to a ‘slumbering lion’, a sign of masculine, and not feminine, power.\(^{85}\)

It can be concluded, then, that the duplicity that Rosamond is depicted as employing is similar to and yet simultaneously different from Victoria’s. They both engage in deceptive behaviour in order to work out their roles in relation to their male counterparts. However, while in Rosamond’s case this duplicity acts as a means to escape dominance, duplicity in Victoria becomes a weapon, not a shield. By portraying a woman like Victoria, Dacre offers to her readership a new model of transgressive, manipulative, relentless femininity. Correspondingly, Alcott, through her strong-willed heroine Rosamond, makes her readers dream about the possibility of freedom. In her Foreword to Gorsky’s *Femininity to Feminism*, referring to nineteenth-century fiction in England and America, Nancy Walker states that ‘the stories of female characters in nineteenth-century fiction’, in which *Zofloya* and *Chase* can be included,

\(^{83}\) Dacre, p. 58.  
\(^{84}\) Dacre, pp. 59−60.  
\(^{85}\) Dacre, p. 59.
reveal the anxieties [...] of a rapidly changing social order in which the cultural ideology looked to women to provide domestic stability even as a growing number of women protested against the status quo and gradually won for themselves a more significant voice in the public life of England and America.  

With this in mind, a critique of the role that nineteenth-century society imposed on women can be identified between the lines of both novels, especially considering the writers’ treatment of gender roles and their duplicitous characters’ reactions to love. Both writers foregrounded their anxieties regarding imposed social roles, though in distinct ways. To do so, they introduced the demon lover, a gothic embodiment of aggressive male dominance. This demoniacal presence, common to both works, is thus an extension of the gender anxieties mentioned by Walker and it is through its use that both authors scrutinise the duplicitous, the masochistic, the nymphomaniac, in one word the transgressive elements of their female characters. As such, these diabolical crossings demonstrate not only the flexibility of the demon-lover trope, but also its relevance in a gender-based reflection.

The female protagonists and their demon lovers, though differently presented in the novels and to divergent purposes, ultimately solidify the argument that genre is impure—here, a mixture of gothic and Sensational. As the novels do not fit a rigid categorisation, in the same way, their main characters resist being enclosed in a single frame. The crossing and mixing of genre rules and gender roles have demonstrated that Zofloya works as a literary antecedent of Sensation fiction, while Chase exploits the female-gothic genre. The triumph of ‘sensations’, the perversity of crime, and the defeat of morality are prominent in both novels, proving the similarity between Zofloya and Chase and their generic transitions. In the end, the act of categorising is an act of restriction. In this sense, both Charlotte Dacre and Louisa May Alcott, by stripping their novels of easily classifiable elements, defied and transgressed not just genre and gender categorisations, but also the interpretive frontiers between morality and immorality, virtue and vice, freedom and enslavement.

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The debate about popular culture and its influence on violence in America has long-characterised the country as a social and political landscape where class, race, and gender identities are highly divisive. The competing national narratives surrounding violence, identity, and culture are further problematised by America’s love and hate of the firearm. Outside these complex and on-going domestic encounters with violence, the US has remained central to numerous foreign conflicts from its earliest days in the American Revolution, to the most recent discussions about what, if any, role it should play in combating ISIS.

Despite this familiarity with conflict and conquest, Johan Höglund writes in *The American Imperial Gothic: Popular Culture, Empire, Violence*, that ‘[f]ew citizens of the West experience the violence with which the US empire asserts its domination outside Western borders’ (p. x). Such disconnection to horror stories in faraway lands, Höglund argues, allows the US to narrate its place on the global scene as a kind of justified vigilante who fulfils a doctrine of salvation through violence. The book therefore addresses how, through various productions and representations of what he terms American imperial gothic, popular culture has pervaded the public imagination in such a way as to normalise horror, violence, and the demonisation of the Other. Importantly, the text goes beyond mere identification of such narratives and their underlying links to political ideology. That is, while Höglund positions American imperial gothic as a kind of accomplice in sustaining US imperial objectives, by ‘align[ing] the gothic horror stories that it tells with the politics and practices that sustain the US empire’ (p. xi), the study takes a bold step further, and challenges readers to resist such sinister narrative cycles and to acknowledge the root of and consequences for an empire of violence.

The first chapter of the book provides a foundational understanding of the relationship between imperial conquest and gothic from the eighteenth century to more contemporary contexts. Höglund relies on Patrick Brantlinger’s construction and use of the term ‘imperial
gothic’ and provides a concise and clear view of how politics, terror, and imperialism play a complex role in narrating empire. Such narration, as Höglund demonstrates, is rife with contradiction and anxiety, and turns upon the structural and infrastructural traces of modernity in the development of empire. That is, empire has become a signifier of modernity. For Höglund, this conflation is most apparent in the mechanised aspects of American military culture and militarised technology. Ultimately, the American imperial gothic emerges in this text as a means to negotiate the ebb of empire and the anxiety caused by imperial crisis. The American Imperial Gothic then charts the development of the US as a global power from the eighteenth century and the pages of Charles Brockden Brown’s novel Edgar Huntly (1799) to the Cold War and most recently, the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan.

A constant strand within Höglund’s analysis of American imperial gothic as a narrative of empire is its insistence upon overly simplistic perspectives of good and evil, self and Other. At the fore of this national mythology is the premise that violence is culturally mandated and in many ways, progressive. Höglund’s interrogation of this narrative is well researched and draws from diverse cultural mediums that include film and literature. Among the selected texts are familiar titles and some that are, perhaps, not as well known. They include Mary Rowlandson’s The Sovereignty and Goodness of God: Being a Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson (1682), Edgar Allan Poe’s The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym (1838), the Hollywood film King Kong (1933), as well as the war-time horror movies King of the Zombies (1941), Revenge of the Zombies (1943), and Return of the Vampire (1943). One of several contemporary texts discussed is the AMC television series The Walking Dead (2010–present). This is not to say that the book highlights the exception or rare example; instead, it carefully and effectively weaves together a canon of violence with which America has constructed itself and its Others since its very beginnings as a republic, when the nation unshackled itself from British control. In doing so, one can see a narrative of American exceptionalism begin to develop. The effectiveness of the author’s argument is advanced due in large part to the links he builds with multiple cultural mediums, encompassing literature, film, and gaming. Furthermore, his explanations demonstrate for readers how these narratives dialogue with political speeches and foreign policy. Particularly effective is Höglund’s reading of George W. Bush’s ‘Top Gun moment’ on the USS Abraham Lincoln in 2003 as an act of performance. Through this and other examples, it becomes obvious to the reader that empire is not strictly a political space nor is art in its many forms depoliticised. The relationship between narrative and politics is a powerful one, and Höglund does well to demonstrate throughout the book how America has perpetuated its status as
global power by normalising horror and violence. That is, as politics, narrative, and social norms intertwine, American culture develops a kind of familiarity with violence to the extent that violence and horror become acceptable, if not anticipated, tactics against hostile forces. In Höglund’s own words ‘the gothic Other can [...] only be exorcised through violence’ (p. 64).

Specifically, the path to normalising violence in various American national narratives has much to do with the figure of the American outlaw. Arguably, early discussion in the book regarding the roots of frontier gothic, its ties to manifest destiny, and the prevalence of the Western raises only old ghosts. However, recalling conventional tropes such as that of the helpless, white female in need of rescue, the frontier as a place of danger and in need of civilising order, and, importantly, male violence as a rite of passage in the development of performative masculinity, serves to emphasise the embedded and cyclical nature of America’s narration and consumption of violence. The cultural patterns of performative violence within frontier narratives continue to evolve and have now begun to influence how Americans engage with technology and gaming.

One of the most engaging chapters in the book is Chapter 8 ‘Militarising the Virtual Gothic’. In it, Höglund addresses how the post-9/11 milieu created a self-sustaining bond between popular culture in film and gaming, empire, and performative acts of violence. In particular, he highlights how military combat, transformed into spectacle and entertainment through technology, allows ‘subjects not only to consume and observe but also to inhabit and perform the world of the imperial gothic’ (p. 117). As Höglund argues in his preface, the dislocation that the West experiences from the violence enacted by US imperial action makes it all too easy to accept violence as an acceptable, default reaction to crisis or insecurity. Thus, this chapter reminds us that complex cultural performances permit us to become detached from our actions, to live outside the consequences of our ideologies. Ironically, it seems that the modernity that surrounds us in an age of technology may transform us into the ‘barbarians’ that empire supposedly attempts to conquer.

The thought-provoking past and present manifestations of American imperial gothic Höglund that explores is strengthened by the book’s clear and precise prose. Too often, critical analysis that engages so many cultural strands can become dense with terminology and tangential asides. This is not the case in The American Imperial Gothic. At the same time, the book’s accessibility does not diminish the intellectual rigour Höglund uses to scrutinise American imperial gothic and its contexts; in fact, it serves to crystallise its argument for the reader. The American Imperial Gothic is an important text for scholars and
casual readers of literature, cultural studies, and politics. Through lucid prose and keen cultural readings, Johan Högglund harnesses a rich history of the economic, social, and political texts that create and narrate the ideologies that inform our individual and collective approaches to power, identity, and crisis. Importantly, it challenges readers to examine critically the role of violence as a practice of security, of freedom, and of modernity.

Kristy Butler

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Bernice M. Murphy, *The Rural Gothic in American Popular Culture: Backwoods Horror and Terror in the Wilderness* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2013)

The English poet Michael Drayton, in his ‘Ode to the Virginian Voyage’, urged the people of Britain to travel westwards to the New World. He writes of

Virginia,
Earth’s only paradise!

Where nature hath in store
Fowl, venison, and fish,
And the fruitful’st soil,
Without your toil,
Three harvests more,
All greater than your wish.

Drayton’s Edenic vision of America, set out in 1606, would be followed only three years later by the ‘starving time’ suffered by the Jamestown colony, when the population of around five hundred people would be reduced to sixty by starvation, disease, and even cannibalism. This tension between optimism and darkness comes to characterise the American experience for Leslie Fiedler, who has described the United States as ‘a world which had left behind the terror of Europe not for the innocence it dreamed of, but for new and special guilts associated with the rape of nature and the exploitation of dark-skinned people’.¹ Fiedler’s 1966 thesis has since been taken up by critics including Teresa Goddu, Allan Lloyd Smith, and Charles L. Crow, who identify a distinctly ‘American Gothic’ tradition, and expand upon the colonial and ecological implications of such a perspective. Recent studies, including *EcoGothic*, edited by Andrew Smith and William Hughes (2013) and a special edition of *Gothic Studies*

on ‘The EcoGothic in the Long Nineteenth Century’, edited by David Del Principe (May 2014), have specifically turned to nature as a focal point.

Bernice M. Murphy’s monograph *The Rural Gothic in American Popular Culture* is, then, a timely intervention into a burgeoning area within gothic criticism. Murphy combines a historicised approach with a close analysis of texts viewed through the lens of genre. As with much current scholarship in the field of gothic studies, this takes a broad sweep from early colonial narratives to novels, films, and recent television shows. The five chapters presented here offer all of the topics that the reader might expect. The importance of the frontier in the formation of American society is a major touchstone for the study, as is the Puritan encounter with the wilderness. In keeping with the ecocritical focus of the current wave of criticism, much attention is given to the idea that, as Murphy states, ‘the natural world will justifiably rise up against humanity’ (p. 194). This theme, here discussed particularly in relation to film, is positioned as stemming from a sense of guilt or anxiety surrounding our relationship with nature. Thus we see a surge of horror films including *The Birds* (1963), *Jaws* (1975), and lesser-known titles such as *Night of the Lepus* (1972) and *Frogs* (1972), which portray animals violently attacking humans, usually due to hubristic human attempts to control or otherwise interfere with the environment. In the post-2000 era, the disaster portrayed on screen is more apocalyptic in tone, and is embodied not only in films such as *The Last Winter* (2006), *The Happening* (2008), and *The Book of Eli* (2010), but also in Al Gore’s *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006), which serves as a touchstone for a wave of narratives that suggest that ‘the devastating effects predicted by Gore are not only underway, but unstoppable’ (p. 194). It is perhaps unsurprising, in this context, that the idea of nature’s revenge on humanity comes to be such a powerful wellspring of horror.

Nature itself is not the sole focus of the discussion, as human horrors also appear. In what may be the book’s most interesting argument, Murphy discusses the demonised figure of the ‘hillbilly’. Seen everywhere from H. P. Lovecraft’s ‘The Picture in the House’ (1924) to *Deliverance* (1972), the backwoods hillbilly serves as a representation of all that is rejected, or repressed, by ‘normal’ society. The imperative to construct strict, yet artificial, boundaries between whiteness and blackness (and the attendant civilisation/savagery binary) during slavery, Murphy argues, had the effect of creating a new racial category of ‘white trash’ associated with the ‘backwards’ past. The extremity of rural poverty in areas such as the southern Appalachian Mountains is exploited by ‘hillbilly horror’, which ‘depict[s]
attractive, wholesome, middle-class outsiders who fall victim to clannish, insular, psychotic, and physically repellent backwoods/rural inhabitants’ (p. 147). The simultaneous idealisation of some backwoods residents as remnants of self-sufficient early settlers, who live a family-orientated and God-fearing lifestyle, allows Murphy to use a structuralist approach, in that she categorises a broad range of these narratives within genre and cultural contexts. The supposed cannibalistic tendencies of hillbillies are explored, with this trope also being read as a displacement of mainstream anxieties. Cannibalistic appetite itself (often necessary for survival in the harsh conditions of early settlement, notably Jamestown) is related to Manifest Destiny and the ceaseless consumption characteristic of the capitalist system, which has led to the decimation of the environment. In this context, the mythical figure of the wendigo appears as a metaphor for this hunger, as seen in films such as *Ravenous* (1999). Overall, then, Murphy’s approach to the material allows illuminating connections to be made between texts, while themes and character types that tend to be taken for granted by the reader or viewer are put solidly into context.

This approach can be seen throughout the book, where Murphy grapples with familiar archetypes from the world of literature, film, and television, and relates them convincingly to singular contexts from the formation and continuing development of American society. Nowhere is this offhand or general, but rather the comparative readings are rooted firmly in history and relevant references to contemporary documents, biblical narrative (particularly the Puritan interpretation), and mythology. At times this makes bedfellows of seemingly disparate topics, but always manages to convince. A notable example is Murphy’s connection of ‘captivity narratives’ such as that by Mary Rowlandson (1682) with the figure of the ‘Final Girl’ as memorably described by Carol J. Clover in her influential critique of horror film, *Men, Women, and Chain Saws* (1992). Both figures are seemingly vulnerable young women who are separated from their home and family, and thrust into unknown dangers, yet survive due to their resourcefulness and strength of character. Murphy herself points out the dangers of making too direct a link for ‘reasons of historical and cultural accuracy’ (p. 39), yet it is exactly these bold connections that make this book feel fresh and exciting, while the depth and accuracy of its scholarship is self-evident.

The scope of the book is so ambitious that it is difficult to boil down to one core thesis, but if such a unifying argument exists, it is based around the idea, as Murphy states in the introduction, that ‘the Rural Gothic is characterised by negative encounters between individuals who have permanently settled in one place, and those who are defined by their mobility and lack of permanent relationship with the environment’ (p. 10). This dichotomy
allows the author to make connections between colonial fears connected to the dispossession of native peoples (bringing to mind Hawthorne’s eponymous Young Goodman Brown (1835), who fears that ‘there may be a devilish Indian behind every tree!’) and apocalyptic visions of complete social breakdown seen in so many contemporary narratives from Cormac McCarthy’s The Road (2006) to the ubiquitous zombie movie. Rural Gothic makes meaningful connections between all of the texts under consideration, offering fresh readings of familiar works, such as Charles Brockden Brown’s Wieland (1798) and Shirley Jackson’s ‘The Lottery’ (1948), and welcome reappraisals of those which have seen less scholarly attention than their cultural impact deserves, such as Thomas Tryron’s Harvest Home (1973), and T. E. D. Klein’s The Ceremonies (1984). It stands as a welcome contribution to an emerging field and as an informed, witty, and readable guide to texts that are often as unsettling and strange as their backwoods subject matter.

Kevin Corstorphine

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Glen Whitman and James Dow (eds), Economics of the Undead: Zombies, Vampires and the Dismal Science
(Plymouth: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014)

If there were to be an overarching theme to Economics of the Undead: Zombies, Vampires and the Dismal Science, it would probably be this: that the devil (or undead monster) you know is better than the devil you don’t. Perhaps, the collection of essays suggests, it is time that we stop fearing the vampire and zombie for being unknown quantities, and embrace them on the one level where we can be equals: that of the market floor. For, as editors Glen Whitman and James Dow write in their introduction, ‘[i]f both parties get something valuable from [an] exchange — sustenance for the vampires, illicit thrills for the humans — then in theory, the monetary payments could go either way’ (p. ix). In other words, if we meet the undead on a more even playing field, perhaps we won’t have to keep running.

Basing their assertions on evidence provided by vampires and zombies from popular culture as disparate as Stephanie Meyer’s Twilight saga (2005–08) and George A. Romero’s Night of the Living Dead (1968), the economists and literary theorists featured in Economics of the Undead explore the real-world implications of the behaviours of the undead, thus

providing the reader with ways in which to benefit from their dalliances with the reanimated. Examples include improving vampire-hunting skills and farming zombies for profit. In the same vein as Max Brooks’s seminal instruction manual, *The Zombie Survival Guide* (2003), the undead menace is discussed here in a completely deadpan manner throughout. ‘When I was a kid’, writes Dow, ‘vampires didn’t sparkle. Mostly they lived in earth-filled coffins and skulked around dank cellars, drinking human blood when they could and rat blood when they couldn’t’ (p. 77). Despite such disparaging remarks, essays are included on all topics relating to life with the re-animated: no issue is too big or too small.

On the more personal side there is ‘Human Girls and Vampire Boys’, in which Whitman outlines the optimum strategy to woo and win a paranormal beau by extrapolating from human-vampire relationships such as Bella and Edward of *Twilight* fame. Somewhat more practically, Michael E. O’Hara’s ‘Zombies as an Invasive Species: A Resource Economics Perspective’ suggests ways in which zombies could be employed for the economic advantages of the still-living, including ‘maintaining zombie hunting as a sustainable recreational sport’ (p. 168). Matters of property law in *The Walking Dead* (2010–present) are raised in Brian Hollar’s legally inclined essay ‘Post-Apocalyptic Law: What Would the Reasonable Man Do in a World Gone Mad?’ Indeed, the chapters all prove to be both as informative and entertaining as their titles are imaginative, and open up for the reader innovative new ways of considering the undead. ‘Is there anyone’, Eleanor Brown and Robert Prag speculate, ‘who, possessed of zombification insurance, would analogously seek a zombie encounter?’ (p. 94). ‘How did the vampires get so rich’, Dow asks, ‘and more importantly, what lessons can human investors learn from them?’ (p. 77). These are heady questions indeed, and ones that have remained unanswered for too long. The answers are frequently interesting (stage-four cancer patients, for example, might be tempted to seek a zombie encounter if insured, it is suggested) while not always necessarily practical (should human investors wish to follow the vampire example, a good starting point, we are told, would be immortality).

One potential criticism that could be levelled at the collection is that it relies too heavily on certain case studies to support its arguments. In particular, the TV series *The Walking Dead* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997–2003) are discussed *ad nauseum*. Certainly, these are staples of horror culture and thus deserve wide consideration. However, the current ubiquity of zombie and vampire narratives across all categories of popular media cannot be denied. As such, there seems to be little reason not to include essays focusing on a larger array of popular-culture products, even if simply to provide the reader with...
recommendations for further reading and viewing. The collection also has a decidedly contemporary bias (notwithstanding the final essay, ‘Killing Time: Dracula and Social Discoordination’ by Hollis Robbins, which is a fantastic reading of Bram Stoker’s Dracula (1897) as a struggle between natural time, governed by the sun and moon, and institutionalised Greenwich Mean Time). This is understandable but unfortunately leads to an omission of the influences of Mary Shelley and H. P. Lovecraft in the creation of the zombie narrative, to name but two.

Perhaps the best aspect of Economics of the Undead is that it links what is so often considered an escapist genre to the real world. As outlined above, many of the theories that are applied to the undead figures also have practical economic, social, and political applications. This is particularly highlighted in chapters like Daniel Farhat’s ‘Between Gods and Monsters: Reason, Instinct and the Artificial Vampire’, which demonstrates how algorithms can be used to predict future attacks from vampires (or indeed other intruders such as burglars), and ‘Eating Brains and Breaking Windows’ by Steven Horwitz and Sarah Skwire, which successfully deconstructs the argument that war (zombie or otherwise) can ever be economically advantageous. The reader is left in no doubt of the significance of horror literature in terms of wider social commentary.

Thus we are brought full circle, as the volume gives us a more complex sense of why vampire and zombie narratives resonate so deeply with the living. The undead clearly have much in common with us, whether that be the debate over the legal status of the zombie (should s/he be classified as wo/man or chattel?) or the vampire assessing the pros and cons of privatising her prey. All in all, this collection is a fascinating link between two subjects that are usually considered so disparate, and it is encouraging to think that there is so much scope for research such as this. Several mentions of ghosts and werewolves throughout suggest that there is room for further volumes on horror economics, while the collection also hints at the possibility of exploration into the economics of other genres like post-apocalyptic, dystopian, and fantasy fiction, film, and television.

Whitman, Dow, et al have certainly made a convincing argument for the relevance of undead workings in the field of economics. Recognising that a vampire can be persuaded to trade with the living rather than stealing their blood; having a sense of security under the terms of comprehensive zombification insurance; appreciating the fact that this dazzling creature in front of you might just be your new Tinder date — the volume encourages us to ponder these scenarios and more. Economics of the Undead: Zombies, Vampires and the
Dismal Science permits the reader to rest easy in the knowledge that their next graveyard encounter with the supernatural will be decidedly less one-sided.

Sarah Cullen

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Fred Botting, Gothic: Second Edition
(Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2014)

At the end of the first edition of Gothic (1996), Fred Botting declared the probable death of gothic. In support of this view, he cited Francis Ford Coppola’s version of Dracula (1992) and its romantic humanisation of the monster. Almost twenty years later, he has revised this somewhat drastic announcement for the second edition of Gothic. Of all the recent developments and proliferations of the genre, Botting finds, somewhat unexpectedly, that the phenomenon corresponding most closely to traditional ideas of gothic monstrosity is Stephenie Meyer’s Twilight series (2005–08). In Botting’s view, the novels’ conservative values, hinging on prohibition and desire, resurrect key gothic features that were previously put to death by Gary Oldman’s turn as lovesick Dracula, which attributed human emotions to the gothic monster. In Meyer’s Twilight, by contrast, the vampire once more acts as ‘an agent of conservative morality’ (p. 201).

As part of Routledge’s ‘New Critical Idiom’ series, Gothic has been a valuable introduction and companion for the student of or newcomer to gothic studies for almost twenty years. This updated, heavily revised edition offers a completely re-drafted introduction, and two new chapters tracing the developments of the genre in the twentieth and twenty-first century, as well as more or less extensive additions which give greater space to American gothic, women writers, and film. However, despite the cover’s announcement that it also provides updates in relation to media and technology, these are brushed over rather than dealt with in any depth. Considering the vast sweep of material that this introduction covers, this is hardly surprising and a fuller treatment may have been too much to expect. The wealth of information and knowledge that Botting presents in this short volume is still very impressive and he has amended some omissions from the previous edition. Thus Richard Marsh’s best-selling The Beetle (1897), which has received much more scholarly attention in recent years, now finds mention. Most importantly, Gothic now features an Index and a Further Reading section divided by chapters. This should prove very helpful for anyone
interested in a more in-depth study of any gothic work or the gothic more generally in a certain period. As was the case in the first edition, Botting does not refer to secondary sources within the text and, for someone not versed in the relevant scholarship, it might prove difficult to discern what has influenced and contributed to the way gothic is introduced in this volume. On the other hand, it avoids overwhelming the reader by too many references and sources, and maintains a succinct and consistent tone and style, which is easy to follow. The author also successfully situates each period he discusses within its cultural context and refers to contemporaneous literary criticism, often by writers whose fiction he also introduces, and thus creates a vivid picture of the germination and understanding of gothic literature at various points in time. In this expanded edition, new texts are included and others are discussed in more detail, which is conducive to a better understanding of individual authors and their relation to the gothic than the limited space of the previous edition allowed for.

In the new introduction, titled ‘Negative Aesthetics’, the author uses a much clearer structure than previously. Jumping repeatedly and without chronological order between outlining key elements of the genre and its chronological development, the first edition’s introduction was rather confusing. In the new version, Botting first describes key characteristics of the gothic under the term ‘Darkness’, by which he means anything opposed to light, reason, and Enlightenment, or, put more positively, ‘[n]ot tied to a natural order of things as defined by realism, gothic flights of imagination suggest supernatural possibility, mystery, magic, wonder and monstrosity’ (p. 2). He then introduces theoretical frameworks for reading the gothic in the section called ‘Negativity’. Here, he pays particular attention to the ideas of monstrosity, transgression, and the crossing of boundaries. Two further sections briefly sketch the transformations of the genre through time and gothic criticism to date. All in all, this new introduction gives a succinct and brief overview of the important features and developments of gothic literature and criticism, and sets the tone for the following chapters, which delineate the transformations of the gothic from its origins to the twenty-first century.

Apart from some minor additions and alterations, Chapters 2 to 7 remain relatively unchanged. Once we reach the twentieth century, however, Botting includes two completely new chapters. Chapter 8, ‘Phantomodernisms’, traces developments from the beginning of the twentieth century up to World War II, and demonstrates how gothic became more diffused and less defined during this period. In particular, he asserts, newer art forms such as film often adopted a gothic mode. This new chapter is much more coherent and focused than the previous edition’s final chapter, which tried to bridge the entire twentieth century in considerably less space. In Chapter 9, Botting returns to his guiding idea of monstrosity, aptly
calling the chapter ‘Consuming Monsters’. However, as he convincingly argues, the traditional idea of the gothic monster is no longer adequate in a post-war world where monsters have come to represent the underdog, and where the Other has gradually taken on positive associations. Moreover, Botting explains how, in the second half of the twentieth century, gothic has proliferated in a variety of new media forms, such as comics, cartoons, music, and video games. He justly suggests that, especially in more recent years, this repetitive recycling of gothic monsters has led to an overfamiliarity and subsequent loss of significance. While this argument is compelling, his otherwise excellent control over a wealth of material reaches its limits in this final chapter, in which, despite his assertions, he remains focused on fiction, film, and TV and does not discuss other media forms in any detail.

As this indicates, just as is the case with the first edition, Gothic is sometimes too compact to be useful for a first-time student unfamiliar with the genre. It is certainly a good introduction which allows readers to gain a broad overview of the gothic, but anyone looking for detailed analyses or in-depth discussion of any particular period or text will need to find this elsewhere. A revision was needed and this edition succeeds on that account: as it illustrates, gothic has proven resilient and transformative, and has enjoyed a boom of popular interest, be it via vampires, werewolves, witches, or zombies. The genre is by no means dead, but has continuously found new forms and functions, as Botting demonstrates with this new, lucid, and well-structured edition of Gothic, which will surely prove as valuable a companion for any researcher of the gothic as its first edition has.

Laura Habbe

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David J. Jones, Sexuality and the Gothic Magic Lantern: Desire, Eroticism and Literary Visibilities from Byron to Bram Stoker
(Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014)

The efforts to understand cinema as one stage of a much longer history of projected media have fertile implications for scholars of horror and the gothic, especially in terms of the fearful potential of the magic lantern (sometimes known as ‘the Lantern of Fear’) and its ancillary media. David J. Jones’s Sexuality and the Gothic Magic Lantern is an excellent source for anyone interested in such explorations. Jones furthers the work of scholars like Terry Castle, Laurent Mannoni, and Mervyn Heard, which recovers the place of the magic lantern and the phantasmagoria in media history, and takes this narrative in new directions in
a book less about lantern practice itself than how the lantern took its place in the stock of modern media metaphors, especially literary ones.

As his title implies, Jones emphasises the close allegiance between sex and death. The shadowy, ghostly images of lantern projections proved not only available to gloomy meditations on death, but also to eroticism (the frankly pornographic lantern slides that Jones reproduces will be instructive to many). Indeed, lanternic imagery is often evoked in literature at the juncture of gothicism and eroticism. A set of ‘lanternist sexual codes’ (p. 203), Jones argues, provided gothic writers with a set of stock images and scenarios that could be transferred from the lantern to the page while retaining a powerful set of implications.

It is with the classic seduction sequence from *Dracula* (1897), in which Jonathan Harker is accosted by a set of three vampire women, that *Sexuality and the Gothic Magic Lantern* begins, and it may be a revelation for students of *Dracula* to learn the significance of those lines comparing the vampires’ laughter to the ‘intolerable, tingling sweetness of water-glasses when played on by a cunning hand’ (qtd. p. 4), which harkens back to a similar image in Lord Byron’s *Don Juan* (1819–23), when the title character has a forbidden encounter with a Spanish woman disguised as a friar. Jones asks, ‘why is the sound of fingers on glass evoked in texts at either end of the nineteenth century so readily or even at all in these dark evocations of transgressive sexual encounters? [...] Was there something in this unearthly, tantalising sound which contemporaries understood as a cue for fear and erotic frisson, part of a great submerged shared cultural heritage which readers in the twenty-first century have lost?’ (p. 5). These are compelling questions and provide an ideal entry point into Jones’s project of unearthing lost contexts and restoring the magic lantern’s status in the history of media.

Jones eventually returns to *Dracula* and its less-frequently discussed semi-sister novel, Stoker’s *The Lady of the Shroud* (1909), as one of his case studies of the ‘lanternicity’ of nineteenth-century literature. Earlier chapters explore the lanternic qualities of other literary works, including Matthew Lewis’s *The Monk* (1796), Lord Byron’s *Cain* (1821), *Manfred* (1817), and *Don Juan*, Charlotte Brontë’s *Villette* (1853), and J. Sheridan Le Fanu’s *Carmilla* (1872). Jones’s characterisation of Carmilla herself as ‘a character [who] flickers seductively between picture, corporeal presence, vaporous absence and dreams, and passes through those quick alterations repeatedly and ambiguously’ (p. 147) and the novella itself as ‘the literary equivalent of a phantasmagoria show’ (p. 142) is particularly provocative, and useful in terms of Le Fanu’s shadowy representation of lesbianism. Jones locates these works
within a history traceable back to lanternists like Georg Schröpfer and Philipstal, shaping that
desert to recover the currents of eroticism in the gloomy spectacles of the phantasmagoria
and its descendants. Jones pays particular attention to the ways in which stock gothic
scenarios familiar from lanterns — including the Matthew Lewis-derived ‘Bleeding Nun’ and
the rape of a woman by a demon — appear and reappear in literary works. In the book’s
conclusion, Jones discusses the lantern-influenced neo-gothic works of dramatist Len Jenkin,
visual artist Kara Walker, and graphic novelist Guido Crepax, and the continuing tendency to
deploy magic lantern codes with respect, especially, to eroticism.

While these elements work very well, *Sexuality and the Gothic Magic Lantern*
includes a rhetorical framing device about cinema, especially horror cinema, that is less fully
realised. The introduction links debates about the cinematicity of literature to questions of
lanternicity, and raises the fact that authors like William Peter Blatty, Stephen King, and Ira
Levin frequently reference cinema in their horror novels; the influence of cinema on these
and other literary works is manifest and undeniable, and provides an analogue to help us
understand how lanterns influenced literature in previous centuries. This much is a point well
observed. When the conclusion returns to this subject, Jones notes that the rape scene in
Levin’s *Rosemary’s Baby* not only harkens back to a familiar horrific/erotic lantern scene
(the rape of a young woman by a demon mentioned above) but is full of cinematic and
newsreel imagery. Jones notes that the book was, of course, adapted by Roman Polanski in
1968, but, rather disappointingly, does not discuss how the scene adapts to the screen. This is
illustrative of the way in which, while Jones discusses the survival of certain stock lantern
images into cinema, he does so in a rather cursory fashion, and devotes just one paragraph to
the literal presence of magic lanterns in films; one of the most prominent, Ingmar Bergman’s
*The Magician* (1958), goes unmentioned. It is particularly surprising to find only a few
isolated references to Georges Méliès, whose *La Lanterne magique* (1903) features a gigantic
magic lantern and whose entire body of work is full of resonances with lantern practice.

It seems unfair to critique the book for not being something it doesn’t claim to be, but
I hope some other scholar finds a way to employ the very useful concept of ‘lanternicity’ to
explore the survival of the gothic magic lantern in cinema. As it is, *Sexuality and the Gothic
Magic Lantern* should prove a valuable read for scholars of representations of the
supernatural, for the history of projected media, for the gothic, and for historians of
pornography as well.

*Murray Leeder*
Charles L. Crow (ed.) A Companion to American Gothic
(New Jersey: Wiley and Sons, 2014)

In A Companion to American Gothic, Charles L. Crow contributes to the field of gothic American literary studies by answering, expanding, and contributing to many of the questions which have been raised in previous years concerning the gothic. What constitutes American gothic? What are the parameters that separate Southern gothic from the rest of the topics covering the genre? How has the figure of the vampire evolved, and specifically, how does the American vampire distinguish itself from the other types of vampires throughout the centuries and across geographical boundaries? Extensive debate concerning all these questions and more can be found in the volume. The volume is unified by an ambitious, yet successful, purpose: it compiles almost every possible subject concerning American gothic and explains each one thoroughly, giving the reader an updated, convenient compilation of the topics that have constituted the genre throughout the years, and still do, and have raised debates about it. This book is therefore vital for scholars working not only on the gothic, but also on broader aspects of American literature. Crow’s introduction gives the reader a clear sense of what the book is and does; moreover, this volume has 42 chapters and at the end of each chapter, there are four sections: cross-references, notes, references, and further reading, which are especially helpful to scholars. Crow selects important essays by leading scholars and classifies them into seven parts: ‘Theorizing American Gothic’, ‘Origins of American Gothic’, ‘Classic American Gothic and its Legacies,’ ‘American Gothic and Race’, ‘Gothic Modern and Postmodern’, ‘Gothic in Other Media’, and ‘American Gothic and World Gothic’. These interesting categories serve as receptacles for almost every possible topic present in American gothic, and more specifically its literary aspects, since its very beginnings. Unfortunately, however, due to the 587 pages that comprise the volume, this review will only be able to give a detailed consideration of a small number of essays within the collection, those which stand out as being particularly representative of American gothic scholarship.

In Part I, David Punter opens his essay ‘Gothic, Theory, Dream’ by situating the gothic as representing American otherness, specifically in the form of forgotten history, trauma, and repetition. Punter theorises on what constitutes American gothic, mentioning, among other concepts, the contrast between the wilderness and settlement, the ‘infatuation’
with the past, and the links between the two. He reminds us that ‘the Gothic is infatuated with the past […] but it is also infatuated with the possibility that the past can be laid to rest’ (p. 23). This assertion serves as a useful introduction to Part II, and to one of its most noteworthy essays, ‘Early American Gothic Drama’ by Benjamin F. Fisher. American gothic drama has been a neglected field of enquiry, and Fisher argues for greater critical attention on early-American gothic plays, just as his counterpart Jeffrey N. Cox has demanded more attention for the British gothic plays of the same period. Fisher asserts that some critics such as Arthur Hobson Quinn have failed to use the term properly in their approaches to the texts, perhaps because they considered the gothic mode as ‘insignificant, worth little or no scholarly attention’ (p. 99). Fisher writes that the term ‘Gothic’ has only been properly applied to dramatic texts in recent years, having previously been termed ‘tragedy’ or ‘romantic tragedy’. Fisher’s research demonstrates that Dunlap’s *The Fatal Deception* (1794) is the first gothic American play, therefore making a valuable contribution to how we understand the history of this genre. Since American gothic cannot be understood without the ‘Dark Romantics’, which play a leading role in the genre’s most illustrious years, Part III includes an essential contribution, ‘Descendentalism and the Dark Romantics’ by Ted Billy. This chapter briefly covers Edgar Allan Poe, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Herman Melville, and examines how Transcendentalism influenced their works. Billy provides strong evidence that American Transcendentalists and European Dark Romantics share more similarities in their philosophical outlooks than has hitherto been supposed. Billy sees Hawthorne’s ambiguity as analogous to the Dark Romantics’ attitudes towards nature, individualism, and reform; the Dark Romantics, he writes, ‘realized that nature has its perils, individualism has its excesses, and social reform has its limitations’ (p. 162). Moreover, Billy suggests that Poe was influenced by — yet harsh in his criticism towards — Transcendentalism; and, as Transcendentalists did, he too highlighted the innate hyper-subjectivity of human nature which is very present in the writings of this group. As Billy argues, Transcendentalists similarly commended the infinite within oneself, and, like Poe, employed organic metaphors to demonstrate how all entities are interconnected.

Part IV elaborates upon the close ties that American gothic has with issues surrounding racial difference. In Chapter 19, ‘Gothic Transgressions: Charles W. Chesnutt, Conjure, and the Law’, Justin D. Edwards covers Chesnutt’s writings on the United States during the post-Civil-War era. Chesnutt’s writings, Edwards argues, depict white men as demonic characters and highlight how the law lacks transparency to underscore other recent legal issues. What Edwards wants to clarify is that the gothic in this context is used to
highlight the issues of slavery and the times when the supposed permanent boundaries between blackness and whiteness become blurred, and that ‘any judgment about a person’s innocence or guilt [...] needs to move beyond racial hierarchies and identity politics to develop a more nuanced approach to crime and punishment’ (p. 245), punishment here being understood as a part of law enforcement during the post-Civil-War era.

Part V includes Ronja Vieth’s exceptional chapter on Cormac McCarthy and his gothic of guilt, boldly reconciling McCarthy’s œuvre with American gothic literature, although McCarthy’s gothicism is rarely acknowledged by critics, and supplying powerful insights and views that have usually been left out of the existing scholarship. Another gem is William Hughes’s ‘Sexuality and the Twentieth-Century American Vampire’, which focuses on works by Anne Rice and Poppy Z. Brite. Hughes argues that the vampire has always been the perfect tool by which to express ‘the myriad and conflicting cultural implications of human sexual activity and identity’ (p. 341) and that all undead must come with an additional sexual secret. He further claims that what has been said throughout the years about the vampire is no longer radical, asserting specifically that America’s cultural heterosexism makes the gay vampire a mainstream figure, and that the vampire sometimes represents a palimpsest of the gay man. Therefore, something new that breaks the norms and challenges the canon must come into the equation, another turn of the screw to the already twisted vampire sexuality. In this same line of transgression, Hughes also underlines how child vampires, as sexual beings, as queer figures, and as predators, transgress the normally accepted notions of childhood.

In Part VII, the essay ‘Fluid Bodies’ by Antonio Alcalá González highlights the rise of Latin-American gothic, with specific attention to the works of Carlos Fuentes. Alcalá González studies past and present gothic short stories, avoiding Fuentes’s masterpiece Aura in an attempt to draw attention to Fuentes’s other, shorter works. He suggests that Fuentes uses the gothic to shed light on the forgotten past that has made Mexico what it is now, and therefore affirms that Mexico can only plan a future if it confronts its repressed past. Specifically, in an attempt to ‘Mexicanise’ the gothic, Alcalá González positions Fuentes as focusing on houses as representatives of the typical architecture of Mexican gothic. In this context, Alcalá González refers to the city as a ‘monster of concrete and asphalt’ and states that ‘the events that take place inside it are also monstrous’ (p. 537). Indeed, he uses the gothic motif of the lurking monster to explain how an analogy between a house possessed by spirits, and a city possessed by traumas of the past, works in this innovative context.
As all of this implies, ‘[t]he Gothic is now seen as essential to understanding [American] literature’ (p. xviii), a point made by Crow in the preface. For those willing to gain this understanding, this is, consequently, a formidable collection of essays covering an ample range of topics, from its origins to its legacies; touching upon postmodernity, Transcendentalism, race, film, media, and even American gothic as an influence on later gothic in other countries. This volume is, therefore, a ‘must’ for current and future specialists in American gothic, a field that still has considerable scope for exploration, and whose many works, starting with the early ones that helped establish a basis for the genre, await further consideration.

Cristina Perez

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Alison Peirse, After Dracula: The 1930s Horror Film

Alison Peirse’s intent in this book is to turn the spotlight of critical attention away from the two US films (both dating from 1931) that inaugurated 1930s horror — Tod Browning’s Dracula and James Whale’s Frankenstein — and towards other, more neglected examples of the genre from that decade. Although her book only specifies Dracula in its title, the shadow cast by Frankenstein is just as long, as her analysis of those other films shows. The range of films considered tracks across a wider variety of horror subjects (White Zombie of 1932, ‘the first zombie film’ (p. 60), is particularly interesting, given the recent ubiquity on film and television of lurching flesh-eaters), and she goes well beyond the Universal Studios line in the US to 1930s examples of the genre from France and England. The latter is particularly unusual, given that critics associated with the British horror film such as David Pirie (whose classic study, Heritage of Horror: The English Gothic Cinema, 1946–1972 (1973), has recently been updated and expanded by the same publisher) have argued that the form only emerged in the 1950s.

After Dracula does not declare a single theoretical approach. Reacting to what she describes as an immersion in critical theory while studying film in the UK, Peirse determines to shy away from it here, though she is not above resorting to psychoanalytic theory when discussing her one vampire film, Carl Dreyer’s Vampyr (1929). There is a consistent and welcome interest in gender throughout the volume, not only in relation to women in the
horror film, but also to the relationship between the men who vie over them, frequently with a homoerotic sub-text. The one female monster is the panther woman in 1932’s *The Island of Lost Souls*, whose ‘passion, agency and ferocity’ (p. 38) make her virtually unique in that decade. Peirse throughout pays detailed attention to the publicity surrounding the making of these films and the reviews they garnered upon release. Her approach pays off handsomely in relation to *The Island of Lost Souls*: the 19-year-old Chicagoan, Kathleen Burke, the focus of much of the pre-release publicity as the panther woman, is elbowed aside by the film reviewers, who concentrate almost exclusively on Charles Laughton’s performance as Doctor Moreau.

These films and more are satisfyingly treated in *After Dracula* in a range of chapters focusing on individual works and the issues they raise. What the interested reader first has to do, however, is to keep their interest alive through the short and unsatisfactory introduction. For one thing, Peirse ducks any definition of the horror genre; the remark that the films she analyses ‘do remarkable, despicable, often supernatural and frequently murderous things on screen’ (p. 8) is as close as she comes. Secondly, she claims there were no horror films before the arrival of *Dracula* and *Frankenstein* in 1931, to which one is entitled to ask: what of the German Expressionist classics like Murnau’s *Nosferatu* (1922) and the formidable array of grotesques portrayed on screen by Lon Chaney? Peirse seeks to defend her claim by saying that the term ‘horror film’ was not in circulation until the early 1930s; but the act of criticism would not have got far had it not learned to deploy critical terms where and when it saw fit, rather than await their historic emergence.

Thankfully, in practice, Peirse *does* make meaningful connection with these 1920s precursors, such as when she shows how the publicity surrounding the extensive makeup regime to which Jack Pierce subjected Boris Karloff as Frankenstein’s monster and the Mummy drew on similar stories concerning Chaney’s elaborate physical transformations. It was salutary to be reminded that Chaney had been signed to appear as Dracula before his sudden death and replacement by Bela Lugosi. Nonetheless, why does she not stay with the decade rather than insisting on 1936 as the cut-off point? Is there not Rowland Lee’s 1939 *Son of Frankenstein*, with Karloff, Lugosi, and Basil Rathbone, not to mention the 1940s cycle inaugurated by Lon Chaney Junior as the Wolfman? Peirse sees a dilution of the genre occurring with the arrival of the draconian Production Code in 1936, which did away with the frequent displays of disrobing heroines on which the villains and the camera linger, and with increasingly sadistic scenes as the films unfold. And, certainly, *Son of Frankenstein* is a rather anaemic and sanitised thing when put beside James Whale’s two florid predecessors,
Frankenstein and 1935’s The Bride of Frankenstein. But the evidence overall is against Peirse, in that it suggests strongly that the genre continued throughout the 1930s and well into the 1940s, before expiring in 1948 with Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein.

More broadly, the title of Peirse’s study, After Dracula, has a rich ambiguity, which her subsequent analysis highlights. The films she considers not only come historically and chronologically after Dracula (and Frankenstein), but she also acknowledges the considerable shadows these two films cast in a variety of ways. Sets are reused, most likely on economic grounds, but their recognisability also feeds into the complex role that memory plays in the works themselves. And a good many of the films she considers have either Karloff or Lugosi in a leading role and, in one memorable instance, Edgar G. Ulmer’s 1934 The Black Cat, both of them. The actors extend their range in these films: Bela Lugosi effectively deploys a black sense of humour absent from his Transylvanian count and Karloff gets a good deal more to say in his lisping English tones than he ever did as Frankenstein’s monster. Notwithstanding, the films frequently reference the two men’s most famous creations, as when Lugosi’s eyes are lit up in White Zombie, ‘a repeat of his glowing eyes in Dracula’ (p. 71), or when Karloff adopts a stiff, lurching walk in 1934’s The Ghoul. During this decade, the two stars appear to enjoy equal status, as opposed to the 1940s when Karloff continued in lead roles whereas Lugosi was often reduced to a scene or two. Both were seeking to inhabit new roles, but with mixed success. When they appear together in The Black Cat, Karloff has no problem vocally or facially in playing the villain. But Lugosi’s persona complicates his ‘good guy’ role; as Peirse notes, he ‘may be polite and well-dressed, but his slicked back dark hair, heavily shadowed eyes and thick Eastern European accent’ (p. 107) cannot but recall Dracula.

What is fascinating to observe across the book is how such binaries break down. In gender terms, there is often a sexual complicity between the two male leads; at first, the villain is in pursuit of the beautiful heroine but, once she has been rendered passive (unconscious, hypnotised, in a trance), the sexual interest turns to the alpha male who is seeking to rescue her and who comes to confront the villain. In White Zombie, for instance, Bela Lugosi whispers something into the hero’s ear which the audience never gets to hear or share. Peirse writes that ‘the scene is explicitly homoerotic’ as ‘the two men touch and whisper. Beaumont’s frightened [response] “no, not that” can be read as a rebellion against Legendre’s [the Lugosi character’s] suggestion that, in order to have Madeline, Beaumont must relinquish himself body and soul’ (p.70, emphasis in original).
The most interesting breakdown of binaries is between the Hollywood horror films, heavily plot driven and generic, and the European avant-garde represented here by Dreyer’s *Vampyr*. The latter was made in France and follows a very different aesthetic, more dream-like and meditative, much less focused on plot and character. But a good many of the European filmmakers, especially from Germany, emigrated to Hollywood in the early 1930s, and a number of them worked on horror films. The director of *The Black Cat*, Edgar G. Ulmer, for instance, had been a set designer for Max Reinhardt’s theatre in Berlin and had worked on *The Golem* (1920). As Peirse notes, ‘German expressionism infiltrates the set design’ of Ulmer’s *The Black Cat* in its art-deco modernist setting, strikingly different from the gothic (and clichéd) haunted house. Instead of dark shadows and gothic buttresses, *The Black Cat* foregrounds a glass and steel house with ‘gleaming floor and long Corbusier ribbon windows’ (p. 106). Similarly, when Michael Balcon tried to stimulate a native horror-film industry in Britain in the 1930s, one of his first moves was to woo back British film actors who had made it big in Hollywood, including Karloff, of course, but also Claude Rains, star of 1932’s *The Invisible Man*. But their appearance in these British films perversely required much to be made of those Hollywood antecedents. Karloff in *The Ghoul* appears particularly wearied by the now over-familiar horror moves expected of him; and, as Peirse rightly notes, the film is stolen from him by the masterful camp of Ernest Thesiger, who was promptly signed up to appear with Karloff back in Hollywood in *Bride of Frankenstein*, itself directed by the expatriate British film director, James Whale. Britain would have to await the coming of its two home-grown stars, Peter Cushing and Christopher Lee, in the 1950s before it would see its true horror-film efflorescence. Indeed, the Hammer versions were more distinctive and less hybrid than earlier attempts at British horror, not least because Universal insisted they steer clear of imitating Karloff and Lugosi’s iconic appearance.

As all of this is meant to suggest, Alison Peirse’s strength is in close reading, both of the filmic texts and of the immediate historic contexts of publicity and review. What she shows in a variety of fascinating ways is the hybridity of the horror film, its contaminating impurities. Although these 1930s examples of the genre are not as ‘forgotten’ as Peirse claims in her introduction — *The Island of Lost Souls* has been notorious since its first release — they are the more memorable after her detailed and incisive analysis.

*Anthony Roche*
Life Lessons from Slasher Films offers a detailed analysis of some of the founding texts of a subgenre that won over thousands of fans during the 1970s and 1980s, producing a long series of sequels and, recently, of remakes. Jessica Robinson defines slasher films by means of reference to Adam Rockoff’s list of their seven constitutive elements, such as the use of the killer’s point of view and his/her preferential choice of a sharp and penetrating weapon. The author explains the ideas involved very clearly, using comprehensible language, which makes this book easily accessible to any reader. This is immediately evident from the brief initial section providing the synopses of the films, detailing the year of release, the various characters’ names and the basic plots, and focusing the reader’s attention on their ‘slasher’ elements. The list includes, among others, genre ‘classics’ such as Black Christmas (1974), Friday the 13th (1980), A Nightmare on Elm Street (1984), and Scream (1996), though the author is very precise in pointing out the differences between the plot elements of the various films. The six chapters are titled according to a specific lesson that slasher films could teach us, although, by the beginning of the first chapter, readers have not been fully introduced to their contents yet.

The first lesson (‘The past will catch up with you’) addresses the traumatic events motivating the killers’ malevolent actions and, specifically, their attempts to recreate a conservative past in the present, although Robinson emphasises that such a past actually never existed and is only an ideal construction that stems from ‘a culture that only existed within their minds’ (p. 15). As in all of the following chapters, Robinson’s analysis is rigorously and coherently conducted with reference to all of the films under examination. Unfortunately, this can sometimes generate repetitiveness, especially in the last two chapters, which apply again the arguments elaborated in the previous chapters to the modern remakes.

The second lesson (‘Listen to your elders’) focuses on the figures of the adults, arguing that the killers are surrogate authority figures who take the place of absent or ineffectual parents, and who act (through obsessive-compulsive behaviour that implies a projection of their own neuroses) as representatives of the ideals of a repressive culture. Robinson associates killers with the allegorical demons and bogeymen represented in fairy tales, seeing them ‘as an instructive device to teach children the proper ways to act within a culture’ (p. 31). The ritualised actions of the killers, the author argues, are intended to re-
produce a static society passing down from the past its values, morals, and ideals. This is opposed by the Final Characters who refuse to be part of such a repetition.

Lesson three (‘Learn from your mistakes’) reverses the perspective by considering the teen years as a rite of passage from childhood and into adult society and maturity. In order to complete such a rite, teens have to be removed from parental control and must be placed in a realm where time does not matter or is suspended — an argument that is resumed in the fifth and sixth chapters. Particular focus is given to the relationship between the teens’ practice of (deviant) sexual behaviour and the undermining of social regulations on the one hand, and their chances for survival on the other. Most interestingly, Robinson affirms that the characters’ gender liminality and their ability to combine both masculine and feminine traits as well as to mix work and play (or seriousness and facetiousness) are decisive for the outcome of the fights.

The fourth lesson (‘Never feel sympathy for the killer’) deals again with the traumatic events constituting the basis for the murderous actions and dysfunctional life of the various villains — motivations that the audience, according to Robinson, sometimes takes for granted or that it receives passively. Robinson further demonstrates that the differences between the original versions of the films and the remakes produced between 2003 and 2010 consist mainly in the latter’s exploration of the villains’ pasts, in which the family unit assumes fundamental importance, as a source for the trauma (as in Rob Zombie’s *Halloween* (2007)) or as supportive of the murderous actions — as in both *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974) and its 2003 remake.

The author’s argument may sometimes appear to be simplistic to an expert of the horror genre, as when reducing the killers’ motivations to mere hostility to sexual practice or to affection towards a parental figure (as is the case, she claims, with Jason in Steve Miner’s *Friday the 13th: Part 2* (1981) and Norman Bates in Alfred Hitchcock’s *Psycho* (1960)). However, previously published critics’ arguments are well embedded in the main text and offer a good support of the author’s thesis, although there are no references to the current academic debate on ‘remakes’ and their relationship with the original sources.¹ Only in the fifth chapter (‘Teens never learn’) are the differences that have been introduced by the modern versions of the films explained in terms of a process of defamiliarisation intended to

upset the audience’s expectations — undoubtedly an original argument. The volume could also have made use of more illustrations and film stills to exhibit further the author’s arguments, and would also have benefitted from a more detailed study of individual scenes, including the mise en scène, camera angles and framing, or the use of lighting and sets.

Nevertheless, Life Lessons from Slasher Films eviscerates the slasher films’ characteristics and exposes them in front of the reader, just as the works linger on the gruesome and gory particulars of the victims’ wounds for the pleasure and horror of the spectators.

Antonio Sanna

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Eric Parisot, Graveyard Poetry: Religion, Aesthetics and the Mid-Eighteenth-Century Poetic Condition
(Farnham, Surrey; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2013)

Simply because of its subject matter, Eric Parisot’s book would be a much-needed contribution to the field, even if it were not the insightful and thoughtful exploration of the topic that it is. ‘Graveyard poetry’, a poetic moment that sits uneasily between the Augustans and the Romantics, is an area that has seen little attention in recent years. Meditating on mortality, and of what might be learned of the soul in conversing with the dead, it is a genre often mentioned in passing, relegated to the periphery of gothic, sentimental, or Romantic literature, or as a footnote in cultural histories of death and mourning. A full-length study, centred on the in-depth reading of key texts, is therefore a welcome addition to the study of eighteenth-century literature.

Parisot focuses closely on Robert Blair’s The Grave (1743), Edward Young’s Night Thoughts (1742–45), and Thomas Gray’s Elegy (1751). This comes as little surprise for those conversant with the subject, but it is important to be clear that elucidating the ‘mid-eighteenth-century poetic condition’ of the title entails here a discussion of the context that gave birth to these poems rather than a grand survey of the (relatively small) graveyard genre. The foundation of Parisot’s study is what the author sees as the period’s declining public piety in favour of private religious meditation, and the role of reading within this. The book’s first chapter, on the ‘theology of poetic salvation’, discusses the period’s debate over scriptural authority, the role of faith in individual salvation, and the nature of the soul’s moral character after death. Though the author recognises the challenge offered to mainstream
religious thought by Natural Religionists, Parisot presents here what is arguably only a simple dichotomy between ‘Protestant’ and Catholic understandings of death, the soul, and the afterlife. In neglecting the very real divisions between the various Dissenting creeds, the Church of Scotland, and the established Church of England, the study fails to address the significance of cultural differences in religious belief and practice that (at the very least) distinguish Blair from his Episcopalian peers.

Parisot’s chapter on Blair does not neglect the poet’s Calvinism, however, and the author argues that *The Grave* represents Blair’s (ultimately unsuccessful) struggle to reconcile the doctrine of salvation by faith alone with the authority and value of poetry. Parisot asserts that

> The poem itself is self-reflexively critiqued as both ephemeral and apocryphal and is presented as a self-sacrificing expression engulfed by its own grave, simultaneously exposing a suspicion of the didactic authority of the poet as a purveyor of self-instruction. (p. 73)

‘What remains’, writes Parisot, ‘is the sense of loss and absence, the subjective experience of death itself’ (p. 74).

Conversely, the author sees Young’s *Night Thoughts* as ‘an argument for the necessity of faith in poetic works’ (p. 8). Like Blair, Young seeks knowledge of the divine in consultation with the dead. Also like Blair, Young ‘resigns his poetic will and text in deference to the unknowable Almighty’ (p. 103). Where Young goes beyond his predecessor, Parisot argues, is in claiming a poetic authority that derives from the poet’s self-positioning as an active conduit for divine and poetic revelation (p. 102).

For Parisot, however, graveyard poetry’s achievement culminates in Gray’s pursuit of an autonomous poetic authority, not merely seeking to learn from the dead, but to assume their status as both a source of spiritual truth and as an object of commemoration. The author contrasts the passive endurance imagined in Gray’s early unpublished draft ‘Stanzas Wrote in a Country Church-Yard’ with the *Elegy*’s willing acceptance of death. Parisot argues that, through suicide, the elegist attains poetic agency and authority. The author invokes both Adam Smith’s theory of the impartial spectator and Hume’s sympathetic contagion, in a reading of the *Elegy* that ties poetic immortality to the creation of emotional affect. As he states,

> In successfully cultivating sentimental response, ensuring perpetual reading and negotiating a tangible social being, the *Elegy*, and the elegist, achieve the
highest office of undying poetic originality. For the elegist, and for Gray, poetic apotheosis is complete. (p. 151)

Parisot’s study holds up the *Elegy* as both end and pinnacle to the genre. The author seems to position graveyard poetry as a bridge between the devotional poetry of the early eighteenth century and the sentimentalism of the later, with Gray representing a breakthrough moment; he therefore sees such works as striving ‘to imaginatively recreate the experience of death rather than to peer down upon the truths of the grave from the safety of the living world’ (p. 154). I am inclined to criticise the implicit teleology of Parisot’s argument. The author makes a persuasive case that the three ‘greats’ of the genre each stretch towards an idea of which only Gray fully takes hold, but Parisot appears to continue from this insight to the point of claiming the *Elegy* as a major cultural pivot. As receptive as we might be to such a claim, in the light of Parisot’s argument, the implication from this is that graveyard poetry’s literary significance rests on its value as a link between cultural moments. For those of us who regard the idea of artistic ‘evolution’ with some scepticism, it is a sandy foundation for the genre’s stature.

These criticisms may appear tougher than they are meant. There is much to praise in Parisot’s book, from its engagement with the literary theory of the eighteenth century to its review of over two centuries of secondary criticism. Most importantly, *Graveyard Poetry* is an intelligently argued work of textual and historical criticism that explores an often-neglected field of literature — the sort of work that is an asset to any library, and one that addresses a now conspicuous gap in the field.

*Richard Gough Thomas*

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BOOKS RECEIVED

Xavier Aldana Reyes, *Body Gothic: Corporeal Transgression in Contemporary Literature and Horror Film* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2014)


Dara Downey, *American Women’s Ghost Stories in the Gilded Age* (Basingstoke; New York: Palgrave, 2014)


Andrzej Wicher, Piotr Spyra, and Johanna Matyjaszczyk (eds), *Basic Categories of Fantastic Literature Revisited* (Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2014)


Chris Woodyard (ed.), *The Victorian Book of the Dead* (Dayton: Kestrel Publications, 2014)

FILM REVIEWS

Wyrmwood: Road of the Dead (Kiah Roache-Turner) Australia 2014
Guerilla Films
(This review contains spoilers)

The third angel sounded his trumpet, and a great star, blazing like a torch, fell from the sky on a third of the rivers and on the springs of water — the name of the star is Wormwood. A third of the waters turned bitter, and many people died from the waters that had become bitter.
–Revelations 8:10–11

When you name your debut film after an apocalyptic star which is sent by some omnipotent deity to wreak havoc upon mankind, you better have the goods to back it up, and fortunately writer/director brothers Kiah and Tristan Roache-Turner’s Wyrmwood: Road of the Dead delivers. Zombie films have historically displayed a tendency to be framed within an eco-political narrative — think Dawn of Dead (both the 1978 original and its 2004 remake), Day of the Dead (1985), 28 Days Later (2002), and Land of the Dead (2005), for example. Like these, Wyrmwood is a film of its time which seeks to capitalise on fears regarding pollution, scientific misconduct, natural fuel shortages, and shifting power dynamics. Such themes, of course, closely parallel the Mad Max films, including the recent Mad Max: Fury Road (2015), a film to which Wyrmwood has been repeatedly compared. From the films’ subtitles (Road of the Dead vs. Fury Road) and depiction of the post-apocalyptic disintegration of society, to the way in which each posits female characters as not only being integral to a new way of life but actually the key to ensuring humanity’s survival, these films are indeed comparable.

The theme of resurrection may be located at the heart of both these films, but there is one marked distinction between Fury Road and Wyrmwood: where the former ultimately maintains a largely serious tone, the latter mostly takes an irreverent approach. What’s more, the world is beginning in Fury Road, and follows a road in the Australian outback that ultimately leads to a promise of rejuvenation and rebirth; by contrast, Wyrmwood travels along a road of the dead. For the protagonists in Wyrmwood, the world as they knew it is
ending, a fact which not only drives the narrative trajectory but also provides the basis for much of its black humour.

Within the first few high-octane and bombastic moments of the film, the tone is set. Four heavily shielded men, in suits of makeshift armour comprised of hockey pads and welding masks, run from under a garage door and into a herd of the undead in order to reclaim their truck with chains and hooks. As vibrant red blood from the exploding heads of the undead perforates the dominant greys of the opening shot’s mise en scène, the figure of Benny (Leon Burchill) stands amidst the chaos. With tufts of hair protruding from either side of his hockey mask, he goads the undead with a resolute, ‘come on you fucking zombies!’ While nothing about this scenario sounds particularly funny, the juxtaposition of Benny’s provocation, the accelerated pace interspersed with moments of slow motion and staccato movements, and the shambolic stumblings of the undead do hint at the film’s comic marrow.

Set in contemporary Australia, *Wyrmwood* tells the story of how two adult siblings find each other once the apocalypse has struck. Having lost his wife and child to a seemingly airborne zombie virus, Barry (Jay Gallagher) embarks upon a road-trip to find his sister Brooke (Bianca Bradby), accompanied by sidekick Benny. Once reunited, the brother-and-sister duo endeavour to defeat forces more sinister than the undead: renegade military powers who for some never-explained reason are kidnapping the living for scientific experiments. As a result of these experiments at the hands of a maniacal dancing scientist, and set to the dulcet notes of KC and the Sunshine Band’s ‘Get Down Tonight’, Brooke is dramatically transformed from victim to victor through quite an unusual innovation, thus providing a refreshing twist to what is often considered a genre at the edge of exhaustion.

At the same time, *Wyrmwood* does have issues elsewhere pertaining to character development. For example, some characters are represented as both tokenistic and stereotypical, as is the case with the military, all of whom are depicted as antagonistic alphas. Other, more interesting characters often seem to be squandered, a symptom perhaps of the accelerated pace at which the film moves. This is the case with Chalker (Yure Covich) whose altruistic efforts essentially save Barry from himself upon the immediate death of his wife. While he initially makes for a compelling inclusion to the plot as a counter-balance to Barry’s fatalistic nihilism, though, he is ultimately demoted to playing the role of a bumbling stoner. However, many of the film’s minor faults are saved by its fresh take on a number of themes such as religion, a theme which is typically more notable in zombie films due to its absence.

An apocalyptic harbinger, according to *The Book of Revelations*, ‘Wormwood’ is a disease-carrying star which will wipe out mankind, carrying the souls of the good to heaven.
and the bad to hell, and condemning those left behind on earth to endure a trial by fire. Religion in zombie texts usually comes in the form of a survivor’s quest to comprehend why the undead walk again. Protagonists therefore generally try retrospectively to uncover what we as a species have done to deserve such a plight, highlighting the jumbled uncertainty that humanity calls faith. While biblical references abound in *Wyrmwood*, unlike the Spanish zombie film *R.E.C.* (2007), which ultimately uses spiritualism as an engaging plot device, it is strongly implied here that divine intervention within the world of *Wyrmwood* is contingent upon humanity’s ultimate quest to destroy itself through science.

Emblematic of this destruction, *Wyrmwood* employs the trope of the psychotic mad-scientist whose experiments on both the living and the ‘dead’ hint at possible explanations for why the latter are returning as flesh-crazed zombies. Seen as far back as Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818), the trope of the mad scientist is not necessarily a novel theme within zombie narratives. Yet the manner in which *Wyrmwood* invokes the trope of the mad scientist as an unhinged disco-dancing enthusiast is not only evocative of Quentin Tarantino’s *Reservoir Dogs* (1992), but also seeks to denigrate the position of man-made science, so that it comes to seem like little more than comic buffoonery in the shadow of the greater laws of natural science. As a consequence, *Wyrmwood* shares a further similarity with *Mad Max: Fury Road*, in that it reveres the laws of Mother Nature above the dogmatism of religion and man-made science.

While eco-undertones and theological rhetoric do permeate the film in quite innovative ways, what really distinguishes this zombie film is a satisfying return to comic horror that combines absurd zombie humour with apocalyptic logic. Though punctuated with quite surprising moments of pathos, such as Frank’s (Keith Agius) admission about the death of his son, for the most part *Wyrmwood* is outlandish without being slapstick and immensely macabre without being morbid. When Old-Testament warnings have materialised, and family members who once loved and cherished you are now clutching at your throat in order to rip it open and eat the contents, all bets are pretty much off. Thus, within the world of a zombie apocalypse, you can pretty much get away with murder, which is essentially what Brooke and Barry manage to do. Like the fallen star which seeks to root out all that is corrupt in mankind, Brooke and Barry have made their peace with the dead and now set their sights upon the evil which lives.

*Sarah Cleary*

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‘For me, the entry point was the idea of facing the unfaceable’, says director Jennifer Kent of her 2014 debut film *The Babadook*.¹ Arguably the backbone of every horror film or fiction ever written, the idea of ‘facing the unfaceable’ is hardly a revolutionary approach in terms of genre. What is interesting about Kent’s film, however, is the overwhelming emphasis on the return of the repressed, drawing an overt connection between supernatural and psychological haunting; or in other words, the idea that what is perceived as supernatural haunting is actually a result of psychological trauma. This has led many reviewers to posit that the real monster in the film is not Kent’s antipodean bogeyman, the Babadook, but rather the repressed grief of the main characters that is embodied by the figure.

The plot centres on widowed single mother Amelia (Essie Davis), who is traumatised by the death of her husband seven years previously. The opening scene is a disorientating, dream-like sequence in which Amelia relives the moment her husband was killed in a car accident as he drove her to hospital to give birth to their son, Samuel (Noah Wiseman). The film draws the reader into Amelia’s daily grind — her mundane job, her difficult, demanding son, her self-centred sister, and her overall lethargy with life. Davis’s portrayal of the harassed single mother is convincing, as the viewer begins to sympathise with her manifestly un-maternalistic impulses. During their nightly bedtime-story ritual, Samuel pulls the eponymous book from the bookshelf: *The Babadook*. The striking red cover of the book stands out in stark contrast to the grey-blue visual tone of the film, which Kent originally considered shooting in black and white. The rhyming narrative contained within the picture-book becomes increasingly disturbing as Amelia reads on, shifting from the initial depiction of the Babadook as a friendly but shadowy figure, to that of a malignant, lurking predator in a matter of pages. The refrain ‘you can’t get rid of the Babadook’ becomes a sinister incantation, coupled with the repeated summons ‘baba ba-dook-dook-dook’, three sharp knocks that indicate the Babadook’s desire to ‘get in’. The claustrophobic feeling of the film increases as the story progresses, focusing almost exclusively on the mother-son dyad and their interaction with the book, with the action being situated for the most part in their

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unnecessarily large, but suitably creepy Victorian house. The book itself undergoes various forms of destruction: it’s hidden only to reappear on the bookshelf; it’s shredded and binned only to materialise on the doorstep, crudely taped back together with a few additional pages prophesying Amelia’s filicide (which by this stage, the viewer is also considering!); finally, it’s burned by Amelia in the classic cathartic act of exorcism. But, of course, the Babadook is not so easily expunged from their lives, as the book suggestively reminds us: ‘the more you deny me, the stronger I get’.

The film is consciously folkloric in theme and tone, with Kent herself admitting that the word ‘Babadook’ was deliberately crafted to evoke the sort of gobbledygook name that a child would invent for a monster. One interviewer quotes Kent as stating that her objective was to ‘create a myth in a domestic setting’, and that ‘even though it happened to be in some strange suburb in Australia somewhere, it could have been anywhere [...] I’m very happy, actually, that it doesn’t feel particularly Australian’. Kent’s disavowal of the film’s Australian provenance strikes me as particularly odd in that the film seems to be very much informed by its locale. Indeed, how could it not be, given that it features an exclusively white, middle-class Australian cast of characters, worth noting, in this regard, as they are strikingly juxtaposed with the black figure of the Babadook. The word Babadook itself, in fact, is evocative of Aboriginal etymology, similarly constructed using a combination of elongated vowels and hard g/k sounds. Although the Babadook is entirely of Kent’s invention, she nevertheless roots it deliberately in a mythology, with the book itself being the material example of this. This would seem to contradict the assertion that the film is placeless, given that myths are typically deeply culturally inscribed and inherited. Myths are also perpetuated primarily, if not exclusively, through narrative means, again signposted by the book as a haunted object, or rather, an object that induces haunting through its narrative. Certainly, if nothing else, the setting is a refreshing re-orientation away from the ubiquitous American backdrop of much contemporary horror cinema.

Considered in light of these elements — the white, suburban setting, the folkloric aspect, the Aboriginal trace — the form of possession that the Babadook takes assumes a particularly racial quality. The book lingers on the image of ‘the Babadook growing right under your skin’, suggesting that this entity is externally infectious but also develops from within. This is not unlike the relation between supernatural and psychological haunting, each

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being informed by the other in that externalised, supernatural haunting is often configured as the result of some subjective trauma. It could be argued that the shadowy figure of the Babadook, the silhouette of whom is visible in the background of many shots, represents the Aboriginal, the Australian Other, the shadowy figure that haunts the white Australian consciousness as a result of collective cultural trauma, a legacy of colonialism. The entity is imbibed and later abjected by Amelia, entering and exiting through her mouth. As she vomits a black substance onto the basement floor — the basement being the place where all Amelia’s dead husband’s things are kept, and psychologically evocative of the unconscious, of course — it stains her skin in the process, a further indication of a racial subtext, or perhaps more generally suggestive of how we bear the marks of psychological experiences, subjective or otherwise.

However you interpret The Babadook, the film offers some genuinely good scares without resorting to cheap jump tactics, gradually drawing the viewer in and building the terror to a climactic crescendo. Though the conclusion is somewhat dissatisfying, there is an acknowledged return to the classic horror-movie format here in terms of the haunted-house setting, the folkloric bugbear, and the eventual reunification of a fractured family unit. Coupled with this, the visual tone and eerie soundtrack add a pleasing stylistic touch that is so often absent from big-budget horrors. It is somewhat reminiscent of cult classic Donnie Darko (2001) in this regard, blurring the boundary between psychological and supernatural projections, while maintaining an ethereal aesthetic that eschews cliché. With such high expectations following this debut, it will be interesting to see what Kent’s imagination conjures up next.

Aoife M. Dempsey

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Leprechaun: Origins (Dir. Zach Lipovsky) USA 2014
WWE Studios/Lionsgate
(This review contains spoilers)

After an eleven-year break, the Leprechaun franchise has been rebooted with a whole new look, attempting a seriousness not found in its six predecessors and likely disappointing fans of those more comical, campy films. The feature-film directorial debut for Zach Lipovsky, Leprechaun: Origins follows a more traditional horror formula than the original, and sees two young American couples — the career-driven Sophie (Stephanie Bennett) and Ben (Andrew
Dunbar), and the laid-back Jennifer (Melissa Roxburgh) and David (Brendan Fletcher) — travel to a small Irish village in search of Celtic artefacts mentioned in history-buff Sophie’s guidebook. Not finding these, they stop in the local pub, described by David as having ‘old Irish charm’, and meet Hamish (Garry Chalk) who tells them of the ‘Stones of the Gods’, which are a seven-mile hike away, and not mentioned in guidebooks in order to keep the village private from tourists. He offers them a ‘cabin in the woods’ for the night, supposedly near the start of the trail to the stones. However, it turns out that the area is inhabited by a leprechaun to whom the villagers owe a debt for mining his gold years before, and the young travellers are actually locked in the cabin overnight as a sacrifice to the creature. Hamish has been protecting his community from the wrath of the leprechaun for years by offering up tourists in this way. It is from this point on that the horror ensues and the characters are picked off one by one, until only the expected survivor remains.

The most notable departure from the source material taken by *Leprechaun: Origins*, and the driving force for its less playful tone is the fact that the leprechaun has become more creature than character. He no longer speaks, but instead growls and grunts. He is also much less visible to the audience, who mostly see claws or shaky close-up shots of an alien-like face. When he is shown in full, his movements appear almost gorilla-like in congruence with the sounds he produces. With this re-characterisation, actor Warwick Davis, known for playing the Leprechaun role, is replaced by wrestling superstar Dylan ‘Hornswoggle’ Postl, whose first appearance in the WWE ring was also as a leprechaun character. His debut in this film requires more physicality than acting skills, however, as he has no dialogue and the few shots we do see of his character reveal simply a generic monster. Not only has the leprechaun lost his voice, but the transformation to this creature has affected his vision as well. POV shots reveal that the leprechaun inexplicably now seeks out human targets through a type of thermal, or ‘gold’ vision, similar to that found in the *Predator* films, reconstructing him as more of a ‘hunter’. While the original leprechaun was a quippy troll-like man in a green suit with a predilection for cleaning shoes, playing twisted tricks, and using his supernatural powers to mimic voices, levitate, teleport, and escape death (except by four-leaf clover), this new leprechaun is a primordial beast that lacks magical power (other than its vision) and brings only villainy and gore to the table. The acquisition of gold no longer seems to be his sole objective as he now accepts offerings of innocent people (apparently needing to feed on humans), though he will still take any of the precious metal that he comes across. This results in close-ups, not only of gold jewellery being pulled out of ears and tongues, but also several deep cuts, impaling, and a particularly gruesome death in which a spinal cord is torn out. Due
to this complete alteration of the title character, the only connection this film (the first in the franchise not to credit Mark Jones as a writer) has to its predecessors is the use of the classic line, ‘fuck you, Lucky Charms’.

Though this film intends to rebrand the Leprechaun franchise from comic to dark and grim in tone, it fails to make a serious attempt at the portrayal of Ireland. The only film in the franchise to be set in Ireland, it was actually filmed in Vancouver, Canada, and contains quite a few questionable moments in its representation of Ireland. Elements of the setting seem out of place, including vehicles more suited for a safari-type expedition and references to a prevalent population of wild boars. Though there are a number of Irish characters in the film, none of them are played by Irish actors, quite a range of accents are heard amongst the population of a single village, and the key local character is given the Scottish name of Hamish. The Irish language itself is mistranslated in the film when Sophie finds a book and, using it to figure out what they are up against, tells the group that Tuatha Dé Danann means ‘leprechaun’. In fact, it refers to a mythological tribe of supernatural kings and queens who were worshipped as deities. Though leprechauns, like other Irish fairies, may be derived from the Tuatha Dé Danann, they appear more prominently in later folklore and stereotype than in the ancient mythology. Despite the film’s title, which suggests that the subject of the creature’s back-story will be explored, there are no attempts at incorporating the legend of the leprechaun beyond this small link. Many of these elements would perhaps not be noticeable to the intended American audience, but they make it hard for an Irish audience to take the film seriously.

Overall, while the reboot does give this film a darker tone than the rest of the entries in the Leprechaun franchise, it actually detracts from its success in this case. The loss of the campiness that gave the earlier films their charm is not made up for in Harris Wilkinson’s screenplay, which follows generic formula too closely, resulting in a predictable storyline and characters. In addition to the film’s lack of leprechaun lore and its predictability, the plot is problematic in a number of ways, perhaps the most obvious of these being that, despite the fact that the leprechaun no longer has supernatural powers, the villagers as a whole have been unable to kill it for years. Enter four American teenagers who manage to foil the murderous attempts of the creature, and the villagers, for almost the first hour of the film. Though three of them do eventually die, Sophie single-handedly manages to behead the leprechaun in the end, begging the question why no one else could.

Of course, the growling heard after the beheading suggests that the leprechaun has developed the power to resurrect, or that there are others nearby. This sets up the possibility
for a sequel which, like this film, despite its problems, is likely to make profits with a straight-to-VOD and DVD release, following the pattern of a number of other films in the genre that do not strive for ingenuity. Ultimately, *Leperchaun: Origins* falls short of the unique and grim representation of leprechaun folklore that it could have been, instead settling in the ranks of creature features that lack truly distinctive qualities.

*Loretta Goff*

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*It Follows (Dir. David Robert Mitchell) USA 2014*

Northern Lights Films/Animal Kingdom/Two Flints

(This review contains spoilers)

*It Follows* was released in Ireland and the UK several months ago, having already garnered very positive reviews from festival screenings in the US and elsewhere. In some respects, the film absolutely merits the praise that has been bestowed upon it. However, for this reviewer at least, it also has one major problem that undermines the suggestion from some quarters that it be anointed a modern genre classic: as we shall see, the sense of familiarity that it goes out of its way to inspire is both its greatest strength and greatest weakness.

The basic plot presents us with an intriguing take on the clichéd ‘sex = death’ dynamic seen in so many other suburban horror films about teenagers. Protagonist Jay’s (Maika Monroe) decision to have sex with ‘Hugh’ (Jake Weary), the new boyfriend she has been dating for a few weeks, has consequences so immediate and bizarre that in other hands they may have made the film seem almost puritanical; were it not for the fact that Mitchell depicts Jay’s plight with considerable empathy and nuance, this would seem like a textbook case of supernatural ‘slut shaming’. After their initially consensual liaison, Jay is chloroformed, tied to a wheelchair, and forced to listen as ‘Hugh’ (who is actually a Jeff, and has been hiding his true identity, for reasons that soon become obvious) explains that he has just passed on what is essentially a sexually transmitted ghost, a ‘thing’ which will slowly follow and then kill her, unless she decides to perpetuate the curse and ‘pass it along’. It’s a stunningly staged scene, and one that sets up the premise in an efficient and eerily atmospheric manner. It’s just a shame that the rest of the film never quite lives up to it. The one truly original aspect of the film lies in the fact that the shape-shifting ‘it’ which will now doggedly follow Jay does so at walking pace, a detail that intensifies rather than diminishes her (and our) fear for her safety. This is essentially the slowest chase movie of all time, which
lends Jay’s dilemma the ridiculous yet implacable logic of a nightmare from which it is impossible to awake.

As several other reviewers have noted, the entity which subsequently appears to Jay in both familiar (as friends and family members) and unfamiliar forms, tends to appear naked, or in underwear/dishevelled clothing. Sometimes the apparition manifests itself in the guise of an individual in an obviously brutalised state. This might suggest that it embodies a literalised representation of sexual trauma, with the victims rendered as a succession of mindless, mute ghosts, forever trapped in the immediate aftermath of their initial ordeal. In a tendency that is regrettably emblematic of the film as a whole, however, this intriguing idea is never effectively explored (in part because, as the ambiguous ending demonstrates, Mitchell has no problem with leaving plot threads hanging). The film’s exploration of victimhood may, however, find its most obvious expression in the story of Jay herself, who appears to be suffering from severe trauma throughout, both as a result of her assault at Jeff’s hands and the subsequent uncanny revelations that serve to destabilise her reality.

Adding to these suggestive elements is the fact that, from the outset, Mitchell also makes it clear that Jay is constantly subject to voyeuristic male attention. Two local boys spy on her in the pool and later peek in at her while she lies in her bed, recuperating from her attack; childhood friend Paul (Keir Gilchrist) appears caring but is obsessively fixated on her; and neighbour Greg (Daniel Zovatto) is a charming but unreliable cad who has treated Jay badly in the past and doesn’t really believe her story (to his own detriment). Even before the haunting begins, therefore, Jay is beset by men who are either absent (her father), predatory (like Jeff), or, like Paul, all too willing to take advantage of her vulnerable state for their own sexual and emotional gratification. If one were to remove from the film altogether the scenes in which other characters see evidence of the ghost’s object-throwing abilities, it would seem very much like a story tracing the psychological ramifications of rape, with the entire haunting being a hallucination brought on by trauma. One could therefore also see the entity being emblematic of the more general abuse of female sexuality imbedded in mainstream culture — although this might also be crediting the film with a thematic coherency I’m not entirely sure it possesses. However, while it represents the film’s most interesting interpretative possibility, this is also a plot development which, as the likes of Keir-La Janisse’s outstanding book *House of Psychotic Women: An Autobiographical Topography of Female Neurosis in Horror Films* (2012) makes clear, is in itself by no means at all uncommon within the genre.
The film’s intriguing but ultimately underdeveloped undertones of (potentially) feminist protest are juxtaposed throughout with scenes in which the inherent liminality of the narrative’s setting, a suburban neighbourhood just outside of Detroit, is underlined. The inherent in-between-ness of the locale is emphasised from the start by the visual and narrative focus on the neighbourhood’s proximity to the natural world. Mitchell uses the real-life industrial and suburban ruins of present-day Detroit as a resonant backdrop. At one point, the teenagers even refer to the neighbourhood that separates the suburbs from the city as ‘the border’ as if to underline the implication (always erroneous within the suburban gothic tradition) that safety and security lie on one side only: the suburban side, of course. Jay’s neighbourhood, like the ghost that stalks her (and possibly Jay herself) is trapped between two worlds. It is also likely that symbolic significance lies in the fact that the bodies of water featured here are all in some sense surrounded by barriers (be they natural or man-made), a detail which underlines the film’s broader interest in themes of confinement and inevitability. We first meet Jay as she immerses herself in a backyard pool. It’s an activity that seems to represent one of her primary forms of escapism, yet at the same time suggests that, despite her desperate attempts to transcend the world around her, Jay remains stuck in one place, literally treading water.

As suggested by my analysis so far, It Follows is often genuinely enthralling, with a dreamy atmosphere that can transition from the gently melancholic to ‘Oh-dear-god-it’s-right-behind-you’ flurries of panic in the blink of an eye. The young cast, led by the excellent Monroe, is good in a self-consciously naturalistic fashion, Rich Vreeland’s electronic score pulses and rumbles ominously, and Mitchell has an undeniably sharp eye for the disquieting deployment of the implacable, shape-shifting entity. Yet there is one major problem here: the almost complete lack of thematic, visual, or narrative originality (slow-walking ghost aside). To call this film derivative would be a polite understatement; any half-way knowledgeable horror enthusiast will experience a strong sensation of déjà vu throughout, most particularly in relation to Mitchell’s recurrent reliance upon Halloween-style slow tracking shots. In addition, the actual composition of many of his most striking images — such as repeated scenes in which teenagers appear on non-descript suburban streets in various states of sinisterly suggestive undress — owes much to the work of photographer Gregory Crewdson, and in particular, his 2003 series ‘Twilight’. The opening scene of It Follows, in which a young woman careens out of her home in night-clothes and, incongruously, a pair of high heels, as if in pursuit from an attacker whom no one else can see (which later proves to have
been the case), is essentially a Crewdson still that has been brought to life, albeit with substantial input from the opening scene of Hideo Nakata’s The Ring (1998).

In fact, while the debt It Follows owes to Halloween has rightly been noted by most critics, the core premise — that of a curse which must be deliberately passed on to someone else if the protagonist is to survive — is straight out of Ring’s playbook. Ring author Koji Suzuki also entitled a short-story collection Dark Water, which could almost be an alternate title for It Follows, given the prominence that bodies of H₂O are afforded here. Ultimately, it all adds up to a sense that what we have here is an undeniably clever, well-acted, and atmospheric effort that at the same time blatantly cribs many of its best moments, plot developments, and visual flourishes from pre-existing genre material. Although It Follows explores anxieties surrounding female sexuality in particular in an undeniably sensitive fashion, it is also a savvy and occasionally pretentious assemblage of familiar elements precision-engineered for the festival circuit. As such, it is likely to frustrate those familiar with the horror genre as much as it impresses.

Bernice M. Murphy

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The Haunted Palace (Dir. Roger Corman) US 1963
Blu-ray release: Arrow Films 2015

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The Complete Dr. Phibes — The Abominable Dr. Phibes (Dir. Robert Fuest) UK 1971 /
Dr. Phibes Rises Again (Dir. Robert Fuest) UK 1972
Blu-ray release: Arrow Films 2014

From the late 1950s until the late 1970s, one actor reigned as American cinema’s king of horror: Vincent Price. The careers of most of today’s movie stars often seem to peak when they are still in their thirties, but Price was nearing fifty when he began appearing in the genre pictures which eventually made him a hero to millions. Although his rise to fame was slow, Price certainly made up for it in his later years. The sheer number and range of movies he made in the 1960s alone was astonishing. It is some of the classics from this period, including House of Usher (1960), The Pit and the Pendulum (1961), The Masque of the Red Death (1964), and Witchfinder General (1968), which assured him the lasting adoration of new generations of horror fans.

While it took years before his talents were recognised by Hollywood, Price’s timing could not have proven better. When the kind of gothic-horror epics which had been out of
fashion for most of the 1950s were revived at the end of that decade, Price was ready to take all the juiciest parts. With his mellifluous voice, Mephistophelean looks, snide charm, and air of brooding and otherworldly menace, Price was a larger-than-life figure ideally equipped to bring a gallery of fantastic gothic characters to the screen.

Inevitably, some of Price’s movies turned out better than others. Indeed, he would have been the first to admit that many were terrible. On the other hand, their fantastic production rate means that a number of superb films overlooked in their day now await rediscovery. Arrow Films have done much to encourage this, by releasing many of Price’s movies in luxurious Blu-ray editions, with restored visuals and sound, and packed with intriguing extras. Recently, they have added two very different titles, one of which will be known to all Vincent Price fans and another with which even some of his most devoted admirers may be unfamiliar: *The Complete Dr. Phibes* (1971/72) and *The Haunted Palace* (1963).

To begin with the earlier film, *The Haunted Palace* has long been perceived as forming part of the ‘Poe Cycle’ directed by Roger Corman between 1960 and 1965, and based on the works of the grand master of American gothic literature. *The Haunted Palace* may take its title from Poe’s 1839 poem but there its only legitimate connection with him ends. Instead, the movie’s real distinction, and what shall make it especially interesting for modern horror enthusiasts, is that it is the very first screen version of a tale by H. P. Lovecraft. Roger Corman, wishing to move beyond Poe, convinced American International Pictures to back a film based on Lovecraft’s ‘The Case of Charles Dexter Ward’. They agreed, with the caveat that it should be marketed purely as a Poe movie, and that Lovecraft only be given a minor writing credit.

Price plays Charles Dexter Ward, who travels to the New-England village of Arkham with his bride Anne to claim an ancient mansion he has inherited. Arriving in the ruinous, fog-shrouded town, they quickly detect that all is not well in Arkham. The locals demand that they leave, frightful mutants wander the streets, and an atmosphere of dread hangs over the place. Captivated by an uncanny portrait of his great-great-grandfather Joseph Curwen, Ward discovers that his ancestor was burned for witchcraft a century before, but not before cursing the town. Falling under Curwen’s malignant influence, Ward resumes the sorcerer’s diabolical experiments in inter-dimensional cross-breeding.

Frequently dismissed as one of Corman’s lesser films, *The Haunted Palace* is actually one of his best. The screenplay, by the noted author Charles Beaumont (who wrote many classic *Twilight Zone* episodes, as well as scripting *Night of the Eagle* (1962) and *The
Masque of the Red Death (1963)), is a cunning adaptation of Lovecraft’s original and solves many of the structural problems which left Lovecraft himself dissatisfied with the story. The Haunted Palace also displays Corman’s artful ability to make movies for a few hundred thousand dollars which looked like they cost several million. Daniel Haller’s inventive sets and Floyd Crosby’s stunning cinematography make this one of the era’s most stylish horror films, something which can now be fully appreciated thanks to Arrow’s beautiful restoration work. The only disappointment remains the climactic manifestation of Cthulhu, clearly a shoddily made glove puppet.

This weak point notwithstanding, The Haunted Palace allows Price to demonstrate his range as both the benevolent Ward and the evil Curwen. He is ably supported by the impressive Debra Paget, the perpetually creepy Elisha Cook Jr, and Lon Chaney Jr, giving his final film performance. Unlike the eerie earlier entries in the ‘Poe Cycle’, The Haunted Palace is also genuinely frightening thanks to Corman’s tense direction. Easily the most memorable moment is the nightmarish scene in which Ward and Anne are slowly but inexorably surrounded by a band of ghastly mutations. If the film alone were not enough, this exemplary release also contains a treasure trove of commentaries, an interview with Corman, Kim Newman on Lovecraftian cinema, and specially commissioned artwork.

Arrow’s other Price-related releases, The Abominable Dr. Phibes and Dr. Phibes Rises Again, remain arguably the actor’s finest cinematic foray. Made back to back in 1971/72, they are not just a synthesis of every horror movie Price had made up until then; they are two of the genre’s true classics. Masterminded by a completely original cinematic talent, director Robert Fuest, and written by James Whiton and William Goldstein, Dr. Phibes sees the titular deranged scientific genius, concert organist, and Biblical scholar seek revenge on the medical team who failed to save his beloved wife Victoria after the car crash which also left him hideously disfigured. Phibes turns to the Old Testament, devising horrible deaths based upon the Ten Plagues visited upon Egypt. Before long, pillars of the British medical establishment are rapidly being eliminated in fantastically gruesome ways, much to the bewilderment of Scotland Yard.

The brilliance of Dr. Phibes lies in its extraordinarily vibrant execution. Not one shot lacks imaginative flair, and its art direction, cinematography, and set designs give it a dazzling, ‘Art Deco meets Glam Rock’ look. Price is at his maniacal best here, hammering out Mendelsohn on his futuristic pipe organ while gleefully plotting the destruction of his latest victim with his glamorous silent assistant Vulnavia (Virginia North). Since Phibes has a rubber mask for a face and can only speak when plugged into a gramophone, it’s to Price’s
enormous credit that he still manages to give a performance which is both exceptionally sinister and also strangely poignant. In addition, Fuest populates his world with a marvellous collection of oddballs, played by the likes of Hugh Griffith, Terry-Thomas, and John Laurie.

Almost as visually rich, *Dr. Phibes Rises Again* is the weaker film thanks to its rushed pacing, confused ending, and the comparatively uninspired methods by which Phibes dispatches his enemies. This time, the reanimated lunatic heads to the Valley of the Kings to harness the River of Life and restore Victoria, only a step behind his ruthless nemesis Darius Biederbeck (Robert Quarry), who is bent on winning immortality too. While the *Phibes* films have never lacked admirers, occasionally they have been accused of being hollow pieces whose only real pleasure consists in watching people die in a variety of unusually nasty ways. What prevents this is their astonishingly lively, albeit jet-black, sense of humour and their inventive subversion of archetypal horror film formulas. It’s also important to remember that, along with 1973’s *Theatre of Blood*, the *Phibes* movies represent the very last of the original Golden Age of horror cinema, before a very different new breed of film came to dominate the genre.

Although both films have long been available on DVD, Arrow’s *The Complete Dr. Phibes* is the first opportunity most horror aficionados have had to see Fuest’s unique vision as it was first presented in cinemas. Apart from the gloriously restored prints of the films themselves, this set includes an exhaustive array of extras which should be enough to satisfy even the most fanatical *Phibes* obsessive, including commentaries by the late director himself and screenwriter William Goldstein, a documentary on Price, The League of Gentlemen discussing their enthusiasm for the good doctor, and a 100-page booklet. This is an absolutely outstanding release, and (as with *The Haunted Palace*) it is one which befits these superior horror films.

Edward O’Hare

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*Tusk (Dir. Kevin Smith)* USA 2014
Demarest Films
(This review contains spoilers)

Horror has long been known for exploiting the rich potential of the animal kingdom to frighten audiences. This dynamic is most prominently seen in the ‘creature feature’, which exaggerates the truly monstrous qualities of fierce wildlife to evoke dread. From the
predatory stealth of the great white shark in *Jaws* (1975), to the diminutive but no less deadly spider in *Arachnophobia* (1990), the creature feature has in fact undergone a revival in popularity as of late, particularly following the release of outlandish TV movie *Sharknado* (2013). However, animal-themed subject matter has also regularly been explored in the sub-type of ‘body horror’, during which a beast colonises a person’s body, a category perhaps best exemplified by *An American Werewolf in London* (1981). As with the creature feature, filmmakers have also drawn upon what are perceived to be less obviously dangerous fauna and so infuse comedy, in an attempt to breathe new life and originality back into animal-centric body horror. For instance, latter years have seen the turn of the unassuming sheep in 2006’s *Black Sheep* and even the humble beaver in *Zombeavers* (2014).

Not only have animals acted as a source of fear by inhabiting human bodies through various curses and infectious mutations, they have also found themselves to be either directly or indirectly involved in scientific experiments which fabricate human/animal hybrids, from the botched teleportation test of *The Fly* (1986), to investigators dabbling in ethically questionable genetic research in *Splice* (2009). It is from this tradition that Kevin Smith’s *Tusk* (2014) emerges, and is set to tarnish irreversibly the image of the decidedly innocuous walrus. While some of Smith’s previous contributions undoubtedly contain sinister undertones, such as 2011’s *Red State*, *Tusk* represents his first legitimate foray into horror, and is the primary offering in the upcoming Canadian-centred ‘True North’ trilogy. *Tusk* melds aspects of the forced captivity familiar from torture porn with the kinds of bizarre interspecies fusions engineered in *The Island of Dr. Moreau* (1977) and *The Human Centipede* series (2009–2015), all the while securely anchored in Smith’s cult-film and indie sensibilities.

*Tusk* follows podcaster Wallace Bryton (played by the criminally underrated Justin Long), who, along with his friend Teddy (Haley Joel Osment), hosts an online comedic radio show dubbed ‘The Not-See Party’, which celebrates the lives of weird and wonderful individuals. The film opens with the pair mocking the star of an internet video — The Kill Bill Kid — who has cut off his own leg with a sword while emulating moves from Quentin Tarantino’s seminal movie. Despite objections from his girlfriend Ally (Genesis Rodriguez), Wallace travels to Canada to interview the viral sensation, only to find he has since taken his own life. Still pursuing a story for the broadcast, Bryton stumbles across a handwritten ad left by an elderly gent who seeks the company of someone with whom he can share his life’s adventures. Wallace responds to the message, and arranges to meet its author, a wheelchair-bound man named Howard Howe (Michael Parks), who lives alone in his elegant home,
surrounded by precious curios and mementos from his travels. As the pair become acquainted over tea, Howe describes an incident in which he was shipwrecked at sea, only to wash up on an island on the brink of death. It was here, he claims, that he found protection and salvation in the company of a walrus whom he christens ‘Mr Tusk’, and with whom he forged a deep and meaningful bond. As Howe recounts his tale, Bryton becomes increasingly drowsy and eventually collapses to the floor unconscious.

The next day, Wallace awakens to find himself confined to a wheelchair, at which time Howe persuades him that he had fallen unconscious due to a spider bite, and, as a result, a local doctor had to amputate his leg to save his life. Wallace’s immediate shock is palpable, while Howe constantly maintains a measured, albeit deceitful facade. It is later that evening over supper that Howe outlines his scheme to transform his detainee into a walrus, using a lifelike walrus suit he has fashioned, in addition to which he insists that his victim behaves like the creature; at this point the striking similarity of Wallace’s name to ‘walrus’ takes on extra significance. When questioned as to his motivation for his actions, Howe’s veil of sanity slips as he reveals an alarming loss of touch with reality, proclaiming his ambition ‘to solve a riddle older than the sphinx. To answer the question which has plagued us since we crawled from the surf and stood erect in the sun. Is man, indeed, a walrus at heart?’

Meanwhile, having been alerted to his capture, the film also tracks Teddy and Ally’s efforts to retrace Wallace’s movements in order to rescue him.

_Tusk_’s opening act is especially solid, specifically the initial encounter between Wallace and Howe, which plays to Smith’s aptitude for dialogue-driven scripts, as their exchanges are engaging and witty without feeling contrived, allowing the banter to flow freely back and forth. The instances of extended conversation facilitate character development naturally, without depending upon awkward exposition; indeed, the tension generated following the revelation of the plan echoes that found in the imprisonment of Paul Sheldon by Annie Wilkes in _Misery_ (1990). But it is Howe’s incentive for the conversion that is remarkably unique for the body-horror genre. It transpires that Howe was obliged to kill and eat Mr Tusk to survive, and has since murdered as many as twenty-three people. Thus, he now seeks to resolve an internal conflict which requires an unwilling participant to assume the walrus identity and re-enact the scene of this butchering — but now in the form of a duel in which Howe must die. Accordingly, he aims to conduct and direct his own death in a performance that will free him from his compulsion to overcome the guilt he suffers for slaughtering Mr Tusk; in other words a _passage à l’acte_ that will at last permit him to exit the stage forever.
The talent of both lead actors in *Tusk* functions to lend gravitas to what is admittedly an otherwise ludicrous plot. Parks excels in preserving the controlled intensity of the distinguished old seafarer, and his account of his ordeal is reminiscent of Quint’s monologue regarding the ill-fated *USS Indianapolis* from *Jaws*, confirming the film’s positioning of the sea as a haunting backdrop, ripe with material for horror. Likewise, Long’s acting prowess is only further demonstrated by taking his character’s unsettling and uncanny predicament and imbuing Wallace’s abject dread with a dimension of authenticity and humanity, in a portrayal that hearkens back to what is arguably the most tragic of human-to-animal transformations, Jeff Goldblum’s Brundlefly in *The Fly* (1986). In conjunction with his earlier work in the *Jeepers Creepers* franchise (2001, 2003), and 2009’s *Drag Me to Hell*, Long’s turn in *Tusk* will continue to cement his reputation as one of his generation’s most consistent scream kings. However, the unexpected, and uncredited appearance by Johnny Depp as former homicide detective Guy Lapointe is a casting choice that will either come as a pleasant surprise partly due to its absence from the film’s marketing, or succeed in inducing groans, a response which will likely depend upon whether or not the viewer has grown weary of the oversaturation of Depp’s quirky, eccentric shtick in recent years. While this may not be his most peculiar role, Lapointe is certainly one of Depp’s more tolerable oddballs and in fact delivers moments of genuine levity despite residing safely within the actor’s comfort zone of mad hatters.

At first, the premise of *Tusk* might seem so ridiculous and self-assured (typified by the inclusion of Depp’s character) that the film might be accused of exuding an air of smugness; ultimately, though, this is not the case. While the bulk of the jesting involves a playful teasing of Canadian cultural stereotypes by the American characters, it is this subtle use of humour which allows Smith to keep his tongue firmly in his cheek, granting respite from the disturbing walrus transformation, and providing stark contrast when juxtaposed against these overtly horrific scenes, thereby keeping the film moving at a steady pace. Yet, the principle reason I recommend *Tusk* is that it reinvigorates the effective power of storytelling as a narrative device, prioritising this over predictable plot points and cheap jump scares so often resorted to in modern horror.

Most surprisingly, the film operates as a compelling character study, as the real terror of *Tusk* lies not just in Wallace’s plight, but rather in how the walrus stands as a cipher for greater traumas experienced by Howe, a man persecuted by the spectre of the neglect and institutional abuse he alleges to have endured throughout his formative years. It is only in his complete isolation at sea, whereupon he adopts Mr Tusk as a type of surrogate attachment
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figure, that Howe welcomes a modicum of reprieve from his life’s hardship, all of which serves to portray him as an intriguing, sympathetic, but ultimately troubled soul.

Gavin Wilkinson

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TELEVISION REVIEWS

Wayward Pines (Fox, 2015)
(This review contains spoilers)

Several factors influenced my decision to start watching Fox’s Wayward Pines, not least the fact that it came recommended as a mix of two ground-breaking cult television series, Patrick McGoohan’s The Prisoner (1967–68) and David Lynch’s Twin Peaks (1990–91). Moreover, M. Night Shyamalan’s involvement as series producer and director of the opening episode suggested the show was likely to offer an eye-opening experience and an entertaining ride, even if the quality of this experience was far from certain. The most compelling motivation, though, was the discovery that the show was based on a series of novels — Blake Crouch’s Wayward Pines Trilogy (2012–14) — and as a result would be a self-contained, ten-part series.

It’s certainly tempting for any television mystery series to hold off on a conclusion for as long as possible. Here Lost (2004–10) and even Twin Peaks spring to mind as series that started off with strong premises but forgot that suspense requires a proportional payoff. Thankfully, due to its limited running time, Wayward Pines did not have the opportunity to go similarly astray and manages to deliver a flawed but entertaining thriller.

The action begins with our protagonist, Special Agent Ethan Burke (battle-hardened Matt Dillon) coming to terms with his surroundings, and opens with a close-up shot of Ethan’s eye as he regains consciousness on a forest floor. We soon learn that Ethan and his partner were involved in a serious car crash while investigating the case of two missing colleagues, but neither partner nor car — nor, indeed, any signs of civilisation — are to be found. Trekking through the surrounding forest, Ethan discovers a quaint mountain-side town by the name of Wayward Pines. The town’s innocent façade soon begins to crumble, however, when several unsettling elements become apparent: none of the phones have
outside lines, there are cameras everywhere, and the entire settlement is enclosed by a five-
metre high electric fence. Even more disturbingly, anyone caught trying to leave is sentenced
to a ‘reckoning’, also known as death without trial. These mysteries are further compounded
when Ethan’s own family turns up in Wayward Pines. While out searching for him, Ethan’s
wife Teresa (Shannyn Sossamon) and son Ben (Charlie Tahan) are victims of a similar car
.crash and awake to find themselves in Wayward Pines hospital. The Burkes are gifted a
.house in the town’s leafy suburb, Ben is enrolled in the local school, and the family is
constantly reminded that they must forget that they ever had a life outside of Wayward Pines.

These early episodes are some of the most successful ones, when the nature of the
surveillance is a mystery and it’s unclear how far the townspeople are prepared to go to
maintain the status quo. The psychological horror often reaches impressive heights, such as
the unexpected and gruesome public reckoning of one high-profile cast member early in the
series. There is also a suitably disturbing chase sequence in which Ethan attempts to escape
from Wayward Pines hospital, pursued by Melissa Leo’s Nurse Pam (for all intents and
purposes, part-Nurse Ratched, part-Terminator), who seems to thrill in the hunt even more
than she relishes keeping her patients captive. A third knuckle-biting moment occurs when
Ethan’s wife and son encounter Wayward Pines’ Sheriff Pope (Terrence Howard) when
.stranded on a country road. Pope’s behaviour up to this point in the series has been a mixture
.of polite and murderous, so what exactly is coming next is anyone’s guess.

It’s this air of uncertainty, bolstered by great performances, that makes Wayward
Pines so engaging. Certainly there is little nuance to be found — the townspeople wander
.around in packs à la Village of the Damned (1960) and the surveillance cameras appear and
disappear as is relevant to the plot, allowing Ethan to conduct secret meetings without getting
.in trouble, while other townspeople are caught for much smaller transgressions — but the
.story unfolds at such a rate that you can almost forgive its lack of subtlety. There is little filler
.in each episode and there is a satisfying feeling that it is all building towards something
.worthwhile.

Which brings us to the middle of this ten-episode arc. Anyone with even a passing
knowledge of Shyamalan’s work will be unsurprised to hear that there is a twist. Indeed, it
.would be far more surprising if there were not a twist of some sort. Shyamalan twists are
known to range from ones that enrich the narrative in works like Unbreakable (2000) or The
Sixth Sense (1999), to the downright ridiculous and often unnecessary, as in Signs (2002) or
The Happening (2008). Wayward Pines’ twist rests somewhere in the middle, both
structurally and in terms of quality and, while it does answer some questions, it also creates
significant plot holes that are never satisfactorily explained. It acts more as an addendum which allows the narrative to change genre rather than to deepen our appreciation of what we have already seen.

The twist is a particularly big one: it is now the year 4028 and Wayward Pines is the last bastion of human civilisation, built as a home from which the repopulation of the human race can begin. The world is dominated by aberrations or ‘abbies’, humans that have mutated into murderous carnivores. Considering there are only a handful of Homo sapiens left in the world, it seems reasonable to assume that the abbies have a varied diet, but their relentless pursuit of human meat suggests they have acquired a taste for it. Wayward Pines exists only because genius scientist David Pilcher (Toby Jones) had recognised the threat that these abbies would pose in the future, and made preparations for the survival of mankind: namely, by building and protecting Wayward Pines. Ethan, his family, and all the other residents of Wayward Pines are all abductees who were cryogenically frozen for two thousand years, only to be woken when Pilcher believed the time was ready to start repopulating the world.

While this is a lot to take in, the reveal itself is handled well. Over two episodes, the camera switches deftly between scenes with Ben as he learns the shocking secret from the town’s school principal and resident brainwasher Megan Fisher (Hope Davis, with a maniacal glint) and scenes with Ethan, who has climbed over the fence and is experiencing the alien world first hand. However, almost straight away there is the uneasy feeling that Wayward Pines has bitten off more than it can chew. The Southern-gothic atmosphere of the opening episodes is quickly replaced with a far more clinical, post-apocalyptic tone and this sudden switch from small-town life to futuristic wasteland is not only disorienting but also forces the show to once again begin its world-building from scratch. The overt threat of flesh-eating monsters is sadly much less effective than the air of uncertainty that typified the early instalsments. The abbies, which were reasonably threatening as a mostly off-screen presence, are a serious disappointment once they take centre stage. It seems like the show’s creators were aiming for primordial vampires, what with the abbies’ grey skin and pointed teeth, but it doesn’t take long before they start to look like what they are: large naked men, running around trying to look scary.

The shift in genre at the show’s halfway point also has the unfortunate effect of rendering what we have already seen less convincing. In particular, the explanation for the reckonings becomes rather sketchy. The townspeople, Pilcher claims, can’t be trusted with the realisation that they have been frozen for 2000 years and that the world as they knew it is gone, so they are kept in line with the threat of capital punishment. Yet Pilcher’s project is
supported by a team of volunteers that chose to be cryogenically frozen and have devoted their lives to keeping the townspeople safe and oblivious. This crack team manage to monitor the townspeople via surveillance cameras twenty-four-seven in order to quash any signs of rebellion, while simultaneously ensuring that all Wayward Pines residents are able to maintain a twenty-first-century lifestyle. How they are able to provide an endless stream of food, fuel, textiles, and everything else the town requires is never touched on, but it is hard to imagine Pilcher achieving such a feat without a large group of devoted followers. As such, it is difficult to understand why Pilcher went to so much effort in kidnapping hundreds — perhaps even thousands — of unstable individuals so he could indulge in a spot of glorified babysitting.

The second half of the series is a race against the clock, with Ethan joining Pilcher in his attempt to stop the rebels (a group of Wayward Pines abductees who have been covertly planning to escape for years) from destroying the fence that surrounds the town. It’s rather disappointing to see the otherwise discerning Special Agent become so willing to trust the very people who have deceived him for so long, but he’s not the only character suddenly to start acting uncharacteristically. Nurse Pam, it’s revealed, is actually the kind and devoted sister of scientist David Pilcher. Her abrupt change of demeanour is difficult to reconcile with her earlier enthusiasm for terrorising patients. (We also never learn the source of her near-superhuman invulnerability, or where she gets the time to go to the hairdresser so often. She’s an enigma for the ages.)

Ultimately, it becomes clear that characters no longer matter, as it’s the overarching themes of individuality versus totalitarianism with which we should now be concerned. This debate is dealt with reasonably well until Pilcher becomes tired of his toys and shuts down power to the fence himself, making his position rather hard to defend. His claim, that he is singlehandedly preserving mankind, is hard to accept in light of his decision to allow whole swaths of the town to be butchered by abbies as the show approaches its climax. The subsequent dash to save the human race offers some effective moments of shock and splatter; it is a hurried mix of 30 Days of Night (2007) and Die Hard (1988), with a gory shootout against the abbies followed by a last stand in an elevator shaft.

When the smoke finally clears we are left with a truce. In an uplifting moment framed by the cryogenic tanks which have the potential for so much good and evil, Nurse Pam and the leader of the rebels, Kate Ballinger (Carla Gugino), agree to work together towards a better future, without the oppressive structures that Pilchard had put in place in a misguided attempt to ensure the future of the human race. This moment is undercut straightaway by the
series’s final twist. Suddenly, three years have passed and the younger generation have taken over the town. The adults have been forced into cryogenic sleep and reckonings are back on the menu. Since we get no explanation as to how the younger generation could so successfully overpower the experienced older characters, it’s a rather jarring final moment. The perfunctory nature of the three-year skip and the lack of characterisation for the younger characters throughout the series renders what could potentially be an elegant commentary on how the past repeats itself as little more than a disappointing moment of sequel-baiting. On the other hand, this final scene is so innocuous and so unlike the novels’ ending that it can almost be dismissed as the pilot of an unsuccessful spin-off show: 'Pines: The New Class, perhaps?

Whether or not a sequel is likely, in this season at least, Shyamalan delivers his own brand of off-the-wall entertainment, characterised by unusual concepts that fall apart when probed too deeply. Wayward Pines is to be praised for its opening act, which boasts strong performances and an eerie gothic atmosphere. It should also be admired for its innovation in attempting to alter the direction of the series. Although the central twist turns out to be too ambitious, it’s nevertheless refreshing to see shows prepared to take such risks. It is harder to praise the direction in which the show chooses to go, however. As is often the case, with the mystery dispelled, the second half of the series proves unable to match the compelling and truly chilling nature of the first. With too many inconsistencies and under-explained ideas, Wayward Pines ultimately falls short of its potential.

Sarah Cullen

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The Originals: Seasons 1 and 2 (The CW, 2013-15)
(This review contains spoilers)

The Originals, a show about vampire-werewolf ‘hybrids’, is itself something of a strange beast. A spin-off from the compulsively watchable The Vampire Diaries (2009–present), The Originals is to its parent series what Joss Whedon’s Angel (1999–2003) was to Buffy the Vampire Slayer (1997–2003), in that it swaps the small town for the big city, and a female lead for a male one. This last statement is, however, slightly misleading, since it is by no means clear that The Originals can be said to have a central protagonist at all, to the point where it is difficult to tell whom, if anyone, we as viewers ought to sympathise with or root
for. Many of the main characters (the family of ‘original’, centuries-old, practically death-proof vampires back to whom all other blood-suckers can ultimately trace their monstrous lineage) are far from likeable, having been established as villains in The Vampire Diaries. In a programme that revolves so closely around knotty dilemmas and standoffs, therefore, narrative tension springs largely from sustained uncertainty as to which equally nefarious plan or individual will win out, and how much damage their enemies (or indeed their allies) will sustain as a result.

This crowd of mutually destructive quasi-bad guys is the inevitable outcome of the recent mania (both on TV and in film) for elaborate back-stories and ‘origins’ narratives, which are now de rigueur for age-old demons and comic-book heroes alike. The series begins as Klaus Mikaelson (Joseph Morgan) and his brother Elijah (Daniel Gillies) arrive in New Orleans, where they had first landed in the New World centuries before. Klaus, a vampire/werewolf hybrid, has fled the idyllic town of Mystic Falls, Virginia, after his various plans for world domination (by building an army of hybrids like himself) are foiled by the protagonists of The Vampire Diaries. He and Elijah hope to reconnect with their family’s chequered past in New Orleans, though Klaus, predictably, also plans to regain control of the city that he supposedly founded, and from which the Mikaelsons had fled in 1919 (as a result of some particularly tangled daddy issues). This basic premise provides plenty of opportunities for flashbacks, complete with the theatrical costuming and ‘old-fashioned’ dialogue familiar from Buffy and Angel, and indeed the Civil-War sections of True Blood (2008–14). Aside from the obvious visual pleasures of such flashbacks, they also offer some respite from the rather frenetic pace of the present-day sequences.

In Season 1, the Mikaelson brothers (joined intermittently by their sister Rebekah, played by Claire Holt) find the city’s French Quarter in the grip of a harsh regime, imposed by the new self-styled king of New Orleans, Marcel (Charles Michael Davis), Klaus’s ward whom he ‘rescued’ from slavery in the early 1800s, and subsequently turned into a vampire. The vampires rule the city, while the werewolves are cursed to take human form only once a month. Meanwhile the witches, a group of powerful mortals (whose ancestors have been established in The Vampire Diaries as inextricably linked to the creation of vampires), also live in fear of Marcel. He has outlawed all witchcraft, on pain of death, though many witches continue to meet and practice clandestinely, living in fear of Marcel’s ‘secret weapon’, a young, powerful witch named Davina who can sense when magic is being performed. Much of Season 1 is, consequently, devoted to Klaus’s battle with Marcel for control of the French Quarter, a battle which weaves in and out of related struggles and uneasy alliances with (and
indeed between and within the ranks of) the witches and the werewolves. Into this already complex mix is added the return from death of Klaus and Elijah’s father Mikael (a thousand-year-old Viking and a vampire so ashamed of his tainted offspring that he has become a cannibalistic hunter of his own kind); the spectre of their mother Esther (an equally filicidal witch); and the fallout from Klaus having somehow impregnated Hayley, an orphan werewolf looking for her pack in the bayou just outside the city.

Season 2 focuses primarily on the ongoing consequences of this pregnancy, and on Klaus’s unending desire for more and more power, which continues unabated, even when he seems to have established himself as top dog, as it were. Indeed, his obsessive-compulsive need for total control, and his inability to trust anyone, even his own immediate family, is what drives the plot of both seasons. His foil is a mortal woman named Camille (or Cami, played by Leah Pipes), who he meets just after his arrival, and who is studying for a PhD in psychology (though she becomes so embroiled in the Mikaelsons’ intricate machinations that one wonders when she gets any writing done). Cami is positioned as Klaus’s potential love-interest, despite the fact that she repeatedly attempts (very unwisely) to psychoanalyse him. While neither the fiendish (if occasionally rakishly charming) Klaus nor the hyper-empathetic Cami can be identified as the main protagonist, both seem to have some claim on audience sympathies, and their personal battles (and indeed demons) are vital to the plot of the show as a whole. However, the ensemble cast ensures that no single individual remains as the central focus for long. Equal narrative and affective weight is therefore given to the sharp-suited, broodingly moral Elijah, whose own psychological demons burst free of his buttoned-up subconscious as Season 2 unfolds; and to expectant/new mother Hayley, whose divided loyalties to vampires and werewolves alike are just as important to the latter season’s development.

While somewhat less focused in terms of overall plot development than Season 1, Season 2 is notable, as mentioned above, for the rapid pacing of individual episodes, in a manner that mimics the near-hysterical momentum of The Vampire Diaries. Both original and spin-off pitch each episode as if it were the season finale, constantly ratcheting up the tension as friend becomes foe, and vice versa, at breakneck speed. Consisting entirely of plot arc with almost no stand-alone episodes, in Season 2, The Originals increasingly resembles its predecessor, as the cast of characters are given no chance to rest between the onslaughts of one major enemy after another. Indeed, so many people are repeatedly killed and then magically resurrected (not to mention transferred into other bodies — of which more below) over the course of the season that it can be just as difficult for the audience to keep up. We
can only assume that, for the protagonists, vampire super-strength is invaluable in helping them to withstand the gruelling pace set by their own monstrous appetites, fraught interpersonal relationships, and byzantine local politics.

One consequence of this relentless plotting is that the viewer is permitted only brief glimpses of what appears to be a fascinating supernatural world surrounding the central vampire family — a world apparently governed by multiple power dynamics that are not always vampire-related. This is particularly evident in the case of the witches, who are depicted as very much a part of New-Orleans culture, and who are themselves seemingly divided into an endless array of factions, cults, and ethnic groupings. Season 1 raises the spectre of a powerful witch-doctor named Alfons Delgado, or ‘Papa Tunde’, a figure who recalls (but is not quite as impressively terrifying as) Lance Reddick’s stellar performance as Papa Legba in *American Horror Story: Coven* (reviewed in *IJGHS* Issue #13). While Papa Tunde’s knife (a supernatural torture instrument) plays some part in the action of Season 2, the man himself, who made a highly theatrical entrance in the previous season, is entirely absent, and apparently all but forgotten amid the increasingly confusing family feuds. The same can be said of Cami’s uncle, Father Kieran, and the arsenal of ‘dark objects’ that he bequeaths to his niece, which are allegedly a vital part of her family’s Irish Catholic heritage, and which are referenced only when they can be made useful to the Mikaelson-centric plot. Finally, a small number of Season 2 episodes feature an abusive psychiatric asylum for disturbed witches, in which Kol (another Mikaelson brother) temporarily locks his sister Rebekah, and which is barely mentioned again after she makes her escape, despite hinting at some further complexities in the witch hierarchy.

The asylum episodes stage the escalation of a rash of serial body swapping (which begins early on in the season when Esther Mikaelson, the matriarch, takes over the body of a local witch), a motif which provides Season 2 with some narrative coherence. When he traps her inside the asylum, Kol (played by Nathaniel Buzolic and Daniel Sharman) simultaneously uses one of his mother’s favourite spells to transplant Rebekah into the body of a notorious witch, Eva Sinclair (Maisie Richardson-Sellers), who has been killing children, and who is the former girlfriend of yet another witch, Vincent (Yusuf Gatewood) who Finn (the final Mikaelson brother, played by Casper Zafar) has been inhabiting. Meanwhile, their mother Esther (Alice Evans) takes over the body of the witch Leonore (Sonja Sohn). With the exception of Kol’s new ‘host’, all of these witches, whose personalities are violently suppressed when the various Mikaelsons take them over, are African- and/or Asian-American, while Mexican-American witches are central to Season 1. Skin colour and
ethnicity are therefore implicitly related to magical ability, an element of the show (and of *The Vampire Diaries*) that, while perfectly visible on screen, is never directly discussed or even acknowledged. The imaginative universe inhabited by both shows is most problematic in relation to the troubled and troubling racial issues that haunt the American South’s past and present. The shows seem to be aiming for a kind of post-racial colour blindness that is, for some reason, most glaringly apparent when it comes to the witches whose personal and political problems are always subordinated to those of the vampires they effectively serve.

Plagued by less-than-progressive racial politics, and by a tendency to side-line its female characters in favour of the existential angst of its undead male protagonists (both Hayley and Rebekah are effectively reduced to secondary characters for much of Season 2), *The Originals* is far from perfect. It is, however, entertaining and gripping enough for me to hope that Season 3 (which CW confirmed in January 2015) resolves some of the issues that it has thus far been neglecting. The programme certainly hints at the tantalising possibility of vampires and witches of colour, as well as female vampires, being given story arcs of their own — the under-used Marcel is surely due some action after an entire season on the outskirts of New Orleans and of the plot. If it can manage this much, then the thought of *The Originals* rising from its ornate coffin once again might elicit screams of excitement (and not just from teenage vampire fans) rather than groans of irritation.

*Dara Downey*

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*Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell* (BBC, 2015)
(The review contains spoilers)

Magic returned to the small screen this year, when *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell* made its debut on BBC television in May. Like Susanna Clarke’s 2004 novel from which it is adapted, the seven-part serial is an alternative history that takes place during the Napoleonic Wars, and follows the travails of Gilbert Norrell and his apprentice Jonathan Strange as they attempt to re-establish the practice of magic in an England that has long since lost touch with its supernatural heritage. The novel unfolded over the course of about 1000 pages, and undertook a pastiche of nineteenth-century literary conventions that came complete with lengthy explanatory and contextual footnotes. By contrast, director Toby Haynes and screenwriter Peter Harness are faced with packing as much as possible into just over 400
minutes of screen-time, necessarily undertaking some revisions and excisions of the source material along the way in an attempt to maintain narrative urgency and coherency. These efforts aren’t always entirely successful, but nevertheless, there’s plenty to admire here in an adaptation that largely stays true to the spirit of Clarke’s much-loved and much-lauded fantasy novel.

That it manages to do so is due in no small part to the pitch-perfect casting of Eddie Marsan as Gilbert Norrell, who ably embodies the bookish and reclusive practical magician, determined to return his chosen field of study to a state of respectability in England (largely from the safety of his library). In this, he is nicely counter-balanced by Bertie Carvel’s engaging performance as Jonathan Strange, the trainee gentleman-magician who is destined to become Norrell’s student and eventual rival, after the inevitable development of a schism between the pair. Both are given stellar support by Enzo Cilenti’s gruffly northern John Childermass, the trusty companion who aids Norrell in his endeavours, but whose real commitment ultimately seems to be the cause of magic itself.

The emergence of both Norrell and Strange as the leading magicians of their age sets them on course to fulfil a prophecy recounted to each by the scruffy street-magician Vinculus (Paul Kaye), and seemingly passed down from the legendary Raven King. Once the ruler of kingdoms in both Northern England and in Faerie, the Raven King has long since departed from England, leaving magic to decline into the dormant state from which Strange and Norrell seek to revive it. Perhaps inevitably, this mythos is less fully realised here than in the novel, and lacks the depth provided by Clarke’s explanatory footnotes; in particular, the Raven King’s significance in a national narrative that pits the north of England against the south seems underplayed. Instead, references to the figure largely seem to function as shorthand for the evolution of the differing belief systems espoused by Strange and Norrell, prompted by their differing attitudes to and experience of the practice of magic. While Norrell remains in England and sets about keeping a stranglehold on the scholarship of magic, Strange’s training takes him further afield: first to mainland Europe to lend a hand in the war against Napoleon, and then to Faerie where he traverses the ‘King’s Roads’, once used by the Raven King himself to travel between Faerie and England. These experiences ultimately convince Strange to value precisely the kinds of practices that Norrell purports to reject in his continued insistence that there is no place for so-called ‘Faerie’ magic and fairy servants in respectable, modern England.

Of course, the irony behind Norrell’s position is that his initial acquisition of celebrity status as the nation’s foremost magician is entirely contingent upon his recourse to ‘Faerie’
magic at the conclusion of the first episode. Determined to convince MP Walter Pole (Samuel West) of the potential benefit of enlisting the services of a magician in the Napoleonic War, Norrell is granted an opportunity when Sir Walter’s sickly fiancée succumbs to a fatal illness just days before their intended marriage. One swift spell later, Norrell has briefly reneged on his commitment to so-called respectable magic and summoned the Gentleman with the Thistledown Hair (Marc Warren), with whom he makes an obviously ill-advised and one-sided bargain to resurrect the future Lady Pole (Alice Englert), in the process promising half her life to the Gentleman. Once struck, this deal has ramifications for the entire plot, as more and more characters fall victim to the Gentleman’s duplicitous actions and become frequent (or permanent) guests at his Faerie home of Lost-Hope. These include Strange’s wife Arabella (Charlotte Reilly) and Sir Walter’s servant Stephen Black (Ariyon Bakare), whose fates will shape the final episode’s climactic scenes, with Lady Pole herself playing a more substantial role in the proceedings than that afforded her in the book. Indeed, the Lady Pole storyline remains central throughout each episode as an effective means of linking the various narrative threads, and provides frequent opportunities to cross from the ‘real world’ into the fantasy landscape from which the Gentleman hails.

These regular encounters with the Gentleman certainly keep the supernatural front and centre throughout *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell*, but in truth, this characterisation of the main representative of Faerie ultimately remains quite one-note and rarely manages to prove truly disconcerting. That said, he does play a key role in one memorably unsettling sequence at the end of the fourth episode, ‘All the Mirrors of the World’, in which he puts in motion his plans to steal Arabella away from Strange and replace her with a decoy shaped from a moss oak which takes her form, but whose wild eyes and strangulated gasps betray her inhuman origins. Shot in cold, washed-out hues, it’s a scene that stands out as perhaps the most genuinely chilling moment of the entire series. Elsewhere, the creepiest moments are usually brought about by Jonathan Strange, whose time on the frontlines of the Napoleonic War confirms him to be a much more hands-on magician than his mentor (literally — he dispatches with one French soldier by conjuring up a giant hand from the surrounding muddy soil). His decision to raise from the dead a group of Neapolitan soldiers to aid Lord Wellington (Ronan Vibert) and his troops proves especially haunting, both for the character and the audience, while his retreat to Venice after the apparent death of his wife sees him concoct a potion made of distilled crazy-old-cat-lady in the belief that by driving himself insane he will finally be able to summon a fairy servant to his aid.
These striking sequences can’t fully distract from the main challenges that the show must negotiate, though. At just seven instalments, it often feels too truncated to be entirely satisfying, and there are (as many observers have noted) persistent issues with pacing throughout. This becomes especially apparent in the race to resolve things within the last couple of episodes. For example, Strange’s Venetian encounter with Dr Greysteel (Clive Mantle) and his daughter Flora (Lucinda Dryzek) is so fleeting that it makes his subsequent selection of Flora to aid him in retrieving Arabella from Lost-Hope seem almost entirely random. More problematically, the blink-and-you’ll-miss-it climactic appearance of the Raven King is a real misstep, right down to the unfortunate styling of him as a reject from an industrial metal band.

If the closing episodes prove at times frenetic in their efforts to reach the finish line, however, the opening two episodes in particular are actually a little too slowly paced. In between the larger set-pieces in which Norrell fools French troops into believing that they are under imminent attack by fashioning some illusory ships out of rain, or that in which Strange restores a beached ship with the aid of some horse-shaped sand, the scene is slowly set in ways that may well prove pleasing to fans of the novel. This leisurely pace likely contributed to declining viewing figures as the weeks continued, though, in particular for viewers more accustomed to the extravaganzas on display in that more dominant contemporary fantasy show, *Game of Thrones* (2011–present). Although the ante is upped by the fifth episode, ‘Arabella’, which opens with a reimagining of the Battle of Waterloo, even this pales in comparison with such brutal and breath-taking sequences as the Battle of the Blackwater with which the second season of *Game of Thrones* culminates.

In the end, though, such comparisons are probably unfair, as *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell* is by its very nature a much more genteel affair. This is a tale of two gentleman magicians, after all, and the final episode, ‘Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell’, finally reunites the pair in scenes that might make the viewer wish there had been space for just a little more interaction between the two throughout the series as a whole. Once again, Marsan shines here, whether it’s acknowledging the value of his friend’s book which he had once tried to suppress (‘the most beautiful book of magic I have ever read’); making the ultimate sacrifice in giving up his much-loved and hard-earned collection of books in order to generate the magic needed to defeat the Gentleman with the Thistledown Hair; or looking on the land of Faerie with absolute glee when he finally finds his way out of his library and crosses the threshold into a world he has only previously read about. Ultimately, it’s in such instances
that *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell* manages best to capture some of the charm of Clarke’s original; when it succeeds in doing so, it conjures up moments of genuine magic.

*Jenny McDonnell*

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*American Horror Story: Freak Show* (FX, 2014–15)

In 2011, *American Horror Story* (abbreviated here to *AHS*) exploded onto television screens, offering a blend of chilling terror, gruesome violence, raunchy sex, and general mind-bending weirdness explicitly designed to outrage and disgust audiences. Three thoroughly nasty but hugely entertaining series later, and this lurid combination has managed to keep viewers tuning in, and in ever greater numbers. Just when film and particularly television horror appeared in danger of becoming too predictable and bland for most devotees, *AHS* has single-handedly restored its capacity to shock and revolt. Indeed, possibly not since the decadent dying days of Hammer studios has so much objectionable material gone into a production intended for a mainstream audience. *AHS*’s astonishing worldwide popularity has proven that being relentlessly sickened is something not only horror fans enjoy.

For the uninitiated, these are the essential facts. Created by Ryan Murphy and Brad Falchuck, each series of *AHS* is a thirteen-part, stand-alone narrative featuring a large regular cast, along with several guest stars. To date, there has been a series chronicling the morbid history of a haunted house in Los Angeles, one charting the unspeakable goings-on in a lunatic asylum in 1960s Massachusetts, and another following a bloody power struggle in a witches’ coven in present-day New Orleans. Since almost every episode is the work of a different writer, *AHS* is remarkable for the spectacularly freewheeling, twist-laden nature of its storytelling, and for a format so flexible that it has incorporated pastiches, parodies, and even song-and-dance numbers. Finally, the show’s ethos seems to be that excess is something to be embraced for its own sake, and that nothing (from visuals, to music, and most of all acting) can be sufficiently over the top.

A huge part of the show’s success has been due to the casting of Jessica Lange, whose phenomenal performances in the first three series have earned her two Emmy awards. Indeed, the *AHS* repertory cast features an unusually strong female presence, with Kathy Bates, Angela Bassett, Sarah Paulson, and Frances Conroy all receiving award nominations for their turns in the show. *AHS* has also attracted an impressive array of male actors, including such
big names as Zachary Quinto, Joseph Fiennes, Ian McShane, and James Cromwell, as well as showcasing such outstanding young talent as Emma Roberts and Evan Peters. The variety of actors in each series, and the rich range of their performing styles, is one of AHS’s great delights.

In *Freak Show*, the fourth season, Lange is Elsa Mars, proprietor of Fräulein Elsa’s Cabinet of Curiosities, a travelling freak show camped in Jupiter, Florida in 1952, whose marvellous performers include Paul the Illustrated Seal (Mat Fraser), Legless Suzi (Rose Siggins), giantess Amazon Eve (Erika Ervin), and Ma Petite (Jyoti Amge), the smallest woman in the world. Utterly ruthless and fame hungry, Elsa thinks nothing of kidnapping innocents to add them to her troupe, and her latest additions are the conjoined twins Bette and Dot Tattler (Sarah Paulson). What is more, where Elsa goes, murder and mayhem inevitably follow and her show quickly attracts a host of very unpleasant characters. Repellent wannabe star Dandy Mott (Finn Wittrock) is denied a part in the troupe and exacts a sadistic revenge, a pair of confidence tricksters has evil designs on the freaks, and Twisty (John Carroll Lynch), a serial-killer clown, is on the prowl.

It would require several times this space to give even a basic account of the convoluted storyline of *Freak Show*, but suffice to say it takes a pleasing number of unexpected turns. While not as random or as inventive as *Murder House* or *Asylum*, it avoids the tangle of confused plot devices which made last year’s *Coven* a muddled and lacklustre affair. Although many scenes are desperately lacking in clarity, *Freak Show*’s dialogue is lively and contains the occasional surprising touch of subtlety. Its production values are also easily as high as before. In fact, the skewed cinematography, sumptuous art direction and costume design, and impeccable period detail make this possibly the most beautiful series yet.

*AHS*’s offbeat characters are integral to its appeal, and this series boasts a vivid collection of grotesques. As the imperious Elsa, Lange presides over all and delivers first-class insults in a hilariously strangled German accent. Bassett, as the fearless intersexual Desiree Dupree, Bates, as the wise bearded lady Ethel, and Conroy, as Dandy’s appalling mother Gloria, are fantastic, while Paulson gives a pair of fine performances as the quarrelling telepathic twins Bette and Dot. Having previously played an unbalanced teenage ghost with a fondness for latex bondage suits and mass murder, a victim of extra-terrestrial torture locked up in a madhouse, and a ‘perfect boyfriend’ made from the spliced remains of mangled frat boys, the ever-astonishing Evan Peters almost seems normal here as ‘Lobster Boy’ Jimmy Darling, the reluctant leader of the troupe.
Also making a welcome return for more punishment are Denis O’Hare and Emma Roberts. O’Hare gets his best AHS role yet as Stanley, a despicable charlatan out to pickle the freaks and sell them to the local Museum of Morbid Curiosities. It’s an outrageously loathsome part which he’s clearly enjoying immensely, while rising star Roberts is superb as his conflicted accomplice. Of the AHS newcomers, Finn Wittrock makes the strongest impression as the psychopathic and Cole Porter-obsessed rich boy Dandy, who imagines he has become a godlike immortal after bathing in the blood of his enemies. As written, the character is ridiculous, but Wittrock makes the petulant, unhinged Dandy equally terrifying and pathetic (what a perfect Joker he would make in a new Batman movie) and he contrasts well with John Carroll Lynch’s Twisty, who is truly the stuff of nightmares. Of this season’s guest stars, the standout is Wes Bentley as Edward Mordrake, a spectral, aristocratic madman born with two faces, who returns from the grave every Halloween to claim another soul for his legion of the damned. Mordrake is a terrific creation, and Bentley’s beady-eyed, intentionally theatrical performance is so wonderful you wish he had been given more screen-time.

Although it doesn’t scale the same epic heights of perversity as the unforgettable Asylum (surely one of the most mesmerisingly demented things ever shown on television), Freak Show has its share of stomach-churning moments and violates good taste at an alarming rate: there is a horrible botched suicide attempt, a young hustler is slowly butchered in nauseating detail, a luckless morbidly obese girl becomes both a substitute mother and an object of lust, Peters uses his outsized digits to perform an unorthodox form of massage on Jupiter’s bored housewives, and sex and death are indivisibly linked. Unfortunately, too many of Freak Show’s ideas simply don’t work (the use of contemporary songs, for example, ruins the period atmosphere), and it lacks the scathing social commentary which was the most disturbing aspect of earlier seasons. An effort is made early on to connect the cruel treatment of the victimised ‘freaks’ with the oppression of other groups marginalised at this point in history, but it’s a half-hearted gesture which mostly fails to convince.

These glaring flaws aside, American Horror Story: Freak Show is never less than riotously enjoyable hokum. Indeed, it’s hard not to admire its shameless, hucksterish attempts to offend by every conceivable means. It’s also exciting to observe the tell-tale signs that all four series have taken place in the same universe and are intricately interconnected, something which Murphy and Falchuck have at last begun to reveal in Freak Show. How many permutations the same format can undergo before it really does become exhausted is anyone’s guess, but for now AHS gives no indication that it’s running out of energy. For all
its irksome clumsiness and deplorable sleaziness, it remains a shrewd, campy, and bloodthirsty rollercoaster ride which is difficult to resist.

Norman Osborn

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Errata

The editors wish to correct a typo on p. 151 of Issue 12, in which Eddie Marsan’s name was misspelled.

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NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

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