The Irish Journal of Gothic and Horror Studies 11 (June 30, 2012)

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Greetings to all of our readers and contributors, and welcome to Issue #11 of *The Irish Journal of Gothic and Horror Studies*. This will be the last issue edited by ourselves, Bernice Murphy and Elizabeth McCarthy. We're delighted to say that journal stalwarts Jenny McDonnell and Dara Downey will be taking over as joint editors. When we published our first issue, back in October 2006, we did so with the strong belief that a free-access online journal dedicated to Gothic and Horror studies was a much-needed resource for academics and non-academics alike. Since then the journal has gone from strength to strength. This would not have been possible without the great team of people who have given their time and talent to the project.

The journal is now 6 years old, and in that time, we're very proud to have worked with such an efficient and hard-working team of section editors. We'd therefore like to thank Dara, Jenny and Eoin, as well as all of our article contributors, and our many reviewers. We'd especially like to thank all of our regular contributors and peer reviewers. We know that the journal is in very safe hands and that its new editors have lots of exciting ideas about updating it. We can't wait to see what issue #12 has in store! With this in mind, we would like to stress that submissions, etc, will proceed as usual.

It's time for us to move on to other projects, but we are currently in the early stages of a journal-related publication which we think will be of interest to many of our readers, and we'll keep you all posted on that through the journal's Twitter Feed and Facebook Page.

With thanks and best wishes,

*Elizabeth and Bernice*

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Tape Spectra

Brian Baker

I.

The film Contact (1997) begins with a striking effects sequence. After the title, the film begins with a shot of the Earth from low orbit, in shadow. On the soundtrack, contemporary rock music plays. Both visual and aural signs mark this to be ‘now’, our present day. The camera (virtually) begins to recede, and as it does, the sound stage alters. A phrase ‘obviously a major malfunction’ is heard, taken from the reporting of the Challenger space shuttle disaster of 1986, and the music segues through 1980s pop into disco. A phrase from the theme music of the long-running tv series Dallas (1978-1991) is heard, as the Earth and then Moon shrink, in silhouette, displaced by the brightness of the Sun. As the camera recedes from Earth and travels outwards in the Solar System, other phrases from 20th century America are heard: Richard Nixon saying ‘I’m not a crook’; Neil Armstrong’s ‘one small step for man’; Martin Luther King’s ‘free at last’. As the camera swings past Jupiter, we hear of John F. Kennedy’s assassination, then Dean Martin singing ‘Volare’, and a member of HUAC demanding ‘have you ever been a member of the Communist party?’. at Saturn, the Lone Ranger calling ‘Hi-ho Silver’, and an FDR ‘fireside chat’. All the while, the volume decreases, descending towards silence as the intensity of broadcasts decrease, as the camera ‘travels’ further out, leaving the Solar System then the Milky Way itself behind, then moving ever faster away from tiny spiral galaxies disappearing into the distance. The screen is then overcome with whiteness, the edge of the universe; the screen then fades up from white, still ‘zooming out’, as the camera shows the reflection of a window in a young girls’ pupil, who we see finally at a desk, transmitting on short-wave radio: ‘This is CQ, W-9 GFO’. She picks up a contact, receiving in Pensacola, Fla., some thousand miles distant, ‘the furthest one yet’, as her father watches benignly. She marks this on a map of the USA.

In this sequence, political history (of the USA) is mixed up with musical markers from popular culture and music, recognisable emblems of particular eras. Space is signified by time: the further out from the Sun we travel, the further back in time we seem to go. Earth is itself a ‘planet of sound’, a tiny mote of dust in the sky, soon lost to our vision, but human broadcasts penetrate the vast distances of space in a way that human beings themselves cannot. The earliest human broadcasts, travelling at the speed of sound, may (without degradation) have reached around 100 light years distant by the end of the first decade of the 21st century, though it would take alien intelligences to have developed receiving equipment far beyond the tolerances and sensitivity of even the most advances arrays on Earth to be able to hear (and later, watch) them. Contact plays a strange double game in its opening minutes: while the opening effects sequence emphasises physical distance (the time taken for signals, at the speed of sound, to travel across space), the images of the girl at her ham radio emphasises instantaneity of ‘contact’, that distance in space is countermanded by broadcast technologies, where a form of tele-presence makes it seem as though someone a thousand miles distant is sitting right next to you. The physical realities of sound, distance and time are then subject, in Contact, to a wider fantasy of instantaneity of contact, one that will have increasingly metaphysical (as well as psychological / emotional) implications as the narrative progresses.

Despite its Anglophone and North American bias, Contact’s opening is of particular interest because it reads contemporary history through sound broadcast technologies: radio (wireless), in particular. The universe itself, of course, emanates radio-frequency signals as part of its fabric, not only from sources such as pulsars but as part of background radiation, and the Search for Extra-Terrestrial Life program.
(SETI) has used radio-telescope arrays to try to filter out possible extra-terrestrial transmissions from the background ‘noise’ of the universe. By focusing on radio, Contact emphasises the fundamental contiguity between human activity (sound broadcasts) and the universe itself, and marks human history through its audio footprint, almost as if human life began with radio, Marconi as Adam. Extra-terrestrial scientists, perhaps, will gauge human ‘intelligence’ (or otherwise) through its capacity to produce audio transmissions. Paradoxically, Earth becomes visible as a ‘planet of sound’.

Radio is one of the sound technologies which came into being in the second half of the 19th century, which also included telegraphy, the telephone, and recording via phonograph cylinders (principles later developed into the gramophone/phonograph, and audio tape). Jonathan Sterne, in The Audible Past (2003), has argued that sound recording is continuous with the 19th century’s cultures of death, in that it seeks to preserve the voice of the dead subject and prevent decay. Sterne connects this to the development of canning technologies in the food industry and also to the arts of embalming. In a sense, preservation of the voice is then a way to efface or overcome time and its depredations (allowing that the recording technologies themselves do not degrade over time). Sterne argues that emblematic of the reifying imperatives of what he calls (derived from Matei Calinescu) ‘bourgeois modernity’, a way of ‘managing time’ itself: sound recordings offer ‘repeatable time within a carefully bounded frame’. (1) However, Sterne goes on to suggest that ‘the scheme of permanence [...] was essentially hyperbole, a Victorian fantasy. Repeatability from moment to moment was not the same thing as preservation for all time’. (2) Recorded sound offered the possibility of repetition, of playback of the voice after death; however, playback itself, on cylinders or gramophone records, relies on the same technologies of material inscription that constitute recording: the needle touches the vinyl groove, and in touching, marks it, degrades it. Repeated playback is another slow fade into white noise, undifferentiation, and death.

The term ‘white noise’, which will become increasingly important to this article, is drawn from the frequency spectrum. Within the audio range, we hear different tones or notes when a particular frequency length predominates. When all frequencies within the audible range are equally present, resulting in a ‘flat’ sound spectrum, then what the human ear hears is ‘white noise’. White noise is undifferentiated sound, deemed ‘white’ through analogy with light, where the presence of all visible frequencies results in white light. The relation of transmission or signal to white noise is one that has haunted analogue sound reproduction technologies from their inception.

Most notably, Jeffrey Sconce has investigated the history of this ‘haunting’ with regard to sound and vision technologies. In Haunted Media (2000), Sconce outlines three recurrent ‘cultural fantasies’ that have accompanied the development of telecommunications technologies: (1) ‘these media enable an uncanny form of disembodiment’; (2) the imagination of a ‘sovereign electronic world’, an ‘electronic elsewhere’; and (3) ‘the anthropomorphization of media technology’, most visible in a fascination with androids and cyborgs. (3) In his chapter on radio, Sconce suggests that ‘enthusiastic celebration of the emerging medium [was accompanied and challenged by texts] suggesting an eerie and even sinister undercurrent to the new electronic worlds forged by wireless’. (4) In fact, we might suggest that sound broadcast technologies enabled an uncanny form of embodiment through tele-presence, the belief that the other was somehow present in the room as you spoke to them via radio or telephone. In either sense, we can ascertain that telecommunication technologies disrupted the ‘metaphysics of presence’ diagnosed by Jacques Derrida and others as central to Western metaphysics, a privileging of speech over writing, of the voice over text, that makes the voice the embodiment of truth and of authenticity. In this phonocentrism, as Derrida called it, writing is seen to be derived from a pre-existing orality, a ‘natural’ form of communication that is prior to ‘the fateful violence of the political institution’. (5) Derrida, of course, sought to undo this binary which privileged voice over writing, and argued that writing preceded, and was
the condition and ground of speech. After the advent of telecommunications technologies, voice itself becomes disembodied, no longer physically connected to a subject who speaks. Tele-presence is at one and the same time presence and not-presence, offering the fantasy of ‘instantaneity of contact’ but at the same time emphasising that the other speaker is not there.

When talking with Bernard Stiegler about television in *Echographies of Television* (2002), Derrida asserts that technologies of the image are bound up with acts of ‘magic’ or ‘faith’, ‘by our relation of essential incompetence to technical operation’.(6) ‘For if we don’t know how something works’, Derrida continues,

our knowledge is incommensurable to the immediate perception that attunes us to technical efficacy, to the fact that “it works”; we see that “it works”, but even if we know this, we don’t see how it “works”; seeing and knowing are incommensurable here. [...] And this is what makes our experience so strange. We are spectralized by the shot, captured or possessed by spectrality in advance. [...] What has [...] constantly haunted me in this logic of the spectre is that it regularly exceeds all the oppositions between visible and invisible, sensible and insensible. A spectre is both visible and invisible, both phenomenal and nonphenomenal.(7)

Although Derrida uses the discourse of visibility here, his addition of ‘sensible and insensible’ crucially extends the idea of the ‘specter’ to the frequency range of audio, in its disruption of presence. In his attempt to situate the problematic of how telecommunication technologies in relation to human knowledge, Derrida allows media to escape discourses of science, the rational (or of knowledge itself) and so it enters the numinous, the ‘electronic elsewhere’, where our relation to it can only be uncanny (and/ or theological: we must believe that it works, even if we don’t know how it works, a ‘technical efficacy’ that must always elude us.) Telecommunications technologies, broadcast media, are then spectralized, ‘haunted’, by this strangeness.

In terms of the developing communication technologies of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, both transmission and reproduction of sound are ‘haunted’ by ghosts. Recording the voice, according to Sterne, is part of a culture of preservation and memorialization of the dead; Joe Banks, in ‘Rorschach Audio’, reports that ‘Edison and Marconi both believed that radio technology might enable contact with the afterlife’.(8) In his short story ‘Wireless’ – analysed by Sconce and Warner – Rudyard Kipling imagines a young man who, entering into a kind of fugue state, becomes a kind of human ‘receiver’ (or we might say ‘medium’) for the transmission of one of Keats’ poems, which he writes down as if transcribing a message: a poem the young man does not consciously know. The mystery of this act is maintained by the short story until the end: the act of transmission itself, a kind of aetheric emanation picked by a ‘sensitive’, remains unexplained. Here we might also return to the film *Contact*. The young girl, Ellie Alloway, asks her father, if she had powerful enough equipment, ‘Could I talk to ... the Moon?’, going on to add ‘Jupiter?’, ‘Saturn?’, and then, ‘Mom?’. When her father unexpectedly dies, the loss of her mother is compounded, and after the father’s funeral, immediately prior to a cut across time to the older Ellie (played by Jodie Foster), we see the girl, once again transmitting on her short-wave radio, calling ‘Dad, this is Ellie: come back? Dad, are you there? Come back.’ Talking across space is twice encoded as talking to the ‘electronic elsewhere’, hoping to hear the voices of the dead.

In the film *Frequency* (2000), John Sullivan (Jim Caviziel) plays a man who lost his own father Frank (Dennis Quaid) in a fire when he was young. It begins in a similar way to *Contact*: on the soundtrack, dislocated phrases from radio broadcasts are heard while the visual track shows image from space, here the plumes of solar flares that will create unusual atmospheric conditions on Earth on two days 30 years

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apart, 10 October 1969 and 1999. Effects-shots of the aurora borealis behind the Queensborough Bridge in New York emphasise both material locatedness (this is a New York story: Frank was a fireman while John is a detective in the NYPD) and strangeness, the presence of the uncanny, the sky ‘haunted’ by the lights. The bridge also symbolises the connection between the two time-periods, as the film intercuts between them, and largely focuses on the relationship between Frank and his young son. The technological ‘bridge’ between the time-periods is short-wave radio, and the backyard mast is prominently displayed against the borealis several times. Frequency matches time through space: John still lives in the house he grew up in, while his widowed mother lives elsewhere, and the film regularly intercuts the older John pacing around the house, himself haunting its spaces, with images of the family life he lost upon the death of his father.(9) The ham radio itself, discovered in the NYFD trunk of his father, becomes an uncanny object; its old valves fail, but the receiver seems to start into life of its own accord when Frank begins to broadcast on it in 1969, and John receives its messages across time. When John informs his father that he is to die in a warehouse fire on October 12th, he alters the timeline (we see direct evidence of this when contact with his father on the radio causes his father to burn the desk he is sitting at, the burn mark appearing under John’s hand as he speaks): his father survives, but it is only at the end of the film (after a long diversion into a serial-killer procedural narrative) that a kind of wish-fulfilment of emotional restitution is enacted. John’s final ‘new’ timeline gifts him with the family life he lost once his father died: Frequency’s imagination of haunted radio directly undoes the trauma of loss.

Both Contact and Frequency, although science fiction films (one a ‘first contact’ narrative, the other a time-paradox story), can both be said to incorporate elements of what is known as ‘EVP’, or electronic voice phenomena. This is a focus of para-psychological research whereby it is understood that the ‘voices’ of the dead can be found imprinted upon the ambient sounds (or ‘noise’) produced when recording in an ordinary empty room. This began in the mid-1930s with the artist Attila von Szalay, who, in his darkroom, heard ‘the voice of his deceased brother calling his name.’(10) After unsuccessful attempts to record these voices on a phonograph, he was finally successful when using a reel-to-reel tape recorder in the 1950s. This technological advance is important. Around the same time, Friedrich Jürgenson, a Swedish documentary film-maker, attempted to record birdsong (also on tape recorder) in his garden, but found, on playback, that he ‘heard his dead father’s voice and then the spirit of his deceased wife calling his name’. (11) Upon publishing his findings in 1959, his book Radio Contact with the Dead was read by the Jungian psychologist and philosopher, Dr Konstantin Raudive. Raudive’s book Breakthrough (1971) was literally that in the popular imagination, and is a curious example of what might be termed ‘spiritualism in the age of electronic reproduction.’ The book’s subtitle, ‘An Amazing Experiment in Electronic Communication with the Dead’ marks its significance as a ‘scientific’ text that purports to reveal the intersection of spectrality, life-after-death communication and analogue recording devices. In the book, Raudive ‘hears’ or decodes voices of the dead (‘speaking’ in English, German, and Raudive’s native Latvian) emanating from the background hiss and rumble of recorded ambient sound: he asks questions of an empty room and records the ‘answers’.

Raudive’s work is a common touchstone for critics considering haunted media. For Sconce, Raudive presents himself and the EVP project as radically antithetical to Freudian depth-psychology:

the Raudive voices did speak of an immortal essence that transcends alienating models of Darwin, Freud, Sartre, and all other demystifying assaults on the transcendental dimension of the human psyche. The irony, of course, is that Raudive remystified the soul through the validating authority of an electronic technology.(12)
However, Sconce asserts a fundamental homology between Freud’s and Raudive’s intentions: ‘At their core, both of these ‘interpretative’ sciences shared the hope that their practices overcome the trauma of a profound loss’. (13) Joe Banks, in ‘Rorschach Audio’, takes an extremely sceptical view, suggesting that ‘EVP experimenters are psychologists who have misunderstood their own work; [...] [they] are inadvertently reproducing acoustic projection experiments’, making the analogy to Rorschach ink-blots. (14) Mike Kelley, in ‘An Academic Cut-Up’ also refers to Rorschach blots, but understands Rorschach’s experiments both as technological Spiritualism and as a way-station in the history of twentieth-century experiments in sound, particularly in the musical avant-garde: ‘one is hyperconscious of the fact that the distortion of the recording process [in EVP] is the primary experience,’ he suggests. (15) My own reading of Raudive’s work would emphasise three main elements:

(1) the centrality of naming in EVP. Von Szalay hears his brother call his name; they call Raudive by name, over and over again: Konstantin, Kosté, Kosti. Naming, interpellation, calling into being: a crucial way of making meaning in EVP seems to circulate around the name, the act of being identified by EVP event, call into presence by an act of hearing/decoding.
(2) The centrality of trauma to the experience. Von Szalay and Jürgenson hear the voices of dead relatives; Raudive’s recently departed mother looms large in the catalogue of voices, and she is the first catalogued figure to be identified in in Breakthrough; on reading transcriptions of the EVP events, Raudive ‘hears’ many dead friends. (16)
(3) Thirdly, the common technological device here is magnetic audio tape.

Where Kittler notes the gramophone as a storage device/externalisations of memory becomes a metaphor for a figure for human consciousness itself, tape has different qualities: ‘tapes can execute any possible manipulation of data because they are equipped with recording, reading, and erasing heads, as well as with forward and reverse motion’. (17) (Kittler also notes, pace Paul Virilio, that it is war, here the experiments by BASF and AEG used by the Abwehr in World War Two, that accelerate magnetic tape production, rather than steel tape, towards general or consuming usage in the post-war period.) (18) As N. Katherine Hayles has it, in How We Became Posthuman (1999), ‘audio tape was a technology of inscription, but with the crucial difference that he admitted erasure and rewriting’:

Whereas the phonograph produced objects that could be consumed only in the manufactured form, magnetic tape allows the consumer to be a producer as well. The switches activating the powerful and paradoxical technoconceptual actors of repetition and mutation, presence and absence, were in the hands of the masses, at least the masses who could afford the equipment. (19)

Hayles writes of how ‘audio tape may already be reaching old age, fading from the marketplace as it is replaced by compact discs, computer hypermedia, and the like’. (20) The compact cassette is now one of Bruce Sterling’s ‘dead media’, and its successor, the CD, is also on the way to obsolescence. (21) However, it is the very imperfections of magnetic tape, the ‘wow’ and ‘flutter’ of the thin, flexible tape passing over the heads, which renders it perfect as a ‘haunted’ technology. Like the ‘ghosting’ of analogue television signals (soon also to be obsolete), the imperfection of the analogue media artefact is part of its quality, its form. It is, of course, it is very imperfection as a recording media – its hiss, its rumble, its flutter – which is the very condition of possibility for EVP. As documentary features on the DVD of White Noise point out, without the hiss of tape – or in contemporary technology, used by EVP experts, the noise generated generated by the hardware of solid state Dictaphones – they can be no coalescing of the EVP ‘voice’, no recording of the phenomenon. (22) Without noise, there physically can be no signal.
The main association for popular research into EVP is now called the Association Transcommunication. From the ATransC website, it is clear that the crucial motivations for the EVP practitioner is to contact a lost loved one: to undo trauma. One of their projects is called ‘Big Circle’, which attempts to contact the lost loved ones who now reside in the ‘etheric’. Its directors, Lisa and Tom Butler encourage DIY: all you need is a tape deck (portable compact cassette recorder), microphone, and if possible a computer with spectrum analyzers and filters and other sound processors to enhance the listening experience, to hear the voices.(23) As Raudive himself writes, ‘the ear cannot hear the voices without technical aids’. (24) It is clear from the AA-EVP/ATransC work shown on the documentary that the voice phenomena are much simpler to decode than Raudive’s: the voices of monoglot (English, in the USA) and seem much more immediately comprehensible. (Indeed, on page 19 of Breakthrough, it seems that the polyglot discourse is a condition of a claim to paranormal status for a voice event: polyglot + ‘sensible meaning’ = ‘voice is paranormal’). It is the democratisation (and technologisation) of mediumship that is so striking here – this is not a spectacular event, complete with female medium, ectoplasm, table rapping, or other visual spectacle: it is seemingly demystified, as simple as taping while asking questions of an empty room.

Where, then, do these voices come from? Kelley offers several means by which to explain the EVP phenomena. The first is that they are indeed some kind of extra-sensible emanations, ‘the tortured voices of those in Hell, [...] the taunts of demons, or [...] the by-products of some numbing mental process that occurs after death’; the second, that they are psycho-acoustic patternings of geography: ‘the haunted house, the poltergeist phenomenon, are explained as a result of the continuing presence of traumatized spirits or stored psychic energy, associated with a given place’. (25) William Burroughs, in his own essay on Raudive, ‘It Belongs to the Cucumbers’, is highly sceptical, and suggests that the voices are more likely ‘imprinted on the tape by electromagnetic energy generated by the unconscious minds of the researchers or people connected with them’. (26) I find a third possibility more suggestive: that EVP phenomena are the coming-to-attention of the human ear to the ‘planet of sound’ around us. Kelley writes:

We are programmed in such a way to screen out as much extraneous information as possible; otherwise we would not be able to deal with the amount of external stimuli that constantly bombards us. A tape recorder does much the same thing that putting a seashell, or a simple tube, up to our ear does – it makes us aware of the amount of white noise that continually surrounds us. (27)

Jonathan Crary, in Suspensions of Perception (2001) argued that the idea of attention became increasingly investigated in the fields of both psychology and optics in the 19th century. This is because of the perceived tendency in human beings (particularly workers, it should be noted) towards distraction, in what Crary calls ‘an emergent economic system that demanded attentiveness of a subject in a wide range of new productive and spectacular tasks, but whose internal movement was continually eroding the basis of any disciplinary attentiveness’. (28) The conditions of a ‘modern’, industrial, increasingly consumption- as well as production-oriented economy, pulled the human subject in two directions: firstly, the bombardment of what Walter Benjamin has called the ‘shock’ of modern existence (urban living, machinery, speed, advertising, etc) creates an increasingly distracted subject in an increasingly kaleidoscopic world; and secondly, that the very economic conditions that produce this kind of world require a working subject who is able to maintain long periods of attentiveness to complex and repetitive tasks (over a 10- or 12-hour working day in a factory, for instance). The disciplining of visual attention that Crary diagnoses can be extended to the field of sound reproduction and transmission; aural attention is required to prevent a kind of distraction of the senses through sonic overload in a world where ‘the skies are filled with electro-magnetic slums’, ‘aural garbage [...] aether talk [...] and] dead city radio transmissions’. (29) EVP, then, in Gothicised form, makes this disciplining of attention itself ‘visible’: it
is what we do not, or cannot, hear. The image that is repeated continuously in *Contact*, of Ellie Alloway concentrating on the sounds transmitted through her headphones (‘no-one listens any more’ says her immediate superior) is emblematic of the necessity of aural attention in modernity: Ellie must shut out the very ‘planet of sound’ that the film begins with in order to contact the ‘electronic elsewhere’.

II.

Fictional or filmic EVP narratives are, like the phenomenon itself, organised around overcoming ‘the trauma of a profound loss’. *(30) Contact*, which, despite being about the search for extra-terrestrial intelligence is a classical EVP narrative, expresses Ellie Alloway’s search for transmissions explicitly as a recuperation of the loss of her mother and father, and when she does indeed achieve ‘contact’ with extra-terrestrials, they appear in the very physical form of her Dad. *Frequency* also has at its centre the loss of a parent, where radio-transmitted EVP phenomena become stitched into a time-paradox narrative where the trauma of loss may not only be overcome, but undone. Both of these films concentrate upon *audio* transmissions, but another, better-known film that incorporates ‘spirit voices’, Tobe Hooper’s 1982 film *Poltergeist*, has at its centre the ‘snow’ of a television screen after transmission on a channel has ended (in the days of analogue signals and ‘closedown’), the audio white noise accompanied by the unsettling light of a cathode-ray tube broadcasting no signal. The poster for the film featured the young girl Carol Anne (Heather O’Rourke) sitting directly in front of this television, listening intently to ‘voices’ only she could hear. The tag-line for the film, dialogue spoken by Carol Anne, is: ‘They’re here.’

Where *Contact* and *Frequency* concentrated upon the loss of the father-figure, the crucial triangulation in *Poltergeist* is female, and maternal. While the father Steven Freeling (Craig T. Nelson) has been morally compromised by his complicity on dubious land deals that have sited housing developments on old Native American burial grounds (a failure of paternal authority more common in the films of producer Steven Spielberg), it is the daughter Carol Anne who becomes the subject of the malignant attentions of the poltergeists. When she is taken to the ‘elsewhere’ in this film, the family call upon the services of a team of para-psychological researchers from UC Irvine. When the ‘scientists’, with technological gear of high-end EVP experimenters (video and audio recording, motion sensors, and so on) cannot solve the problem of poltergeist activity, they call in the medium, Tangina Barrons (Zelda Rubinstein). It is she who realises that the phenomena are ‘spirits’ who have not gone into the ‘light’ of the hereafter, and that a malign entity has captured both Carol Anne and the attention of spirits, preventing them from ‘passing’; and it is she who sends Carol Anne’s mother Diana (JoBeth Williams) into the ‘portal’ to retrieve her daughter. When they emerge back into the ‘real’ of the house, mother and daughter are covered in some kind of ectoplasm, a (re)birth-fluid that emphasises feminine and maternal materiality. The core of *Poltergeist* is the recuperation of the mother-daughter bond through the ministrations of the female medium/ midwife, preserver of arcane knowledge and practices that always-already escape the scientizing discourses of the UC Irvine team (who are led by a female scientist, but whose practices are resolutely coded as masculine: rational, technological, and deeply flawed).

These three films, then, can be constellated as a ‘parental’ mode of EVP narrative, in which trauma is focused upon the parent/child relationship and emotional dynamic. Another group of EVP narratives, which will take up the remainder of the essay, are Orphean in nature. Orpheus has, in the twentieth century, been a myth recurrently taken up by artists and writers who wish to explore artistic creation and transmission, but also the imperatives of loss and recuperation. In his Afterword to his translation of Rainer Maria Rilke’s ‘Orpheus’ sequence of sonnets, the poet Don Paterson writes that Rilke wrote the poems at such speed that it seemed to Rilke as though they were being broadcast from elsewhere (as in Kipling’s ‘Wireless’), where poetic creation took the form of an ‘enigmatic dictation’. This exogamous conception of writing leads Paterson to propose the poet as a kind of medium:

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Someone so sensitive that they become not only a lightning rod for all the crackling static of the culture, but also a satellite-dish, a ‘receiver’ (to use a Rilkean favourite) for things a less precisely attuned and calibrated sensibility would never be aware of. These individuals possess no supernatural powers, but do have abnormally strong sense of what’s on the wind for us. (31)

Orpheus is, of course, a mythic figure for the poet, one whose gift is bound up with loss. Orpheus, once a priest of Dionysus, is, at the time of his marriage, a priest of Apollo. The son of a river god (or perhaps Apollo) and Calliope (the Muse of epic poetry), Orpheus is gifted with a supernatural ability to play the lyre: his song charms the trees (who uproot to come nearer the singer), softens stones, alters nature itself. On his wedding day, his bride Eurydice, fleeing the bee-keeper Aristaeus, treads upon a snake, is bitten, and dies. The grief-stricken Orpheus thereby descends into the Underworld, and through song, persuades Persephone and Hades to allow Eurydice to accompany him back to the upper world, on one condition: that he does not look back at his wife as they ascend. Unfortunately, as they near the upper world, Orpheus does look back, either in fear, or anxiety, or through love of his wife – and her shade retreats to the underworld. Despite his efforts, she may not be released a second time. In some versions of the myth, Orpheus then forswears the company of women and takes young male lovers. Precipitated by this rejection, women of a Dionysian cult, in an intoxicated frenzy, tear Orpheus to pieces; his head and lyre float down the river, still lamenting the loss of Eurydice, until they are washed ashore on Lesbos, while his shade is reunited with Eurydice in the underworld. The head of Orpheus becomes an oracle until Apollo, fearing competition with his own oracle at Delphi, silences the head and places Orpheus among the stars.

The figure of Orpheus has, from the Medieval period, through the Renaissance, Romanticism and to Modern and contemporary literature, has been re-imagined as: (a) an emblematic narrative of loss of the loved one; (b) a figure of the transcendent power of art and poetry; and (c) the imagination of the boundary between the real or quotidian and the transcendent or divine. Contemporary SF, fantasy and gothic/horror fictions have used an Orphean narrative pattern, of a journey to an ‘underworld’, to construct narratives of anxiety, trauma and loss. These include films such as Solaris (2002), where a voyage to a sentient star, and thereby contact a transcendent other, is patterned on the male protagonist’s search for the restoration of his lost wife, horror/SF crossover texts such as Event Horizon (1997), where the scientist Weir’s interest in the demonic ship is predicated on undoing the trauma of his wife’s suicide; and, in different ways, both White Noise (2005) and Frozen (2005), films I will consider in more detail shortly.

While all these films connect EVP phenomenon with loss, there are significant differences, which can be expressed in tabular form. (Bold indicates video-based EVP; italics signify audio-based EVP.)

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In Jean Cocteau’s *Orphée* (1950), Jean Marais plays Orpheus, a poet who fears losing his gifts, and who suffers the loss of his wife when Orpheus’s Death (personified by Maria Casares) falls in love with him, and deceives him by sending messages via car radio which he then copies down and presents to the public, to great success, as his own work. Some of these are numbers (referring to the coded broadcasts of the BBC to French Resistance fighters in Occupied France in World War 2), but some have a dislocated, surreal quality: ‘A single glass of water lights up the world’; ‘Jupiter enlightens those he would destroy’. The exogenous nature of Orpheus’s poetry – it is actually composed by his great (and deceased) young rival, Cégeste – connects Cocteau’s *Orphée* to Rilke, but also to EVP: these are disembodied voices, calling via sound broadcast technologies, with mysterious intention. Orpheus asks the angel Heurtebise ‘Where can they be coming from?’ It is, of course, from the ‘electronic elsewhere’. Cocteau’s Orpheus does indeed retrieve his Eurydice from the underworld, and although the prohibition about looking back at his wife remains intact, this version of the narrative does not end in disaster (and dismemberment), but in a kind of triumph over Death, albeit mysterious and problematic.

In *White Noise* (2005), communication devices abound: cell phones, answer phones, TV, video, computer screens all feature heavily in the *mise-en-scène*. These devices, lyres for the electronic age, allow a bridge to be formed between quotidian and other- or under-worlds. The haunted nature of telephonic/telegraphic communication is figured directly as communication with ghosts, and particularly with the spirit of a lost wife. Michael Keaton plays Jonathan Rivers, an architect (the sign of ratio, of Apollo) whose second wife tells him she is pregnant before she drives into the city for a meeting. She never returns. Her car is found by the river with a flat tyre, and her body is eventually discovered up-river, taken there by the tide. In the protagonist’s name and this location we find reference to the *Styx/ Lethe* imagery that is much more overt in *Frozen*, but also the birth imagery that Brian Jarvis notes as significant in the J-horror variant on haunted tape and the invasion-horror narrative, *Ringu*. (32) (In *Frozen*, Annie, the lost sister, has also recently had a child; we see the baby with the ‘abandoned’ father.) Ultimately, the narrative descends into both spirit-invasion horror (malignant spirit entities as in *Poltergeist*) and, in a curious genre-swerve, serial killer narrative, where the wife’s death was murder, not accidental, and is one of a sequence that the serial-killer offers up to the malign spirit entities. *Frozen* makes the same swerve when revealing, at the point of the female protagonist’s death at his hands, that the abandoned father of his sister’s child is in fact the murderer of both sisters.

At first, in *White Noise*, televisual imaging technology (home movies shown on TV) are not connected to EVP. As in the figure of John Anderton in *Minority Report* (2002), whose watching of holographic images of his lost son are meant to comfort but merely compound the trauma of loss, Rivers seeks out videotapes of his life with his lost wife as an index of unrecuperated trauma. The promise of all these haunted technologies is, ultimately, the restoration of a form of life to the dead: as Terry Castle notes in *The Female Thermometer*, the phantasmagoria entrepreneur/inventor Etienne-Gaspard Robertson, when introducing the show ‘emerged, spectrelike, from the gloom, and addressing the audience, offered to conjure up the spirits of their dead loved ones’. (33) The bridge formed by these technologies, as we saw with *Frequency*, is not only to the spirit world, but also to the past, the time in which the loved one was not lost.

This literal nostalgia, this return home to a time before loss/trauma, is indicated in the *mise-en-scène* of *White Noise*. Rivers’ home and office are photographed with a cool, grey-blue palette: chrome, brushed steel and glass predominate. After he moves to an apartment following his wife’s death, this becomes still more emphasised, the blue light of cathode ray screens reflecting from glass-brick walls. When Rivers is
approached by an EVP specialist, Raymond Price (Ian McNeice), who tells him Rivers’ wife has contacted him, the initially sceptical Rivers visits Price’s home. The mise-en-scène here is markedly different: the clapboard house contains rooms lit in shades of red and brown, the space cluttered, old rugs on the floor. Unlike Rivers apartment, this base is homely, heimlich perhaps, although part of the clutter is the EVP equipment itself: tapes, video recorders, computer, and a DAT player. The room bespeaks the past, and the technology of the past; it is as though Price has heard voices through a crystal radio set in his front room (echoing the ham radio activities of Ellie Alloway in Contact). In a sense, this is exactly what he has been doing; EVP as do-it-yourself radiophonics. If Price’s house is homely, then Rivers deliberately dislocates himself from ‘home’. He moves from a house shared with his lost wife to a cold, modern apartment building in the city. Perhaps the house is haunted by the memories of his wife, and indeed it is here that Rivers is seen watching home movies; and the move to the blank new apartment becomes an attempt to escape these ghosts. But it is here, through tape and EVP that the ghost of his wife manifests itself. It is the very blankness of the modern apartment that calls forth the ghost.

This narrative, like others mentioned above, combines Orpheus motifs, technology and the numinous or transcendent. They place a male questing protagonist at the centre of narrative agency. In the figures of von Szalay, Jurgenson, Raudive, and in White Noise Rivers and Price, EVP is represented as a male activity, the technology perhaps inverting the paradigm of female mediumship. As Scone and Marina Warner note, from the Fox sisters on, there is an interesting implication of gender in Spiritualism – a gender politics. Scone writes: ‘spiritualism empowered women to speak in public, often about very controversial issues facing the nation’. In spirit photography, it is William Crookes or William Hope photographing female mediums; and in spiritualism, the female does not speak: she is a medium for others. The media (photography/ tape) that will prove the scientific fact of the existence of post mortem life (spirits, voices) is coded as male; the mediums that are the focus are female. In White Noise, Rivers visits a blind female seer, a medium, who cautions him against EVP, warning him not to ‘meddle’. The conflict between the archetypal female medium, and the technophile male EVP experimenter, bespeaks a kind of gender problematic in these Orpheus narratives, and perhaps an attempt to wrest the figuring of the ‘electronic elsewhere’ into the realm of the masculine.

Frozen (2005), on the other hand, is certainly a text which uses EVP motifs – the imprinting of a strange image on to surveillance CCTV tape – but in the service of a narrative which focuses on female, and sisterly, loss. When Kath, the surviving sister (Shirley Henderson) of a disappeared woman visits the alleyway where CCTV images of her sister were captured, she has a vision whereupon she stands upon tidal sands, while what she takes to be her sister walks upon a sandbank across and inlet or creek. As the film progresses, and the number of these visions increases, the Orpheus patterning becomes more apparent: a boat is seen, rowed by the blind ferryman Charon, and when she discusses her visions with a counsellor/priest (Roshan Seth) he explicitly decodes them as a Greco-Roman underworld.

The counsellor/priest’s discourse runs directly counter to the scientific, demystifying impulses of Raudive and other EVP experimenters. The priest says to Kath: ‘some things are beyond understanding and we just have to accept them as mysteries’. At the same time, when Kath shows him a printout of the uncanny image on the CCTV tape, in return he shows her a Rorschach ink blot, indicating that her meaning-making, of Annie as a dead and her visions as uncanny, is faulty. Later in the film, the image on the ‘blot’ becomes clearer, like a very slowly developing Polaroid photograph. It is revealed to be a close up of a two-shot taken while Annie and Kath were on a roller-coaster, their happy faces pressed together. Whilst Kath only finds herself, not Annie, wandering the underworld sands in her visions, this image does suggest (albeit sentimentally) that the two sisters are reunited in death. Through Kath’s visions, which we see as a cinematic ‘real’, the afterlife is presented as a kind of truth or reality, just as in EVP.

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Frozen returns to the figure of the female visionary, though Kath’s mediumship is overtly bound up with trauma and loss, and possible psychological disintegration. Kath ends up ‘channelling’ her own death, seeing her own face, when Jonathan Rivers in White Noise sees the deaths of others. He does not see his own death, even though his EVP visions become proleptic/prophetic/prophylactic in form. However, the last image of White Noise is Rivers, with his wife, amidst the visual snow of blank videotape playback, looking back out of the screen at us. Where Kath and Annie are bound up with each other, White Noise’s final visual gesture is to turn to the audience.

Why? The film is explicitly a cautionary tale, and on-screen titles warn that one in 12 EVP events our threatening in nature. It is also a warning against the Orpheus narrative, of looking back over one’s shoulder, of nostalgia. After Rivers funeral, his son, first wife and her current husband sit in their car. The radio comes on of its own accord, and we hear Keaton’s voice, as an EVP, say ‘I’m sorry’ to son who, somewhat curiously, seems pleased by this event. What is striking about certain sequences in this film is not the use of EVP, nor the spirit-invasion narratives, but the images of the son, playing alone, on the father, in another room, watched blank tape in a search for his wife. In inhabiting nostalgia, in wanting to restore the past, in an inability to overcome the trauma of loss, Rivers neglects his son, and present time. The real locus of anxiety (and pathos) in White Noise is not the bereaved lover, but the neglectful/forgetful father.

III.

There is one film that uses EVP motifs I have deliberately refrained from mentioning so far: M. Knight Shyamalan’s The Sixth Sense (1999). There is indeed a ‘lost wife’ in this film, but, of course, the ‘twist’ in this narrative is that Dr Malcolm Crowe (Bruce Willis), the psychologist who treats a traumatised child who ‘sees dead people’ (Cole Sear, played by Haley Joel Osment) is himself dead, only a ghost. Cole tells Crowe that the ghosts ‘only see what they want to see’, and while this bears upon Crowe’s ongoing self-delusion as a ghost who believes himself to be alive, it also indicates the failure of rationality and scientific/ medical discourse to deal with the real cause of Cole’s trauma: he really does see dead people. As the narrative nears its end, Dr Crowe realises that the causes of his own death lie in the roots of his rational world-view. His home invaded by a traumatised former patient, Crowe is shot, and the film seems to take place after his recovery, but in fact occurs after his death. Crowe ‘fails’ Vincent Grey (Mark Wahlberg) because he can only see Vincent’s symptoms as internal and psychological terms, whereas the truth lies externally; he, too, contacts the dead. On playing back a tape of an interview with Grey, Crowe hears what he has blocked out all this time, the voices that haunt and torture Grey. The EVP manifestation finally makes clear to Crowe the limits of his own discourse; and this way is the path not only towards understanding his own condition (as ghost), but a form of healing for himself and Cole, who stands in and recuperates the damage that he could not undo with Vincent Grey. The Sixth Sense is then another recuperative narrative, and as he leaves the film (and Earth), Crowe is rewarded with the knowledge of his wife’s ongoing love for him.

It is important to note, by way of conclusion, that the films I have been considering here are mainly grouped around the years 1997-2005, with Orphée and Poltergeist preceding them. All the films deal with analogue technologies: radio, audio tape, video, CCTV. These analogue technologies (excepting CCTV) were in decline in this period, and most have now been supplanted by digital formats: digital and web radio; vinyl records and audio tape by cd and digital downloads; video tape by dvd and video files. (Analogue television signals are being ‘switched over’ to digital in the UK at the time of writing, nearing the end of a process that has taken several years.) For audio tape especially, a nostalgia-inflected culture has developed, around the ‘mixtape’ as a particular form of transmission and distribution (consumer-led)
of music, and vinyl has continued to be supported by DJ and remix culture. At the end of their time as consumer technologies of sound and visual reproduction, it seems that analogue technologies particularly became haunted by the ‘ghosts’ of nostalgia and by the very imperfections that rendered them unheimlich. The degrading qualities of reproduction of audio and video tape or vinyl records inserted them into history as material objects, and personal history as bearers of the marks of playback (particularly evident in the scratches on vinyl), but the associations conjured by this entry into history and memory themselves produced ghosts.

As I have argued in the course of this essay, it is the very properties of these media which are the ground and condition of their ‘haunted’ phenomena, the imperfections of aural and visual reproduction. Without noise, as I have stated, there can be no signal. Does the sonic ‘cleanness’ of digital reproduction mean that communication technologies will no longer be uncanny? The use of digital sound recorders by contemporary EVP experimenters suggests not: computers, hard disks or digital cameras have their own ambient footprints. There is a difference between analogue and digital reproduction; however, Bernard Stiegler suggests that both can create anxiety:

Analogico-digital technology continues and amplifies a process of suspension [that interrupts one state of things and imposes another] that began a long time ago, in which the analog photograph was itself only a singular epoch. And so the process in ancient, but the current phase of suspension – in the form of digital photography – engenders an anxiety and a doubt which are particularly interesting, but particularly threatening.(37)

It is, then, perhaps sound and visual reproduction itself which is haunted, rather than specific technologies. In digital artifacts and glitches, we may still see ghosts.
2 Sterne, p.332.
4 Sconce, p.62.
9 In John Cheever’s ‘The Enormous Radio’ (1947), a radio set picks up the conversations of other families in an apartment block, allowing the owners of the radio to eavesdrop on others. The result of this ‘haunting’ is that the couple’s own suppressed history, its secrets, come to the surface once more. John Cheever, ‘The Enormous Radio’, *The Enormous Radio and Other stories* (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1953)
10 Sconce, p.84.
11 Sconce, p.84.
12 Sconce, p.90.
13 Sconce, p.90; p.91.
14 Banks, p.80.
15 Mike Kelley, ‘An Academic Cut-up, in Easily Digestible Paragraph-Size Chunks; Or, the New King of Pop, Dr. Konstantin Raudive’, *Grey Room* 11, Spring 2003, 22-43 (p.38).
20 Hayles, p.208.
25 Kelley, p. 25; p.29.
27 Kelley, p.37.
30 Sconce, p.91.
34 Here we find a connection to narratives of uncanny wireless, such as Kipling’s ‘Wireless’, Friedlander’s ‘Goethe speaks into the phonograph’ (reproduced in Kittler) and the film Frequency.
35 Sconce, Haunted Media, p.49.
36 Jayne Steel, who collaborated with the director of Juliet McKeon on the script of Frozen, has confirmed to me that narrative elements of the film are explicitly drawn from the Orpheus myth.
‘Seven Devils’: Gerald Griffin’s ‘The Brown Man’
and the Making of Irish Gothic

Sinéad Sturgeon

‘… of the true Hibernian stamp, the genuine emanation of the mud cottage, redolent of turf and whiskey…’

—an anonymous reviewer describing ‘The Brown Man’, Monthly Review, April 1827

Gerald Griffin’s chilling short story ‘The Brown Man’ has been largely forgotten since its initial appearance in the collection “Holland-Tide;” or, Munster Popular Tales (1827), the writer’s fiscally-motivated fiction debut, and the volume that made his name after a long, unsuccessful slog as a playwright in London.(1) As the story is so little known, it may be useful at this point to provide a brief narrative synopsis. The scene is set in a remote part of West Munster, where a widow named Guare and her beautiful daughter, Nora, live in poverty and near-starvation. Their plight appears to improve when Nora is courted by and marries ‘a strange horseman’ known as the Brown Man, who promises to make his new wife ‘a lady, with servants at her call, and all manner of fine things about her’. (2) But on arrival at her new husband’s home, Nora finds that the Brown Man’s ‘estate’ is a ‘wild bog’ and his palace a ‘clay-hovel’, while the only food available is ‘a handful of raw white-eyes and a little salt’. The bride trembles at the sight of the marital bed, ‘a little straw in a corner’, but worse is yet to come. (3) That night, and the next, the Brown Man leaves the cabin, returning to bed ‘cold as ice’ half an hour later. On the third night he leaves again, and this time Nora secretly follows him, ‘winding through a lane of frost-nipped sallow trees’. (4) To her horror, she sees her new husband, his horse and his dog in the graveyard of Muckross Abbey, ‘seated by an open grave, eating somthing; and glancing their brown, fiery eyes about in every direction’. (5) The next day, a terrified Nora pleads to be allowed to visit her mother; the Brown Man refuses, ‘I didn’t marry you to be keeping you gadding’, but offers to fetch the widow himself. (6) In due course the widow appears and Nora confides to her the horrifying sight she has witnessed:

‘My husband by the grave, and the horse … Turn your head aside, mother, for your breath is very hot … and the dog and they eating.—Ah you are not my mother!’ shrieked the miserable girl, as the Brown Man flung off his disguise, and stood before her, grinning worse than a blacksmith’s face through a horse-collar. He just looked at her one moment, then darted his long fingers into her bosom, from which the red blood spouted in so many streams. She was very soon out of all pain, and a merry supper the horse, the dog, and the Brown Man had that night, by all accounts. (7)

For the most part, reviewers of Holland-Tide were favourable, focusing their attention on the lengthy opening story ‘The Aylmers of Bally-Aylmer’. Nevertheless there were those who were disturbed by the Gothic contours of the breviloquent ‘Brown Man’. The Literary Chronicle railed ‘The Brown Man we dislike, a child of six years would like it better’; and while the Dublin and London magazine described the stories of Holland-Tide as ‘highly entertaining’, the reviewer made an exception of ‘The Brown Man’, ‘which is too diabolical’. (8) The story still retains its bedevilling power, one that is enhanced by the uncharacteristic economy with which the story is told, yet its cool reception in 1827 proved a telling foreshadowing of the story’s eventual lapse into obscurity. While it is occasionally included in anthologies of Irish short stories, ‘The Brown Man’, like much of Griffin’s work, has been largely neglected by
In narratives the Yet, Brown Griffin’s the constituent superstition, (Griffin ‘Holland­Tide’ Festivals Irish summons a their of is bricolage ‘The together, of national parameters of Irish Gothic writing, a trend that is currently underway in critical studies (notably, in the web-pages of this journal (10)). To this end, I will endeavour to demonstrate that ‘The Brown Man’ broadens our understanding of the complex and varying ways in which Irish writers used Gothic modes in their work. ‘The Brown Man,’ it will be argued, reveals Irish Gothic to be intensely and intentionally intertextual—a bricolage of national narratives which, taken together, transcend their constituent parochialisms, thereby participating in a markedly cosmopolitan cultural arena.

Such a reassessment may at first glance seem to be a contrary critical response to a story that strives to distinguish itself as specifically and regionally Irish. Following an epigraph from the English verse-satire ‘The Dragon of Wantley’ and an oddly academic-sounding opening paragraph (of which more later), the story’s geography (West Munster, the Mangerton mountains, the Gothic remains of Muckross Abbey) and Hiberno-English dialect all pertain to a stereotypical Irish peasant setting:

In a lonely cabin, in a lonely glen, on the shores of a lonely lough, in one of the most lonesome districts of west Munster, lived a lone woman named Guare. She had a beautiful girl, a daughter named Nora. Their cabin was the only one within three miles round them in every way. As to the mode of living, it was simple enough, for all they had was one little garden of white cabbage, and they had eaten that down to a few heads between them, a sorry prospect in a place where even a handful of prishoc weed was not to be had without sowing it.(11)

The repetition of lonely establishes the childlike, fairy-tale feel of the narrative as well as the remoteness of the location (the mythical, mystical West so central to the imagination of the Revival writers later in the century), but the emphasis on food, and on the near-starvation of the women, sounds a note of realistic, material concern that is also the principal subject of the volume’s opening pages. ‘The Brown Man’, as noted by the Monthly Review in the epigraph to this article, flaunts an Hibernian bravura appropriate to a volume strategically marketed as part of the wave of regional fiction in vogue in the 1820s. The success of Holland-Tide (Griffin produced a second volume, Tales of the Munster Festivals, later the same year) suggests that the writer had garnered from his time in London a shrewd estimation of what his English audience expected in the way of local colour, although the graphic horror of ‘The Brown Man’ was a step too far for some, accustomed even as they were to themes of violence and the supernatural in ‘authentic’ representations of Irish life.

The overarching fictional frame of Holland-Tide supports its commercially-sound ethnographic purpose: a story-telling session by a group of Irish peasants gathered together for a ‘most frolick November-Eve party, at the house of a respectable farmer in the west of Munster’. (12) ‘Holland-Tide’ (or Hallowe’en) thus summons a dominant context of Irish folklore, superstition, and the supernatural.(13) Such a narrative strategy might appear unusual coming from a writer who greatly admired (and indeed sought to emulate) the Banim brothers’ Tales by the O’Hara Family (1825) specifically for its ‘power of creating an intense interest without stepping out of real life, and in the very easy and natural drama that is carried through them’. (14) Griffin’s working title for his own collection was the less evocative, even mundane moniker ‘Munster Anecdotes’; the stories, he wrote to his brother, were to be ‘illustrious of manners and scenery precisely as they stand in the south of Ireland, never daring to travel out of perfect and easy probability... Reality you know is all the rage now.’(15) Yet, while the novella ‘The Aylmers of
Bally-Aylmer’ features a ghost that turns out to be a mortal being, the rest of the stories repeatedly foreground supernatural phenomenon without even the ‘loophole’ of possible rational explanation. ‘The Brown Man’ deploys conflicting authorial modes and combines fantastical elements (such as talking animals) with realistic detail in a style that anticipates something of the controlled extravagance of magic realism. Taken as a whole, Holland-Tide is by turns Romantic, melodramatic, realist, Gothic, or a combination of all of these, suggesting either that Griffin changed his mind as to the tenor of his fiction, or that his conception of ‘realism’ was significantly different to how this genre was developing in English literary tradition. Griffin's ‘The Brown Man’, like much Irish writing of the period, challenges the boundaries of literary genres, to ongoing discomfiting effect. While readers in the 1820s found the story too diabolical, Vivian Mercier, in his 1964 anthology Great Irish Short Stories, worried that it almost wasn’t diabolical enough: ‘[w]ith his facetious tone and phonetic spelling of Irish English, Griffin almost ruined a terrifying vampire tale.’(16)

To perceive Irish ‘reality’ as differing in substantial ways from its English equivalent was hardly exceptional; as is often remarked, the island was already securely established in British cultural consciousness as a place of extraordinary, anomalous difference, a site of romantic and Gothic adventure rather than ‘real life’. The critic Siobhán Kilfeather has traced the ‘wild’ Ireland of Spenser and Milton, through the work of a variety of eighteenth-century writers and genres to reveal Ireland as ‘one of the original sites of the Gothic [which] may help to explain the status of Ireland as a Gothic scene in the nineteenth century.’(17) A review in 1827 of the Banim's second series of Tales by the O’Hara Family (1826), expressed the widespread view that ‘[t]here is no country more fertile in the materials of romance than Ireland.’ While the tenor of English life was ‘even, dignified, and graceful’, in Ireland,

on the contrary, common life is almost of itself a romance, requiring no foreshortenings, no artificial contrast, no dexterous excision of level passages, no heightenings of passion, fortitude, or crime. Pleasure and despair border as closely on each other as the chapters in a novel […] There is not the unity and decorum requisite for tragedy; but there is precisely the variety which the exigencies of romance demand, thrown by nature into the strongest relief.(18)

Griffin’s emblematic title Holland-Tide thus attests to the widespread perception of Ireland-as-living-romance (or Gothic), capitalizing on contemporary interest in folklore and regional fiction as markers of national culture and identity, even as the volume’s generic muddlings exemplify the complex (and often critically problematized) texture of literary realism in nineteenth-century Irish writing.(19)

‘The Brown Man’ then, at first glance appears as a quintessentially ‘Irish’ story, channelling local folklore, redolent of traditional tales told by the fireside in ‘the mud cottage’, and overlaid with Gothic tropes of terror, horror, cannibalism and/or vampirism (both are possible readings of the story), as well as, more subtly indicated, the ways in which the past returns to haunt and torment the present. Yet, any reading of the story as narrowly ‘Irish’ is complicated by the teasing tone of the opening paragraph, which hints at a deeper meaning encoded in the narrative:

The common Irish expression of ‘the seven devils’ does not, it would appear, owe its origin to the supernatural influences ascribed to that numeral, from its frequent association with the greatest and most solemn occasions of theological history. If one were disposed to be fancifully metaphysical upon the subject, it might not be amiss to compare credulity to a sort of mental prism, by which the great volume of light of speculative superstition is refracted in a manner precisely similar to that of the material, every day sun, the great refractor thus showing only blue devils to the dwellers in the good city of London, orange

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and green devils to the inhabitants of the sister (or rather step-daughter), island, and so forward until the seven component hues are made out, through the other nations of the earth. But what has this to do with the story? In order to answer that question, the story must be told.(20)

This dense prologue, ruminating on the relationship of nationhood and traditional culture, is in stark tonal and stylistic contrast to the story that follows, and demands attentive reading. Does Griffin’s analogy, comparing the localized reception of superstitions or myths to refracted white light, reinforce national particularity or counteract it? At the very least, it provokes and problematizes the question of national difference in a period which placed much emphasis on the importance and validity of such distinctions (and within a volume seeking to profit as already noted, from its declared regionalism). By insisting on a communal aboriginal source for popular culture, Griffin arguably subverts essentialized notions of identity. What, though, as Griffin riddlingly asks, has any of this to do with the story? His culturally sophisticated frame (even before taking into consideration the epigraph, more on which below) immensely enriches the reading of ‘The Brown Man’ and the interpretations that we are prompted to make; the deeper meaning of the story, it could be suggested, is the fallacy of belief in national singularity, advancing instead a multicoloured cultural plurality suitably couched in that most hybridized and versatile of literary genres, the Gothic. Combining the colours of blue, orange, and green, as any art-school student knows, produces brown, and Griffin’s brown man, I want to argue, becomes not only the figure for such transnational mythic dissemination, but the site of an Irish Gothic that is more heterogeneously intertextual, intercultural, and aesthetically studied than has previously been acknowledged.

While critical assumptions as to the constitution and function of Irish Gothic have recently received some sustained and fruitful interrogation, the overwhelming scholarly convention has been to decode Irish Gothic writing as a vehicle for class anxiety, finding in the texts of writers such as Charles Maturin, Sheridan Le Fanu, and Bram Stoker, a fitful literary tradition that allegorized the troubled subconscious of the Protestant Anglo-Irish in the nineteenth century.(21) The work of Griffin, a Catholic raised in post-1798 Limerick, whose father reportedly assisted the Irish peasantry in the severe repression that followed the rebellion, provides an opportunity to widen the parameters of criticism to explore what Richard Haslam has postulated as ‘an Irish-Catholic-nationalist Gothic mode’. (22) Taking a cue from the historical bearings of Anglo-Irish Gothic criticism, which aligns the supernatural with either the oppressed (and vengeful) Irish or the oppressing (and guilt-stricken) Anglo-Irish, it is tempting to read ‘The Brown Man’ in the first instance as a sort of Gothic aisling which allegorizes the structures and practices of colonialism. Such an arch, meta-textual framing may be signalled even in the choice of epigraph: an extract from ‘The Dragon of Wantley’, a well-known satire allegorizing a dispute over tithes in a seventeenth-century Yorkshire village.(23) The dragon in question referred to an ecclesiastic with an unreasonable appetite for tithes, and the knight of the piece, ‘More of More-Hall’, versified the lawyer who brought a successful suit against the cleric on behalf of the Wantley parishioners. In an analogous allegorical manner, it could be argued that Griffin’s story symbolizes the oppression of Ireland (textually figured as Nora Guare) by an exploitative, alien aristocratic class (the Brown Man). The trope of Ireland as a beautiful, vulnerable maiden was well established even by the nineteenth-century; one of the earliest, most famous proponents of the aisling tradition was Aogán Ó Rathaille, buried, according to popular legend, in the churchyard of Muckross Abbey (where Griffin’s Brown Man carries out his midnight raids). The Gothic ruin of Muckross Abbey and its violent history is itself a symbol of centuries of religious persecution and civil strife in Ireland and, pursuing this historical line further, the Brown Man himself could originate in the person of particularly loathed Anglo-Irish landlords: Denis ‘the rope’ Browne (so-called for his alacrity in hanging suspected rebels during 1798) and lividly castigated in Antaine Raiftearai’s ‘Amhrán na bhFrannach.’(24) Alternatively, and more specifically related to the

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The precise topography of the story, another candidate is Valentine Brown (1695-1736), a scion of the great landowning family of west Munster and subject of Ó Rathaille’s most notoriously scathing satire, ‘Vailintín Brún’.

A mist of pain has covered my dour old heart
since the alien devils entered the land of Conn;
our Western Sun, Munster’s right ruler, clouded
--there’s the reason I’d ever call on you,
Valentine Brown.(25)

This reading of ‘The Brown Man’ would seem to fulfil the rubric of a Catholic-nationalist Gothic, with the emphasis perhaps on the latter half of the equation. Equally, it speaks to the anxiety-inducing paradox at the heart of the post-Glorious Revolution British state which preached democracy at home and elsewhere, in Ireland and the Empire, practised despotism. ‘The Brown Man’ could thus reflect upon the barbarism which became, as Luke Gibbon has argued, ‘intrinsic to the maintenance of colonial rule.’(26)

While it is tempting to see the Brown Man, fortified with the usual gentry accoutrements of horse and hound, as a prefiguration of the vampiric Anglo-Irish landlord, there are textually embedded problems with such a reading. The Brown Man’s estate is revealed to be ‘a wild bog’, and his big house ‘a clay-hovel’(27); moreover, fittingly to these domestic arrangements, the Brown Man speaks Irish:

‘Whogh! whogh!’ said the horse as they drove off, ‘that was well done. Are we to have a mail [sic] of her?’
‘Easy, ma-coppuleen, and you’ll get your ‘nough before night,’ said the Brown Man, ‘and you likewise, my little dog.’(28)

This complicates the notion of the Brown Man as an alien, post-Cromwellian Anglo-Irish landlord, associating him rather with a more ancient Gaelic world and, more circuitously, its damning representation by Elizabethan and Jacobean English colonialist writers as a place of savagery, barbarism, and cannibalism (a tradition founded much earlier by Gerald of Wales’s Topographia Hibernica [1187] and Expugnatio Hibernica [1189]).(29) This colonial counterpoint is immediately signalled in the text’s opening line; while the expression ‘the seven devils’ is ‘fancifully’ linked to the seven colours of the rainbow, the allusion has other possible origins: the New Testament story of the seven demons cast out of Mary Magdalene (Luke 8:2), and, more ominously, John Temple’s influential propagandist history on the 1641 Rebellion, The history of the general rebellion in Ireland, first published in 1646, and frequently re-issued thereafter. The phrase occurs as Temple details a horrific scene of Irish rebels triumphantly parading and mutilating the severed heads of seven English soldiers, which are then unceremoniously dumped in a hole outside Kilkenny:

And to make the manner of their burial, and the heads themselves yet more contemptible; the rebels (over the hole where the heads were laid) set up a long stick, whereto they fixed papers, that all may take notice of the place: and after, and from that time, the rebellious roguish boys, took up, and frequently used the oath, ‘by the cross of the seven devils heads buried on St James’s-Green.’(30)

The popularity of Temple’s work was durable and, as Kathleen Noonan argues, ‘played a particularly powerful role in fixing a negative image of the Irish in the minds of the English,’ finding an enthusiastic audience in London where its frequent re-publications marked periods of heightened public fears about the security of the state: ‘[w]ars with the French, Jacobite rebellions, even the Home Rule agitation of the
Jarlath Killeen has demonstrated how Temple’s text and its ‘imagology of horror’ were crucial components in the formulation of Irish-Anglican Gothic, and its subsequent evolution in the eighteenth century in the work of William Molyneaux, William King, Jonathan Swift, Edmund Burke and Maria Edgeworth. The spectre of Temple in ‘The Brown Man’, though, is at best equivocal in its historical resonances. By echoing Temple in its opening line, the story positions itself in relation to the well-established colonialist view of an island that was self-consuming in its irredeemable savagery, but, given the teasing tone of the opening paragraph and its pert questioning of originary national narratives, the relation is more likely than not an ironic one which points to how history, like any other fiction, may be consumed and cloaked by myth. Thus, one outrageous, extravagant Irish fiction points to another, initiating a sub-current of self-reflexive anxiety over the very act of writing—the ways in which textual representation might compromise or jeopardize the integrity of the self—that may be discerned in other aspects of the narrative (a point that will be returned to presently).

‘The Brown Man,’ then, draws upon varying and various perceptions of Irishness without committing to one variety (or colour), retaining an underlying ambivalence that is apropos to the opening paragraph’s exposition of misguided claims to national distinctiveness. If Griffin is pointing to an allegory, it may be towards a more Swiftian satire on the dreadful plight of the Irish poor, paralleled in the child-eating Dragon of Wantley. Far from confirming Ireland as a place of extraordinary difference, the story finds common ground between English and Irish in the callous, cannibalistic exploitation of the poor by the rich, as well as the creative ways in which traumatic experience is memorialized and transmitted within given communities. Returning to the problem posed by the opening paragraph, we might infer that ‘The Brown Man’ is less a national tale than a narrative archetype whose appearance varies or refracts according to the localized context in which he appears. Even more destabilising to the thoroughgoing Irishness of the Brown Man, however, is the surprising array of ‘brown men’ that may be summoned from adjacent cultures and traditions. While the trope of cannibalism is common in the Gothic (though the motif of grave-robbing seems to have held a particularly personal resonance for Griffin (33)), its function in ‘The Brown Man’ can be seen to go beyond creating the sensation of horror—or the metaphorical figuration of colonial oppression—to symbolise the piecemeal, bodysnatching nature of the genre itself. More obliquely, this trope may also be seen as a vehicle for Griffin’s own anxieties about literary creativity, writing, and originality.

Most clearly ‘The Brown Man’ draws on folklore and the Gothic. Mercier describes it as a vampire tale which, he speculates, was ‘brought to Ireland by the Vikings, for it seems to be an example of Aarne-Thompson Folk tale Type 363, “a story almost entirely confined to the shores of the Baltic and of Norway.”’ (34) One might also describe ‘The Brown Man’ as a grim fairy tale, following the broad critical consensus that a fairy tale is ‘traditional folklore adapted and written down for the entertainment of children, usually featuring marvellous events and characters, although fairies as such are less often found in them than princesses, talking animals, ogres, and witches.’ (35) In Romantic-era Europe, traditional folklore and fairy tales were the subject of increasing interest and were already becoming strongly associated with children (as indicated by the censorious reaction to ‘The Brown Man’ in The Literary Chronicle). In the 1820s, books on national folklores were enjoying something of a boom with London publishers eager to take advantage of an emerging mass market; such folkloric works, Jennifer Schacker argues, took on transnational resonance because ‘the books’ status as displaced, representative now of both foreign orality and domestic literacy, gave them a new depth of meaning.’ (36) Folklore and fairy tales, in short, were becoming key cultural components in the formation of national identities and the associated socio-political relations therein. Griffin’s story relates to this wider context in a number of ways. As well as recreating, with a deeply sinister twist, the typically inoffensive brownie of Scottish and Northern English folklore, ‘The Brown Man’ draws on darker tales such as Charles Perrault’s ‘Bluebeard’. 
and ‘The Robber Bridegroom’ of the Grimms’ collection, the latter being having become recently available in English. (37) One might also perceive in the English translation and publication of Adelbert von Chamisso’s Peter Schlemihl in 1824—which disconcertingly blends fantastical events with realist narrative in its story of a young man who sells his shadow to a mysterious grey man—a source for the disconcerting behaviour of Nora Guare’s shadow in ‘The Brown Man’:

Looking down towards her shadow on the earth she started with horror to observe it move, although she herself was perfectly still. It waved its black arms, and motioned her back. What the feasters said, she understood not, but she seemed still fixed in the spot. She looked once more on her shadow; it raised one hand, and pointed the way to the lane; then slowly rising from the ground, and confronting her, it walked rapidly off in that direction.(38)

A brown man also features in the work of the linguist and poet John Leyden (1775-1811), who contributed a ballad, entitled ‘The cout of Keeldar’, to Walter Scott’s hugely popular Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border (1802). In the preface to ‘The cout of Keeldar’ there is an explanatory note relating to ‘The Brown Man of the Muirs […] a fairy of the most malignant order’—a malignant dwarf who attacks any mortal hunters who trespass on his domain.(39)

“Brown dwarf, that o’er the muir-land strays,
Thy name to Keeldar tell!”
“The Brown Man of the Muirs, who stays
Beneath the heather-bell.(40)

Another, and perhaps the most obvious, intertext for ‘The Brown Man’ is Thomas Crofton Croker’s Fairy Legends and Traditions of the South of Ireland (1825), ‘the first book purporting to contain material collected from oral tradition in the British Isles’. (41) Any comparison between the work of Croker (the so-called ‘king of the fairies’) and the fairy tale quality of the shorter tales in Holland-Tide (a point made by at least two contemporary reviewers) is intriguingly problematized by Griffin’s horrified reaction to the correlation. Griffin’s brother recorded the writer’s fury on his work being likened to Croker’s:

He crumpled the paper in his hand, raised it high above his head, stamped violently, and almost dashed it to the earth in the excess of his feeling. “Oh!”—he said—‘oh!” with a prolonged, and deep, and painful emphasis on the word—“this was just what I feared. I told—these tales were like Crofton Croker’s.” I was perfectly astonished, and said, “Why, what signifies it?” “Oh!” said he again, “you don’t know the effect of these things. Only think,” he repeated, with the utmost vehemence, “only think of being compared with Crofton Croker.”(42)

How is such fury to be explained? A comparison would surely have been to the struggling young writer’s benefit, as Croker’s volume had been well received by critics (a second edition appeared within a year, and he published second and third volumes in 1827 and 1828).(43) Tempting as it may be to ascribe Griffin’s horrified reaction to his distaste for Croker’s highly stereotyped tales of Irish folklore and culture (comparisons of Holland-Tide to the work of the Banims do not seem to have caused any such angst), the more likely immediate reason was an authorial anxiety of originality, suggested by the writer’s brother.

His great aim in all his efforts was to obtain a character for originality. Besides the natural vigour and truth of his writings, he wished that they should be distinguished as new. He could not bear to be blended with other writers as merely one of a class, still less could he tolerate the thought of being considered a copyist of any, even the greatest of them.(44)
Still, a comparison of Croker’s and Griffin’s respective representations of Irish folklore is telling. While the *Fairy Legends* sometimes deals with violence and disturbing supernatural occurrences (fairy theft of human children, for example), Croker’s condescending style and generally benign tone largely neutralises the sense of terror created by such events. Read against *Fairy Legends*, the pared-back and fast-paced narration of ‘The Brown Man’ is striking, as is its unmediated, horrific conclusion—‘an effective piece of rustic Grand Guignol’, as John Cronin described it.(45) Moreover, the strange shift in narrative tone in the opening of ‘The Brown Man’ may perhaps be better understood by reference to Croker. Indeed, one might posit a reading of ‘The Brown Man’ as a satire or parody of a Croker tale, the academic-style peroration on the particularity (or otherwise) of national myths in the opening paragraph of Griffin’s tale serving as an ironic point of contact and contrast to the elaborate ethnographical notes Croker appended to his stories. Croker declared that his collection was proof of a distinctive national character and psychology, and the comparative perspective in his notations invited English readers ‘regardless of education, class or age,’ as Schacker argues, ‘to direct a critical and patronizing gaze on their Irish objects.’(46) As noted earlier, ‘The Brown Man’ reflects ambiguously at best upon this type of associative, instructive reading between folklores and national characters, and though the narrative voice invokes elucidation (‘But what has this to do with the story?’) it refuses in the end to provide it, leaving the reader instead with the horrific image of Nora Guare’s drained, lifeless body, unrelieved by Croker-style anthropological footnotes. The connection between local folklore and essentialist socio-political meaning is pointedly withheld; in this context ‘The Brown Man’ reflects upon and ultimately rejects the intellectual and literary contrivance of Croker’s project, formulating a point stated more bleakly by Griffin in his next volume, *Tales of the Munster Festivals* (1827), that ‘a ruined people stand in need of a more potent restorative than an old wife’s story’. (47) Placed in the middle of the sequence of stories, ‘The Brown Man’ constitutes the dark heart of *Holland-Tide*, instilling a central, destabilising ambivalence into a volume marketed as authentic regional fiction, and is indicative perhaps of Griffin’s increasing frustration with the fraught complexities of the Irish writer in London, forced to make a living by writing about Ireland for a largely indifferent English audience.(48)

In addition to folklore, the fairy tale, and the Gothic, another more unlikely genre lurking behind the awful figure of the Brown Man is dramatic opera, which infuses the paratext of the story in a variety of ways. To begin with, ‘The Dragon of Wantley’ was the basis of a 1737 burlesque of the same name by Henry Carey and John Frederick Lampe, which became one of the most successful stage productions of the eighteenth century. Griffin’s title ‘The Brown Man’ itself conjures arresting echoes in the recent productions of the English Opera-House, which, on 26 July 1817, premiered ‘a new grand melo-dramatic Romance’ entitled *The Wizard; or The Brown Man of the Moor*.(49) This was an adaptation of Walter Scott’s historical novella *The Black Dwarf*, included in his series *Tales of My Landlord* (1816). The play was scathingly reviewed as a ‘romantic perversion of poetry and common sense, but it was sufficiently successful to be revived briefly the following year (September 1818).’(50) Two years after the first staging of *The Wizard; or The Brown Man of the Moors*, the same opera house was again advertising a production entitled *The Brown Man*. (51) This, however, seems to refer to an altogether different piece, described in *The Theatrical Inquisitor* as ‘a melo-drame which is translated from the French piece, “L’Homme Brun”, by Mr. Arnold’, and it was poorly received on account of its ‘inculcation of the dreadful crime of suicide, in the last scene’. (52)

Griffin’s preoccupation, in his own career, with stage-writing, and his connection with the English Opera-House in particular, invests these echoes with peculiar resonance. As a teenager Griffin had been inspired by a meeting with John Banim (whose play *Damon and Pythias* had recently been staged at Covent Garden in 1821) to become a playwright, and with this intention he moved to London in 1823 at

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the age of 19, with his tragedy *Aguire* in hand.(53) On arrival, he made the dismaying discovery that ‘another play of the same name, and founded on the same story, had already been presented’. (54) Griffin persevered, assisted in part by the kindly Banim (who introduced him to Samuel Arnold, manager of the English Opera-House), but three years later he still had not found success, and was scraping a living as a journalist and reviewer. Even as he turned to regional fiction in 1826 (writing at a tremendous pace the tales that would become *Holland-Tide*), he continued to write dramatic pieces and submit them to Arnold, though he was increasingly despairing that his ambitiously conceived style of high-minded, poetic drama could be successful, out of step as it was with popular taste and its ‘rage for spectacle’, as he phrased it. (55)

In these intertextual echoes and dramatic doublings, as well as its central theme of cannibalism, ‘The Brown Man’ may be read as performing the characteristically Gothic function of exercising or exercising repressed anxiety; in this case, over the very act and nature of writing itself. Two incidents, recorded by Daniel Griffin, cast interesting light on how his brother was curiously subject to such apprehensions, and testify to the pressure they exerted in the period that he was writing *Holland-Tide* alongside other compositions: ‘two or three operas’ as well as ‘a new comedy’. On reading parts of the new comedy, Daniel Griffin recalled that he was

struck with the similitude of the scene between the father and daughter, and that between Mr. Vere and his daughter in the Black Dwarf. The contrivance, situation and interest of both were indeed so like, that I thoughtfully said, “Why, Gerald, this scene is in the Black Dwarf.” He seemed incredulous, and said it was impossible, but on my persevering in my assertion, he sent out for the book (which I believe he had never read,) to the nearest circulating library. When on perusal he came to the scene which I referred, he laid down the tale in perfect dismay, acknowledging that it was the very same scene, and that all his labour was gone for nothing. (56)

Whether Griffin had read the novella or attended a stage production, the anxious adjacency of Scott’s black dwarf and brown man to the writing of *Holland-Tide* is intriguing. Daniel Griffin’s thoughtfulness is open to question, and indeed his accidental sabotage of his brother’s work was even yet not complete:

I returned from a walk, with Peter of the Castle, a new tale by the O’Hara family. Gerald was engaged in writing one of the tales of Holland-tide, and had at the moment just concluded an amusing description of Shrovetide. Anxious to see his friend’s new work, he laid down his pen and glancing at the commencement, found the very first chapter contained a description of Shrovetide much more ample than his own. He at once tore out the latter from his tale, and I am not certain that he ever completed it. (57)

These instances of near, unintentional plagiarism, even as Griffin was self-consciously authoring a work conceptually indebted to the work of Scott and the Banims, create a charged context for the composition of ‘The Brown Man’ by a writer desperate to be thought of as original and *new*, but afflicted by a fatal sense of belatedness. As Daniel Griffin reported of his brother:

There appeared to be almost a fatality in the many instances in which he had been thus anticipated by contemporary writers. We have already seen that on his first arrival in London, and after he had sent his tragedy of *Aguire* to the theatre, he found that another play of the same name, and founded on the same story, had already been presented; that Mr. Banim had anticipated him in the play of the Prodigal Son, and that in another piece of his, which he afterwards showed him, he discovered the counterpart of Canabe, a character in an unfinished play of his own. These coincidences he came at length to look upon as
occurrences rather to be anticipated than wondered at. There is after all in the human mind very little individuality in the power of originating what is new. (58)

The anxieties of indebtedness that inflected Griffin’s ardent attitude to his own writing provides a compelling context for ‘The Brown Man’, a story that on the one hand invites its own deconstructive analysis, and, on the other, discourages the privileging of any one interpretation. While it masquerades as a turf-scented tale ‘of the true Hibernian stamp’, Griffin’s ‘The Brown Man’—with its disconcerting tonal and stylistic shifts; its historical allusiveness and interrogation of originary sources; its disinterring and cannibalization of Irish, British, and European folklore and fairytales, as well as a microgenre of dramatic opera—is equally suggestive of the interiorized Gothic landscape of a writer haunted by recurring worries of originality, plagiarism, and the inevitability of belatedness. One begins to perceive unsuspected correspondences with Griffin’s exact contemporary, James Clarence Mangan, whose prose fictions such as ‘The Man in the Cloak’ (1838) as well as his Autobiography similarly resonates an uneasy preoccupation with literary influence and ingenuity, cloaked in the sophisticated use of Gothic modes. While scholarly analyses of Irish Gothic have tended to focus on larger historical and national currents to compass the ambit of their critiques, for Griffin the Gothic seems more a means of moving inwards, purposefully rejecting the slide from the personal to the political. While the monstrous Brown Man can be construed as a colonial revenant, he can also, and perhaps more accurately, be read as a distorted and disturbed figuration of the alienated artist—that Byronic archetype of the Romantic period—doomed to recycle the moribund tissue of other textual bodies. Returning to Griffin’s opening analogy, ‘The Brown Man’ becomes an illustration of how literary originality, or the possibility of uncontaminated aesthetic provenance, is as misleading a notion as the purity of national culture. In addition to the seven devils and seven colours of the rainbow, we might speculatively add seven archetypal myths or narratives, which are similarly dispersed in prismatic refractions ‘through the other nations of the earth.’ (59)
1 Griffin put inverted commas around the first part of his title, probably to stress the national and cultural subject-matter of the book, thus connecting it to the regional, historical fiction that became very popular in the 1820s with the work of Sir Walter Scott and, in the case of Ireland, the Banim brothers’ *Tales of the O’Hara Family* (1825). For references to Griffin’s collection, hereafter *Holland-Tide*.

2 Holland-Tide, p. 299.

3 Ibid., p. 300.

4 Ibid., p. 301.

5 Ibid., p. 302.

6 Ibid., p. 304.

7 Ibid., pp. 306-7.


9 Vivian Mercier included ‘The Brown Man’ (though without the epigraph) in his *Great Irish Short Stories* (London: Souvenir, 1964); the story also appears in William Trevor, ed. *The Oxford book of Irish short stories* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989). While ‘The Brown Man’ has also been included in Rosemary Gray’s recent expansive collection *Irish Ghost Stories* (Wordsworth editions, 2011), the text has been silently abridged to jettison both the epigraph and introductory paragraph, both of which, as I will argue here, are essential to understanding the full implications of the story.


11 *Holland-Tide*, p. 298.

12 Ibid., p. 5.

13 In his collection *Fairy and Folk tales of the Irish Peasantry* (1888), W.B. Yeats described November Eve as one of the three yearly festivals of the Irish fairies: ‘On November Eve [the fairies] are at their gloomiest, for according to the old Gaelic reckoning, this is the first night of winter. This night they dance with the ghosts, and the pooka is abroad, and witches make their spells, and girls set a table with food in the name of the devil, that the fetch of their future lover may come through the window and eat of the food. After November Eve the blackberries are no longer wholesome, for the pooka has spoiled them.’ Yeats, *Writings on Irish Folklore, Legend and Myth* ed. Robert Welch (London: Penguin, 1993), p. 9.


15 Ibid., pp. 154-5.

16 Mercier, *Great Irish Short Stories*, p. 25.


20 Holland-Tide, pp. 297-8.
22 Griffin’s father reportedly ‘felt acutely the sufferings of the peasantry in the disastrous period of 1798, and did everything in his power to mitigate them. During these unhappy times, his endeavours to avert punishment, prevented or softened many instances of individual hardship wherever he had influence.’ Life, p. 34. Following on from Deane, Haslam proposes the category of an ‘Irish-Catholic-nationalist Gothic mode’ in his article “‘Broad Farce and Thrilling Tragedy’”, pp. 240-1.
23 ‘The Dragon of Wantley’, along with a decoding ‘key’ to the satire, was included in Thomas Percy’s Reliques of Ancient English Poetry (3 vols.,1765); perhaps tellingly, the verse Griffin selected for his epigraph was singled out for particular analysis in the Reliques. For further commentary on ‘The Dragon of Wantley’, see Jacqueline Simpson, ‘Fifty Dragon Tales: An Analysis’, Folklore vol. 89, no.1 (1978), pp. 79-93.
24 ‘The Song of the French”; according to Guy Beiner, verses from this poem were common in collections of folklore in counties Mayo and Galway. Beiner, Remembering the Year of the French: Irish folk history and social memory (University of Wisconsin Press, 2007), pp. 88-9.
27 Holland-Tide, p. 300.
28 Ibid., pp. 304-5. Myles-na-coppule, or Myles of the ponies, was later the name of a loquacious Irish peasant in Griffin’s very successful and influential novel The Collegians (1829); as is well-known, this character was also the source for Flann O’Brien’s penname, Myles na gCopaleen.
29 For a discussion of such predominant tropes in English representations of Ireland, see Michael Neill, ‘Broken English and Broken Irish: Nation, Language, and the Optic of Power in Shakespeare’s Histories’, Shakespeare Quarterly vol 45, no. 1 (Spring 1994) 1-32. For the long-lasting influences of Giraldus Cambrensis, see Andrew Hadfield and John McVeagh, Strangers to That Land: British Perceptions of Ireland from the Reformation to the Famine (Gerrards Cross: Smythe, 1994), especially Chapter 1, ‘Giraldus Cambrensis and English Writing about Ireland’.
31 Kathleen M. Noonan, “‘Martyrs in Flames”: Sir John Temple and the Conception of the Irish in English Martyrologies’, Albion vol. 36, no. 2 (Summer 2004), 224, 225.
33 Griffin’s The Rivals (1829) features a lively scene of grave-robbing medical students, who extract some grisly humour from their grim pursuit, engendering some discomfiting comments, pp.110-111.

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38 *Holland-Tide*, pp. 302-3.
40 Ibid., p. 360.
42 *Life*, p. 199. Griffin was reading the review in *The Literary Gazette*, which remarked that ‘Persecutions of Jack-Edy’ is almost Crofton Croker-ish’ (*The Literary Gazette*, issue 527 [24 Feb. 1827], p. 115). Another reviewer commented that the shorter tales in *Holland-Tide* possessed a type of merriment ‘much more a-kin to the wit and pleasantry of the collector of the ‘Fairy Legends,’ than to the melo-dramatic muse of M.Banim.’ *(Monthly Review*, n.s. 4 [April 1827], p. 382.)
44 *Life*, p. 198. In a letter of 1824, Griffin wrote of his new play *Gisippus* that ‘what gives me greatest satisfaction respecting it is the consciousness that I have written an original play.’ *Life*, p. 92.
47 Croker prefaced *Fairy Legends* with a statement that his stories were written ‘in the style in which the are generally related by those who believe in them’ and that it was his intention thereby to illustrate ‘the Superstitions of the Irish Peasantry—Superstitions which the most casual observer cannot fail to remark powerfully influence their conduct and manner of thinking.’ Griffin, *Tales of the Munster Festivals* (1827), vol.1, p. xviii.
48 Commenting on Daniel O’Connell’s visit to England in 1825, Griffin wrote to his brother ‘As to the general opinion here, the whole affair is very little talked about at all, and it is a doubt to me if one man out of ten (take Englishman as they are) ever heard of [John] Lawless. You have a queer notion on the other side of the water, that your concerns are greatly thought about here. It is a doubt to me if the “dear little island” were swallowed by a whale, or put in a bag and sent off to the moon, if the circumstance would occasion any further observation than a “dear me,” at one end of the town, and a “my eyes!” at the other’. *Life*, p. 148.
49 Advertisement in *The Times*, Thursday 24 July, 1817, p. 2; Issue 10206; col C.

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51 Coincidentally, the Royal Coburg Theatre production listed below The Brown Man in The Times advertisement is Bluebeard, or Female Curiosity; The Times, Saturday 4 Sept, 1819; p. 2; Issue 10716; col A.

52 The Theatrical Inquisitor, Vol. XV (July to Dec. 1819), p. 108. Samuel Arnold was the manager of the English Opera-House; he was noted for often giving foreign works their first showing in England. The French piece in question appears to have been the melodrama L’Homme brun; ou, le billet doux (Paris: Barba, 1818) by Jean-Toussaint Merle, first performed at the Théâtre de la Gaîté, 9 December 1818. From the summary of L’Homme Brun provided in the Theatrical Inquisitor supplement to vol. XV, the plot of this melodrama bears no other resemblance to Griffin’s brown man, or the play based on Scott’s novella.

53 In a letter of 1822 to his sister, Griffin remarks on the positive critical reception of Damon and Pythias—‘the best historical tragedy which the age has produced’—and this, combined with his regret that he ‘could not obtain possession of many London or Dublin’ newspapers to send her, suggests that he was doing his best to keep up with the London theatre scene, and knew of its seasonal schedules. Life, p. 64. In this period he had also been working as a journalist, chiefly for the Limerick General Advertiser (which, however, he disliked, describing it as ‘a painted sepulchre’ which was ‘quite dependent upon the government.’) Life, p. 61.

54 Life, p. 174.

55 Ibid., p. 83.

56 Ibid., pp. 173-4.


58 Life, p. 174.

59 Holland-Tide, p. 297. In fact, the English journalist and writer Christopher Booker makes exactly this claim in his book The Seven Basic Plots: Why We Tell Stories (New York: Continuum, 2004).
What Lies Beneath: Amie Dickie, Dawn Mellor and Goth Pop Art

Ana Finel Honigman

When contemporary artists employ appropriation of mass-market iconography as a flexible critical strategy for achieving conceptual goals a difficult element to evaluate is the sincerity and authenticity of the artist’s appreciation of his or her subject matter. Celebrity source material, from which many emerging and established artists create uncomplicated homages as fans of pop-culture, provides an especially rich genre in which to address this issue. Here, interest in pop-culture material is presented not in overtly adoring artwork but through what I term “Goth Pop,” an unusual aesthetic that initially appears to undermine the artist’s admiring relationship to his or her source material. I consider this style to be “Goth Pop” because of its morbid, grotesque, sinister and violent appearance which mirrors the artist’s true feelings for its pop-culture subjects. To engage the complexity of this creative impetus, this study will discusses work by two young, established artists combining Pop art concerns and a Goth aesthetic as an expression of an intimate dynamic between artist and subject.

I examine the work of Amie Dicke and Dawn Mellor because of intriguing contrasts within their relationships to Goth Pop’s public and private meanings. Dicke and Mellor are openly and sincerely fans of their subject matter and also fans of the historical and contemporary material from which Goth Pop originates. Mellor has a profound emotional and intellectual investment in her source material but she is primarily involved in work that renders private demons public, just as horror films reinterpret personal trauma or fears as larger external threats. In contrast, Dicke’s work is immensely private. Secrets and erotic mysteries imbued with sinister or morbid undertones are central motifs in the Gothic tradition and the updated Goth genre. Dicke’s work exemplifies these themes as surfaces are stripped away to reveal underlying concerns and an almost obsessive focus on the contrasts between superficial polish and a rough, intimate under-layer informs her work.

Today’s artists working with a Gothic lexicon are different from artists who created similarly themed work in the 1990s. Douglas Gordon, Mike Kelley, Rachel Whiteread, Damien Hirst, Cathy de Monchaux, Gregory Crewdson, and Jake and Dinos Chapman, all internationally prominent in the ‘90s, worked within a Gothic idiom by producing morbid, macabre imagery intended to evoke the feelings of fright associated with horror media and the Gothic tradition. Yet, as Catherine Spooner notes, “[they] are not concerned with spiritual transcendence and historical nostalgia [of the traditional Gothic], but with the themes of haunting and imprisonment found in the Gothic novel.” (1) Instead of sourcing the subculture, they primarily employed traditional Gothic imagery and themes for symbolic, personal or political purposes. In contrast, the most striking movement within the current Gothic genre consists of artists directly referencing horror films, from esoteric camp to commercially successful movies. Artists specifically referencing horror tropes form a distinctive contemporary sub-genre of Gothic art.

Dicke’s art represents the impact of the vampire horror genre in the ‘90s. While Vampire films and motifs have re-emerged with a vengeance in current pop culture, the symbolic significance of the genre is not the same as it was during the ‘80 and ‘90s, when AIDS awareness and media coverage was at its most prominent; an era of when Dicke and artists of her generation formed their sexual consciousness. In Dicke’s cut-paper collages, which consist of photographs torn from current fashion magazines or peeled from bus-stops, the Dutch artist takes contemporary fashion imagery and alters it to reveal the spectres of grunge behind the polish and decay beneath the glamour.

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Dicke began a series consisting of customised pages from high-fashion magazines and poster-sized ads that she sliced with X-Acto knives more than a decade ago. In these works, she whittles flat images of sunny or sultry sex kittens into phantoms of sexual iconography, evoking the photographer Corinne Day’s scrappy sullen girls whose beauty seemed weathered by heroin, rough nights, and desperate sex. (2) Dicke’s collages are pure fantasy, but they resurrect the spirit of “dirty realism” – a prevailing genre of fashion photography from the ’90s, where beauty and decay/sex and death were joined together. Dicke cuts into the images, removing the models’ flesh and individual facial features. Leaving their hands, hair, feet and coy pouting upper lips untouched, she carves the models’ limbs, clothes and famous faces into sinewy designs, cuts out their eyes and renders the remainder of their sleek bodies into long slick strings of magazine paper - a beautifully Gothic design of slender glossy paper strips.

I interpret Dicke’s art as summoning up central aspects of Georges Bataille’s writing and applying them to the threat and danger of AIDS. However, despite the ghost of AIDS trauma hovering throughout her art, Dicke was driven to her subjects through loneliness, not fear of intimacy’s ramifications. Dicke first responded to fashion’s lure as a young girl in Rotterdam when she transformed her bedroom into a glossy cocoon with collaged pages cut from fashion magazines covering the walls and door. After that early connection with fashion, her admiration blossomed into a creative maturity in 2001, during six month period that she spent in New York City on a starters’ grant from the Dutch government, a year after completing her degree in Fine Art from the Willem de Kooning Academy of Fine Arts in Rotterdam.

Unlike other artists producing contemporary Gothic work, Dicke’s art does not explicitly reference particular horror films. However, it expresses a haunting sense of the “uncanny” and her early collages embodied the complex and culturally relevant allure of the vampire genre, one of the aesthetic and conceptually driving subgenres of the Gothic tradition. (3) Although they appeared to be born of violence, the careful and skilfully produced interventions into fashion’s imagery were driven by Dicke’s sincere love for fashion. By dissecting away fashion’s fluff, fabric and fantasy, Dicke reveals an underlying morbidity, distilling the signifiers of vampirism during the era of heightened mass-cultural Western awareness of AIDS into a series of seductive paper cut-outs. Visually, Dicke’s cut-paper creations have the dazzling, sensual decorative appeal of Gustave Klimt paintings and the dark, stark, angry bite of Egon Schiele watercolours. In writing about Schiele, art historian Patrick Werkner defines his work as a “death wish united with the cult of eroticism.”(4) In today’s culture, the cult of eroticism is largely interwoven with the industry of fashion and the images that it produces for mass-deletation, which Dicke renders as overtly morbid. For example, in Dicke’s 2004 version of the Dance Macabre, a girl envelops herself in a multi-coloured coat; her red hair and her hand are the only parts of her face, body or garment that have not been cut into a flame-like pattern. Dicke often interlaces text with images: ad copy will remain visible or rock lyrics like “I can’t control the urge” will be scrawled across models’ bodies. By cutting into the space where they are posed, Dicke allows something within the girls to seep out and infect their surroundings.

Although her work initially appeared to be critical of fashion imagery and the fashion industry, my further conversations with Dicke revealed that her art is not, as many critics have argued, a feminist denunciation of Western beauty standards. Instead, her work is an existential exploration of the self that is more at odds with the ethos and application of fashion than a fundamental rejection of the fashion and beauty industries. A feminist interpretation is often ascribed to Dicke’s work because of its keen attention to the models’ bodies which ties her art into both a horror tradition and fashion imagery. As Jersley observes, “The Splatter movie is the horror subgenre in which you actually watch the body being torn apart and the blood
flowing. It incessantly talks about disintegration and decay. The body is suffering, not the soul, the body is the visual center of horror, not evil incarnate. The monster is the monstrous body not the monstrous character.”(5) Dicke’s work transforms female flesh into abstract forms; Helmut Hartwig argues that the body in splatter films is defined by metamorphosis, as it changes from a contained form into a mess of fluids, organs and “uncoordinated and undifferentiated” mass.(6) Victims in these films travel through the narrative until they emerge as mere bodies, “amorphous masses of biological matter” instead of individuals, just as Dicke’s models are stripped of their identities and become mere form.(7) Notwithstanding the substantial and well-argued literature characterising slasher films as a sublimation of misogynist urges, the body in splatter films is horrific because it is rendered devoid of signification, gender, desire, and sexuality.

The girls in Dicke’s art are counter-points to this use of bodies in horror-cinema. Most models today are very young; they are demographically younger now than in fashion’s recent history. Although young models are encouraged to project sexuality, their own sense of their sexual identity is often still unformed; like Clover’s Final Girl, they are not in full possession of their sexual power although they professionally evoke sexuality. This dynamic informs the experience of viewing fashion images for dedicated fans of fashion such as Dicke.

Although she disagrees about restricting her work to a purely feminist critique, Dicke is open to differing interpretations of the work, which she asserts is created without pre-conceived concepts. In 2008, she told me:

“My art has violent aspects. But that violence is infused with concentration. Curiosity, combined with frustration, is the starting point where my work begins. Sometimes the combination creates the exact type of energy that I need to do something ‘stupid.’ And an impulsive, direct, uncontrolled action, like that, can be seen as violent. ‘Stupidity’ can inspire discovery. And ironically, it can produce a beautiful feeling. It makes me think of a quote by Georges Bataille: ‘Truth only has one face, that of a violent contradiction.’”(8)

This sensibility connects Dicke’s work to AIDS iconography. Bataille also approvingly quotes Sade’s assertion that, “There is no better way to know death than to link it with some licentious image,”(9) and Dicke does this brilliantly. Seen today, Dicke’s Gucci succubuses are a reminder that sexuality is still not, and never has been, safe. AIDS shaped young peoples’ emotional landscape by bringing scepticism and mistrust to the forefront of every relationship, by forcing partners to disclose their sexual histories under mutual threat of death. If they were cautious, this dialogue promoted intimacy because they were obliged to share facts about themselves, but the consequences of lying and being lied to could be deadly.

This sensibility is hauntingly expressed in her 2007 sculpture “Dissolving floors of memory.” This work consists of an opulently decorated, but discarded and dishevelled, chair, a pair of battered luxury shoes and sugar. The sugar is gathered on the floor besides the chair in powder and solid cubes. Dicke assembled the piles of sugar when wearing the shoes and grating the sugar with a knife between her spread legs. “Dissolving floors of memory,” conveys a clear sense of loss and pleasure’s bitter aftermath. The shoes and chair were evidently once desirable and lavish but their current condition is ravished and worn. The sugar that Dicke shaved between her spread legs is another sign of depleted delight and need. The effect is a haunting testament to craving, memory and empty, unfulfilled longing. The sculpture’s melancholia is a universal rumination on faded glory and romantic loss. But it can potentially be interpreted as a rumination other addictive and destructive white powders. In the specific context of AIDS symbolism, the sugar can function as a reference to drug-fuelled recklessness, the carelessness of wild
parties or the danger of infested needles, and the erotic significance of Dicke’s heels hinting at a specifically sexualized form of decay.

This upsetting sense of absence is also demonstrated by Dicke’s see-through sex kittens, whose apparent transparency is sinister instead of comforting – an illustration of the sexual risk/reward profile of living in the era of AIDS. Yet, her images are also articulate renderings of Bataille’s theories, which can be applied to the iconography of AIDS as a virus spread through pleasure and behaviour associated with desperation or hedonism such as casual sex or heroin use. A cautionary precept of Bataille’s 1962 study, *Erotism: Death and Sensuality*, is that “eroticism is assenting to life up to the point of death … In essence, the domain of eroticism is the domain of violence, of violation. The whole business of eroticism is to strike to the inmost core of the living being, so that the heart stands still.”(10)

Frustration, rage and a drive toward suicide are evident in one of Dicke’s most noted images of glamorous sexuality. *Gisele Wants Out* (2003) is simply a gossamer-thin web of the contours around Brazilian supermodel Gisele Bundchen’s famously voluptuous body as she writhes against the constraints of her background. Similar impulses surface in *Show Ass Jess* through the thin outline of Calvin Klein model Jessica Miller jutting out her hip as she pulls at cords of paper connecting her to sliced-up surroundings. The seemingly contradictory sentiments engendered by these manifestations of misery are captured by Bataille’s observation:

“We find the state of affairs that binds us to our random and ephemeral individuality hard to bear. Along with our tormenting desire that this evanescent thing should last, there stands our obsession with a primal continuity linking us with everything that is … this nostalgia is responsible for … eroticism in man.”(11)

Dicke undercut eroticism’s anonymity by including the name of the subject in the title of a piece or in text taken from the original image. One such piece is *oooh Kate* (2003), a brightly coloured, slick headshot portrait of the supermodel Kate Moss. In *oooh Kate*, Dicke retains the elements that signify Moss’s transformation from unscrubbed gritty beauty to polished chic, such as her shiny mahogany hair and the outline of the brocade high-collared jacket that Moss modeled, but cuts away Moss’s face to bring the image back to her dark roots. Similarly, in *Heidi II* (2003) Dicke manipulates a swimsuit shot of the German model Heidi Klum crouched on her palms. Klum’s symmetrical features, warm expression and muscular body radiate healthy domesticity and rational intelligence, and even with her face reduced to lines of glossy paper, lips and hollow eyes, she still expresses a hint of residual sweetness. This relic of the model’s personality warns that an infection like AIDS is invisible and even a familiar sexual partner may be a deadly threat; an appropriately haunting cautionary image.

In contrast to the slick glossy surfaces of Dicke’s collages, dense, heavy clotted oil paint characterizes Mellor’s paintings. These surfaces suit her personal pantheon of broadly famous pop-culture faces from fashion, film, art and politics, and more esoteric icons of intellectual culture. In contrast to the media’s assertion that celebrities are a “combination of the spectacular and the everyday.”(12) Mellor’s morbid surrealist paintings present celebrities as ghouls in comical and telling scenarios whose scrappy, witty and brutal surrealist portraits are like a voodoo retelling of mass media cultural mythology.

Represented by the influential TEAM gallery in New York and formerly with London’s prestigious Victoria Miro gallery, Mellor has shown at Tate Liverpool, New York’s PS.1, and the Prague Biennial. For her, celebrity has always been a central theme. Her subjects range from French feminist Helene Cixous and French post-structurist Gilles Deleuze to French-o-phobe Condoleezza Rice. She has painted Christina Aguilera in the pose of Saint Sebastian, Audrey Hepburn as a zombie with her lips chewed off,
yet still elegantly attired, and Linda Blair from *The Exorcist* wearing an “I Love NY” T-shirt. For the lead image to *The Flesh and the Fury*, her 2003 debut exhibition at TEAM, Mellor presented a chorus-line of fifteen nearly identical images of Madonna in her iconic Jean-Paul Gaultier cone-bra, whose last figure holds her leg high and emits a stream of urine. Another 2003 painting shows a young Elizabeth Taylor, standing against a bright sky-blue background with a swarm of butterflies surrounding her head and her mouth open in a cry of terror.

In service of these themes, Mellor uses a strong palette of rich colours and thickly applied paint. Her palette has become increasingly muddy, even murky, and the density of the brushwork has intensified, giving her canvases the look of dusty oil paintings unearthed in an attic. This appearance of premature aging confers an optimistic illusion of longevity on her contemporary celebrity subjects, while the portraits of older, more culturally established icons seem to be undiscovered evidence, offering new insight into their character.

Much of the impact that Mellor’s work evokes comes from the atmosphere of the supernatural that frames her practice. Positing that Mellor is inspired by political feminist motives to satirise her subjects, Grady T. Turner described her debut show as “an exhibition of surrealist lampoon[ing] media fascination with celebrity.”(13)

Time and again, Mellor isolates her subjects’ most telling aspects and renders them radioactive, creating mutant versions of public figures that critic David Cohen terms “anti-portraits.”(14) Through sci-fi metaphors, these depictions of celebrity illustrate Sean Redmond’s argument that “fame culture offers ‘ordinary’ and ‘extraordinary’ people the chance of a heightened level of intimacy that potentially, perhaps inevitably, destabilises the borders and boundaries of identity, and which energises or electrifies one’s experience if the world.”(15)

Viewers of Mellor’s images will often find it difficult to discern affection for her subjects in them. But after closely examining her work and conducting a series of interviews with her, I have concluded that empathy instead of iconoclasm is her fundamental motivation.

In a 2007 interview for Saatchi Online, Mellor told me:
I think my motives for conscious misrepresentation are a response to what I perceive to be the impossibility of conclusive representation, at least if it is aimed at directly. Maybe I can discover something by accident through misrepresentation, something about my own desires, dreams and fears. I wanted to take responsibility and discover my moral position. On the one hand there is a sense of empathy for the ‘victims,’ the celebrities I portray, that could appear to suggest moral commentary and on the other I am the one who is in possession of the tools of violence and destruction. I have painted and imagined them this way. I wanted to see the extent to which my desire may be imitative of the culture I was consuming and if a possible spontaneous and subjective desire existed at all.(16)

Mellor’s desire to “take responsibility” is a repudiation of the notion, articulated by Matt Hills, that “the media world is effectively divided into two groups: those who are visible in the media, and so possess high status, and those who are invisible – the far lower-status audience of fan-consumers.”(17) The empathy that Mellor’s paintings are intended to provoke is an inversion of the manufactured empathy produced by the media, which crafts an image of celebrities as accessible and relatable figures. The differences between American and British celebrity culture, and the complex inter-relationship between gender, class and pop-culture within the British art establishment, have been the topic of our interviews.
In one of these discussions, Mellor summed up her observations with the statement: There is of course a relationship between class and the consumption of popular culture, which informs both within U.K. and U.S. When I’ve shown work in Belgium or Italy people discuss the violent perversity and desire more. I guess the American art I’ve seen about celebrity still exposes some differences from British art. It’s less explicitly seedy even when it’s dark or melancholic, in the same way perhaps that American Pop Art and European Pop Art are similarly divided. American artists really know how to celebrate something beautiful or sexy in some aspect of their art. In the U.K., we pride ourselves on irony, perversity and failure.(18)

Mellor underscores the cultural dynamics that oppose ordinariness to specialness by painting an array of cultural icons as complete freaks. Tabloids undermine the mythic status of celebrities with close-ups of cellulite and exposés of their every bad day while at the same time feeding upon their accessible ordinariness.(19) Mellor’s art goes further and deeper by mocking the desire to make super-human stars out of the people we elect to govern, teach or entertain us. In works such as Mellor’s Sapphic satire of Hilary Clinton and Condoleezza Rice, there is never any question of whether celebrities are ‘normal.’ Many of her subjects appear barely or not even human. In some images, Mellor places celebrity stars in graphically sexual situations, such as in The Supremes and Four White Cunts, where three members of the iconic girl group are depicted as holding decapitated blond heads and one of the singers exposes herself to show that she has a white woman’s vagina.

However, many of the renditions of celebrities in Mellor’s images are not inconsistent with their personae, and it is possible to divide their subjects into those who would be pleased by their attribution and those who would be baffled or offended. Thus, Grace Jones, who is shown pushing smoke out of her nostrils like a bull about to charge, looks as erotically overwhelming as always. Karl Lagerfeld might be amused by Mellor’s depiction of himself looking dignified and svelte, with a massive silvery cockroach on his shoulder and another dangling over his forehead, its legs brushing his sunglasses lens like a hat’s veil. In contrast, Mellor’s comparatively straight-forward portrait of Anna Wintour would probably not meet with her approval. In Mellor’s subtly disquieting image, Wintour is seen with her arms tightly pressed to her chest and an expression of stiff disdain on her pinched face, while a few faint streaks of blood on her arm reveal the pent-up mania and fury emanating from one of fashion culture’s most feared and admired forces.

It is difficult to imagine that Tony Blair would be pleased to be presented as a blessed-out raver with a Barney doll dangling off his nose-ring. As Phil Ginsberg describes this work, “Tony Blair turns his head and stares out at us, his trademark grin on his face. This time, it seems a little more manic than usual. A metal key-ring brutally pierces the cartilage between his nostrils. Dangling from it, just below his mouth, is a cute children’s toy: Barney, the purple dinosaur and superstar of American children’s television.”(20)

Not all of Mellor’s images are intended to tease out a subject’s particular quality or to reference an episode in a celebrity’s life. She also arranges disparate celebrity combinations to portray interconnectedness of fame among the upper-echelons of stardom’s incestuous social community. As Ginsberg observes, “The[se] drawings tend to bring the women together in perverse collusion. Jennifer Aniston is caught paying loving homage to J-Lo’s famed posterior; Penelope Cruz smilingly offers her severed breasts to a vision of [Nicole] Kidman; and Anna Nicole Smith binds Courtney Love in forced admiration of Mariah Carey.”

For a striking group of subjects, Mellor goes beyond a single representative image to show them in a multiplicity of guises. In 2008, Mellor presented “A Curse on Your Walls”, a themed exhibition with

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TEAM gallery that focused on her most extensive single-subject series. The show combined 71 portraits from Mellor’s *File Affections* with a separate series of larger-than-life paintings inspired by Judy Garland and *The Wizard of Oz*.

Mellor’s relationship to the star and her character summoned up a complex range of associations and extrapolations. Garland and her character, Dorothy Gale, both were young women with such unwavering senses of self that setbacks, wondrous distractions, horrifying diversions and even a field full of poppies could not push them off course. For this reason, the character of Dorothy has come to mean a great deal to many very different people. Dorothy’s protean ability to be adopted by divergent admirers while remaining a quintessential American icon was a key reason why Mellor chose her as an inspiration.

In six mammoth paintings, some of which measure 12’x10’, Mellor explored Salman Rushdie’s notion in his essay, “The Wizard of Oz”, that Dorothy may exemplify Americana through her yearning to return to small-town Kansas, but she is also the ultimate “symbolic refugee” who struggles through the Diaspora, desperate to find her way home.(21)

In his review of the TEAM show for the *New York Times*, Ken Johnson described the paintings as “rousing ambitious” with “incendiary impact.”(22) Beyond question, they were unconventional in handling their iconic subject. According to Mellor’s own exegesis, Dorothy is “a nasty piece of work” and the paintings reflected that persona. For example, *Yellow Bricks Dorothy* presents three monster versions of Dorothy pushing wheelbarrows filled with gold bricks in a row though an interior whose stained-glass window suggests a church. The final Dorothy is rendered as if she were a portion of the stained glass, although her placement in space is some distance away from where the window reaches the floor. The Dorothy before her has a half-skull and half-beast head, and the one leading the line is missing flesh on part of her face. Mellor asserts that the multiple Dorothys are positioned like British women moving bricks in a vintage World War II photograph that she copied. There, Dorothy’s bricks are made of gold and the skin on her face is melting, a composition that Mellor intended to convey the impression that Dorothy was a Jewish girl slaving in a work camp during WWII.

Of another Dorothy painting, critic David Cohen writes,

“Ms. Mellor’s handling of paint is often at its most subtle and tender when her politicising is at its most blatant and brutal. *Giant Dorothy* (2007-08) has Dorothy kneeling before a soap-bubble globe containing her longed-for Kansas homestead floating above a blasted heath. But in a gesture that cripples the innocence of the image, she has sprouted an erect penis (depicted in the same blue gingham of her dress) that penetrates the bubble. Her face duplicates as it turns its gaze from the house to the ground; a beautifully handled passage. Around her head is a halo of burning white slogans of militant, anti-religious, anarchic character, burning bright against the dark, ominous sky, that read, “Destroy the Abrahamic Moralist Trilogy of Terror. We will establish a new state. Kill Breeders, Steal Babies.”

The Dorothy image that most tellingly expressed the Pop Goth aesthetic is *Dead Dorothy*. Here, Dorothy lies naked and mutilated in a smoking foxhole. A cluster of disco balls gathers near her disembowelled corpse and thick streams of blue and white stripes form sharp shapes, like the markings on a graph. Stuck into her bloody body are signs reading. “There is no place like home,” “Suicide is painless it brings on many changes,” and “A Star is Born.” The most explicit image in the series, it engages with Garland’s own personal trauma, her career and her status as a gay icon, to which the disco balls allude.
Within a shifting context of ambiguous origin and social placement, Mellor offers a range of alternative and often oppositional identities for Dorothy. “She looks American from the gingham dress she is wearing,” Mellor has said. “But it is unclear whether she has adopted that outfit in order to assimilate, or whether it is reflective of her identity.” In some paintings Dorothy seems to be wandering through a war-ravished stretch of Iraq. In one, she lies stiff in a bombed-out building whose appearance is copied from a newspaper report about the destruction of an Iraqi home. Yet, current polemical questions coexist with historical and political references such as the invocation of the Holocaust in Yellow Bricks, while other images offer the possibility, through news reportage they appropriate, that Dorothy might instead be Palestinian.

“Is she a terrorist?” Mellor asks rhetorically about the implications of her images. “Is she a victim of war? A Fascist? Is she American? Is she just an American working-class girl with an extreme view? Because she is a child, you want to see her as a hero and you want to empathise with her. But who is she and does she deserve our sympathy? It is important to have ambiguity; I had massive empathy and then I tried to imagine the rage I would feel if I were a Palestinian child or a child from the Holocaust. I portray her in many of the paintings as an extremist, and I want there to be the question of whether she is a child who was so oppressed that she developed extreme views as a result of her oppression.”

Implicit in Mellor’s speculative interpretations of her own work is an overarching desire to show that Dorothy can be every displaced person confronting the dark side of their own vision and quest for freedom.

In one of the most compellingly contradicted storylines that Mellor establishes, the character of Dorothy becomes the narrative of a “gay fundamentalist, ‘kill breeders’ extremist ...reinvented as a gay terrorist.” Mellor says that she was not aware of The Wizard of Oz’s gay cult status when she began obsessively painting images of Judy Garland during her MA studies at the Royal Academy.(27) “I knew I was gay then,” she recounts. “But my whole relationship with the gay scene was through techno and clubbing. I saw Judy Garland at Carnegie Hall during her last summer performing, and I just became obsessed with her, without realising what she signified within gay culture. But I became fascinated with her and just kept painting her over and over.”

From this desire to represent her personal relationship to a star in whom she has invested private meaning, Mellor created gripping portraits of a culture’s dysfunctional relation to celebrity.

**Conclusion**

Dicke’s and Mellor’s Their Pop Goth aesthetic enables them to explore their subject-matter and express their convictions because of the style’s innate passion and explosive imagery. Their style superficially appears critical or aggressive towards their subject matter, yet actually articulates their emotionally invested attachment to the richness, complexity and wider relevance of their pop-culture interests. A Gothic visual vocabulary enables Mellor and Dicke to delve into the contradictory allure of specific public figures, and celebrity overall, without relying on simple binary assessments of a star’s likability. Instead of expressing a basic approval or criticism, Pop Goth allows both artists to grapple with the desire, fantasy and one-sided emotional investment that fans feel for the stars they adore.
3. Jersley, Anne, "The horror film, the body and the youth audience" in *Producing cultures - The construction of forms and contents of contemporary youth cultures*, February 1, 1999, p 1.
8. Bataille. P. 8
18. Ginsberg, Phil, „Dawn Mellor: Vile Afflictions,“ artnoonwall.org 8 March 2009
‘Looking Back’: Scottish Queer Gothic Returns in Zoe Strachan’s *Ever Fallen in Love*

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The tension between remembering and repression harbours an oscillation between fear and desire, since ‘Memory offers the heroine the opportunity to confront her deepest darkest fears and darkest desires.’(1) Though Haggerty alludes to the gothic fiction of Ann Radcliffe, it is nevertheless an appropriate commentary that can be applied to Zoe Strachan’s *Ever Fallen in Love* (2011), a contemporary Scottish gothic novel. Strachan’s queer gothic novel straddles past tense first and present tense third person narration to uncover the story of Richard, a gay computer games creator, and his former friendship with apparently heterosexual Luke, whom he met as a student. At the heart of the narrative lurks a dark secret that is gradually exposed through Richard’s memory which conceals an interrelated unrequited love for Luke and a heinous act of sexual coercion/rape carried out by both. This culminates in the female victim, Lucy’s, death and their expulsion from University. Since ‘She was under the influence of drugs’(2) a question mark remained over whether her drowning was accidental or suicide, while implicating Luke as the local drug dealer. The return of the repressed is unearthed through memory, triggered by Richard’s sister Stephie visiting him in his remote Highland hideaway. Though he attempts to bury the past, Richard’s haunted self is compelled towards ‘looking back’ (6), which involves the traumatic memory of Lucy as well as the aching love for Luke, whom he spends much time looking for online. It is no accident that Richard’s desire for Luke conflates with the trauma of having to look at one’s past, as an erotic longing for unity overlaps with a thanatotic division. Fred Botting posits that Gothic romance embodies ‘the psychic economy of eros and and thanatos’ as desire itself becomes the undone of *Liebestod* since ‘Love never dies’. (3) Richard experiences the uncanny as ‘a sense of repetition or “coming back” – the return of the repressed […] a compulsion to repeat’(4), as past and present narratives intertwine bringing the doubles of his past and present selves ever closer together. While Kirsty Macdonald contends that ‘Scottish fiction has previously only rarely been examined through the lens of the Gothic’(5), I will explore *Ever Fallen in Love* through that lens and argue that it is very much a Scottish Queer Gothic novel replete with uncanny tropes such as doubles, a castle, a fire, death, secrecy, graveyards and returns. Though contemporary fiction, Strachan intertextualises her Gothic literary ancestors, particularly the Celtic texts of Scottish, Irish and French Gothic, looking back in homage while offering her own contemporary view of Scotland’s alterity. In her response to an interview question regarding her decision to relocate to an independent Scottish press from a London publisher, Strachan says that ‘this novel wouldn’t be for them. I thought my kind of fiction, and maybe my personality, might find a better fit with a smaller publisher […] and I really admire how they combine passion for Scotland in all its diversity with a very ambitious international outlook’. (6) She makes a decision to shift from the centrality of London to the devolved remoteness of a small Scottish publisher to signal that this text is part of a Scottish Gothic but is also queer ‘in all it diversity’.

For Botting,

Romance, as it frames gothic, seems to clean up its darker counterpart, sanitising its deprivations; it tries to transform, even ennoble, violent gothic energies as a quest for love in the face of death […] Monsters, in this romantic transformation of gothic, find themselves increasingly humanised while villains become increasingly alluring: repulsion cedes to attraction as horror gives way to romance.(7)

Thus, ‘The gothic genre’s usual trajectory is reversed: a flight from figures of horror and revulsion is turned into a romantic flight towards them, now figures of identification’. (8) This is precisely the pattern
followed by Richard who pines for the monstrous manipulator Luke, while simultaneously attempting to sanitise his own culpability and compliance in Luke’s twisted plot. Richard’s erotic weakness for Luke fuels the latter’s control over him, resulting in thanatotic madness. The trope of madness, according to Mair Rigby, signals ‘‘excessive relations between men’ and, particularly with nineteenth-century Gothic, such men, ‘on finding themselves under the domination of another male figure, go “mad” or express a fear of madness’. (9) During such a moment of madness Richard’s desire for Luke manifests itself in the sexual degradation of Lucy. Richard recalls that night when Luke orchestrates their dangerous liaison, for ‘Part of the appeal, I suppose, that it would happen in a narrow, single bed, under the gaze of Lucy’s childhood teddy bear and the photos on her pinboard of friends, family, pet dog’ (191). Predatorily, Luke feeds off the sinister pleasure of corrupting her childhood innocence with traumatic acts of sexual debauchery which forever haunt Richard. Fuelled by alcohol, ‘things get out of hand and you know there’s no point in going back, so it’s as if you’re sleepwalking, not really there. Until the morning, when it’s crystal clear, and you try to layer that gauziness between your waking self and the memory that you can’t afford to give house room’. (10) Unable to give this uncanny memory ‘house room’, Richard cannot evict it from his mind, slowly accepting his complicity: ‘Lucy, why did she go along with it? (Did she go along with it?)’ (193). This queer abject sexual transgression allows Richard to fulfil his gay desire for Luke, while the latter can maintain his heteronormative veneer, and Lucy serves as the in-between exploited simulacra, for ‘While I stayed still but still hard in position, he eased himself in from the front. He began, slowly, to move, and I thought I would explode then expire for the pleasure of feeling him so close to me’ (194). She becomes incidental to their queer pleasure yet legitimises its heteronormative boundaries, for

His pace quickened, I had to match it and I did, perfectly, wishing it could last forever. When I opened my eyes he was looking at me again, looking at my face with awful wonder in his eyes, and he smiled, as if he would have kissed me […] If she hadn’t been between us. He reached over and stroked my hair back from my face, and his touch, his touch, the feel of him against me, his fingers brushing my throat, my lips, made me shudder and slow, and as I relaxed I saw his beautiful face contort, as if it was the sight, the sound, the feel of my ecstasy that had brought on his own, and I had to bite the inside of my cheek until I tasted blood to stop myself saying out loud what it was that I felt. (194)

The discarded female is left traumatised and victimised and participates in her ultimate self-erasure, negated by the mirror of their mutual reflection. Lucy is Luke’s double: both names mean light, which is refracted through Richard’s gaze, while the path to his painful self-enlightenment pivots upon his encounter with both of them. Upon their shared looks and mutual climax, Richard bites his inside cheek, the blood symbolising a vampiric homosexual encounter whose name he dares not speak ‘out loud’. Paulina Palmer argues that a Gothic motif is “the unspeakable” and the themes of secrecy and silence relating to it’, adding that ‘Something can be unspeakable because the individual lacks knowledge of it, because the knowledge is repressed, or because, though having access to it, s/he dare not admit the fact’. (11) Traumatised by his participation in “unspeakable” acts of sexual transgression, Strachan’s narrative nevertheless unveils his secret as the gothic tale reveals itself. Considering the ‘unspeakable’ perversity of the Gothic, Macdonald insists that ‘due to its inherently superior and conventionally more powerful position, straight male identity is consequentially receptive to depravity and sordidness’. (12) Acknowledging that power corrupts, she posits that Gothic fiction undermines ‘the hegemonic power of the male by destabilising traditionally the most stable of identities’. (13) Strachan’s text certainly destabilises heteronormativity and instead offers a plethora of queer identities. Contrary to Macdonald’s view, though, not all heterosexual male identities are secure, and Luke’s is disrupted on the basis of his marginalised class, Scottish and Oedipal tensions.
Thus, torn between desire and disgust, Richard’s secret is eventually revealed. Catherine Spooner notes that ‘If Gothic in its eighteenth and early nineteenth-century phase has been seen by some as a “dark side” to Romanticism [...] then in the twenty-first century Romanticism seems to have become a kind of shadow double to the Gothic’. (14) Whenever Richard indulges in erotic memories of Luke, he is immediately suffocated by Lucy’s thanatotic shadow. Stephie contemplates,

imagine how great it would be if you could look inside your head and see all the files stored there, and just delete the stuff that clutters things up. Then once a month or whatever you could empty the recycle bin and they’d be gone. All the crappy memories that you can’t quite shake would disappear forever. (45)

In reply to his sister, Richard admits that it is a ‘Nice idea [...] But there’s always a trace. You might think you’ve deleted a file, but there’s still a shade of it there. Someone could delve in and retrieve it’ (45). Memory, then, Richard concedes, cannot be conveniently deleted but, instead, acts as a shadowy palimpsest that forever returns to haunt and pollute the present. Despite living in isolation from his family and previous life in the remote north of Scotland, and taking up running to try to refocus his mind and outrun his past, he battles against constant returns to past mistakes, despairing,

Was it possible, he wondered, ever to escape these small and to anyone else inconsequential recollections that suddenly burst into your consciousness and occupied it completely? [...] An awkward phrase, a stupid comment, long forgotten by the person to whom it was addressed, that years later could still flood you with self-loathing. (105)

The omniscient present tense narrative offers a glimpse into his repressed demons of ‘other memories, of stronger things, if you allowed these to slip into your mind’ (105). His hope that ‘the present should trump the past’ (105) mirrors the narrative’s present where he tries to live remotely and differently, yet is haunted by the encroaching past tense narrative of his former self. According to Strachan, ‘I think of it as a novel about unrequited love, about memory, about how we tell and retell our own stories to try and make sense of our lives – and to try and pinpoint the moment at which we made the decision that changed our paths forever’. (15) The uncanny facet of repetition is part of Richard’s haunted memory that he perpetually revisits through the narrative. Strachan continues, ‘The novel explores the difference between the person Richard was at eighteen and who he is now, whether he was actively corrupted by the person he fell in love with or whether the relationship simply awakened intrinsic parts of his character, the existence of which he would rather not acknowledge’. (16) As Nicholas Royle explains, ‘The uncanny [...] has to do with a sense of ourselves as double, split, at odds with ourselves’. (17) In the split between his present and past, ‘There is a sense of a doubled self, needing to recover from a traumatic history, and attempts to acknowledge or reconstruct either a repressed culture or repressed experience’. (18) According to Palmer,

The double is a signifier of psychic division [...] Its significance tends to be ambiguous since, while an encounter with her/his double may furnish the individual with a sense of liberation and even jouissance, the double may also represent an aspect of the self that s/he feels anxious or guilty about. It resembles, in this respect, the concept of the abject which, according to Julia Kristeva, fascinates at the same time as it repels. (19)

As much as his past life with Luke horrifies Richard, at the same it entices him, admitting that ‘He often wondered what he’d do if he could go back and relive that period, usually coming to the uncomfortable conclusion that he’d do exactly the same again’. (4)
Richard’s despair at the seepage of traumatic memories and wish that his past had been different signifies not only an individual psychological struggle but, rather, equates with a cultural loss embedded deep within the national psyche. According to David Punter, being subsumed by England has led Scotland to regret its history and seek to envisage alternative possibilities ‘that includes within itself the question “What if?”, the implicit possibility of a history that could have been “done differently,” the possibility of a writing that would now be speaking from a position of political power rather than from one of subjugation to the invader, the settler, the conqueror’. (20) ‘There seems little doubt’, he continues, ‘that in both Scotland and Ireland Gothic at a certain point became a way of articulating those suppressed histories, as indeed it continues to do so’. (21) Strachan’s depiction of the queer Richard, then, manipulated by the heterosexual Luke, mirrors Scotland’s hegemonic influence by England, its neighbourly doppelganger. This uneasy national relation resulted in a psychic split within Scotland regarding those in favour and those against the Union established in 1707. The uncanny, notes Royle, ‘comes from Scotland, from that “auld country” that has so often been represented as “beyond the borders”, liminal, an English foreign body’. (22) Scotland itself serves as a distorted looking-glass of England, both familiar and utterly alien. As with Frankenstein’s relocation to the gothic landscape of ‘some obscure nook in the northern highlands of Scotland’ (23) to undertake another monstrous creation, Richard’s retreat to the isolated Highlands allows him to avoid human relationships and contact while working on creating his own virtual games. His relocation is in itself uncanny, both at home yet not at home in the unheimlich of remote removal from familiar society. Crucially, from his very first encounter with Luke, Richard is detached from home, since ‘The first time I met him? […] It was the day I left home’ (79). Further, they meet on a train, a chronotopic trope that transports them in time and space to an altogether queerly different location, where they can act out alternative selves. The train allows them to reach a transitory space of transformation, where queer alternate acts occur: Richard and Luke transfer sexually – transsexually – through Lucy’s body, her female body sacrificed as a vessel for their gothic pleasure.

However, with the arrival of Stephie and, later, her friend Loren, he is not permitted to remain severed from his past but, instead, must face his demons (interestingly, the three characters’ initials are RLS, paying homage to the Victorian master of Scottish gothic, Robert Louis Stevenson). Richard and Stephie ‘passed the ruins of the crofts opposite the beach’ (142), and their ghostly imprints allow Richard to articulate the uncanny affect of the Highland Clearances as ‘Kind of sad, I always think […] So many people lived here, once. There was a whole community, shifted to the coast by the clearances’ (142). Stephie’s response that ‘It must’ve been hellish’ locates this historical traumatic memory within the parameters of gothic torment, while Richard emphasises the uncanny displacement and relocation of home, ‘Yes. And then I guess some of them emigrated, in the end. Or were forced to emigrate’ (142). These historical evictions, with people dispossessed from their homeland, epitomise the unheimlich and situate Scotland’s cartography within a gothic backdrop. Haunted by the ghost of the Clearances, Richard and Stephie witness a neo-colonialism of the Highlands which serve as a playground for affluent English tourists. The wild landscape becomes uncanny, subject to disneyfication as holidaymakers in ‘people carriers, bicycles strapped to the roof’ (78) reductively package it into a short break in an adventure playground theme park. Notably, Richard observes ‘the large and grumbling English family whose Scottish adventure seemed to have already disintegrated amidst tug-o-wars over burgers and chips’ (206). In a bid to signify the authenticity of the town for the benefit of tourism, ‘Some misspelling had delayed the partner sign that would offer the Gaelic translation, prompting a volley of letters to the editor of the local paper, all of them expressing their outrage in perfect English’ (211) The neo-colonial “owning” of Gaelic for tourist purposes is satirically acknowledged through Richard’s focalised thoughts that ‘Still, it was nice that someone originally from Buckinghamshire should feel such a connection with the language’ (211).
The ten year gap between Richard’s retrospective first person narrative of his misspent student days with Luke and the omniscient commentary upon his current life is a common literary device. For instance, in Frances Hodgson Burnett’s *The Secret Garden* (1911), gothic secrets are interrupted after ten years with the arrival of Mary; in Homer’s *The Odyssey*, it takes Odysseus a decade to reach his wife and home following the Greek/Trojan War; or in J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone* (1997), the infant Harry spends ten years with his abusive surrogate family before entering the fantasy realm of Hogwarts. The indication, then, is that Richard will not continue in his isolation but that it will be interrupted. The story that he has been concealing will out, remapping forbidden territory of trauma and desire that is located geographically as well as psychologically at a spatiotemporal distance. Thus, ‘Romance “is the story of an elsewhere” […] hiding guilty secrets […] repressed wishes and desires return’.(24) It is that elsewhere that the past narrative returns us and Richard to, dogging his footsteps no matter how fast he tries to run away from it until, ultimately, he must journey back to the skeletons of his geographical past. Strachan’s title, *Ever Fallen in Love*, encapsulates the concept of gothic romance, with the acknowledgement that the novel will address themes of love and desire, but equally, ‘fallen’ signifies a gothic propensity for something sinfully darker. This is reinforced with the echo of the Buzzcocks’s 1978 song ‘Ever Fallen in Love (With Someone You Shouldn’t’tve)’ which, in turn, was inspired by the film version of *Guys and Dolls*, with the long suffering Adelaide’s dialogue that addresses the inevitability of falling ‘in love with someone you shouldn’t have’. Loving the wrong person enduringly despite its detrimental impact upon the self is a major theme in Strachan’s text in the depiction of Richard’s unrequited love for Luke. In an interview she states, ‘we’re all fascinated by desperate, doomed love affairs and most of us have fallen in love with someone we shouldn’t have fallen in love with.’(25) In turn, 1978 is only one year prior to the dawn of Britain’s love/hate relationship with Thatcherism: Scotland, in essence, was forced into that relationship against its will and led to a dislocation from Westminster politics that ultimately fuelled the campaign for devolution.

From the outset, the novel hints at the unsuitability of Luke as Richard’s love interest, as he recalls that ‘You wouldn’t think that there were still women who could be ruined. Perhaps there aren’t any more, but back then, in that university town by the sea, there were. It was quite an old-fashioned place. Luke was quite old-fashioned too. Cast himself as a latter day Dorian or Valmont, sinned the old sins’ (1). Immediately, the first person retrospective narration alludes to the downfall of Lucy as a ‘ruined’ woman coupled with the sinful associations of Luke who has self-fashioned himself according to the sinister decadent literary figures of Oscar Wilde’s Victorian character Dorian Gray or Vicomte Sébastien de Valmont in Choderlos de Laclos’s *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* (1782). Luke seeks ‘old-fashioned’ inspiration from ‘old sins’ in the gothic fiction of the 18th and 19th century fin de siècle, associated with sexual ‘sins’. To recall Botting’s earlier comment in terms of gothic romance, then, there is something ‘elsewhere’ about Luke’s old worldly otherworldliness of depravity, drawn from other literary texts. The chronotopic train has transported them to an ‘elsewhere’, suggesting that contemporary time structures have been queued, just as Jonathan Harker’s ‘watch was still unwound’ when in the Transylvanian ‘sort of sanctuary’ of Dracula’s castle which, apparently, protects him against ‘those awful women’. The past is an indelible mark on the present, where even the university is described as ‘an old-fashioned place’. Its gothic architecture and remote northern location superimposes upon their, then, contemporary attendance in the 1990s, as present and past are interwoven. Richard recalls that ‘We were sitting on the windowsill of the pool room in the Union […] a girl who was celebrating her lucky, winning shot […] Better she’d lost, kept quiet. Her taste for games was unlikely to match his’ (1). By linking Lucy’s pool game to Luke’s ‘taste for games’, who has already been associated with sexual sins, it is clear that Lucy will be manipulated into a dangerous liaison, just as Richard is too. The scene describing Lucy’s sexual degradation mirrors the ‘old fashioned’ gothic tale of Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897), when Lucy, depicted as a loose (Loosy) woman, is impaled by Arthur who is encouraged by Van Helsing, ‘driving deeper and

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deeper the mercy-bearing stake [...] his breath came in broken gasps’. (27) Just as Richard and Luke share an erotic gaze that erases Lucy, so too does Arthur and avenging males engage in homoerotic bonding, where ‘For a few minutes we were so taken up with him that we did not look towards the coffin’. (28) Richard’s name is a near anagram of Dracula – Drac Hir – and he certainly participates in the vampiric feeding of hir/her to satiate his own queer taste. Richard’s initial befriending of Luke is fraught with foreboding, for ‘He seemed to be sneering as he turned and looked back towards me but maybe it was just the light because then he said: “Got any plans for later?”’ (16). But, given his developing attraction, Richard blinds himself to Luke and ‘so we arranged to go for a drink around six, the nery lap from the ex-mining town and the prickly youth from the city scheme’ (16). Their queer friendship is secured in the other wordly place of a gothic mansion, described as ‘a mixture of castle and country house, built from grey stone’ (51). It is a disused dead space, left vacant and resembling cemetery gravestones with its ‘grey stone’. A chronotopic decayed past imposed upon the present, it aptly serves as the place where these friends share the ghostly stories of their past until Luke sets it alight. Self-fashioning themselves as lords of the manor, their ghostly presence suggests a pseudo affluent lifestyle forged in the embers of privilege, as Richard notes that

The mirrors above the fireplaces showed rooms within rooms and I caught myself staring deep into the reflection, as if I might catch sight of ladies in fine dresses and the men in sleek suits [...] I pictured a 1930s heyday, the 50s and 60s spent clinging to the past, then a slow decline into final demands from creditors and shutting off rooms. (60)

The landscape is depicted uncannily, as ‘swathes of white mist began rolling down from the fields onto the road. It seemed magical, as if we were in another world’. (154) Hardly surprisingly it is associated with spectres – ‘Do you believe in ghosts [...] This looks spooky’ (155) – as Richard’s wordplay associates Luke with look and spook. But even their gothic haunt is displaced by capitalist tourism, redesigned as ‘They rebuilt the castle, you know. Turned it into luxury apartments for posh golfers’ (257). Being ‘the same, but not the same’ it is defamiliarised upon Luke’s return, where ‘He must have wanted to remember, to touch the past, rub it between his fingertips and feel it once more. It’s over, he’d said all those years ago, and yet he’d gone back anyway’ (257).

While acknowledging that ‘The uncanny is queer. And the queer is uncanny’ (29), Royle considers Freud’s discussion of looking as an integral aspect of the uncanny, where ‘the double and “déjà vu” are all most immediately associated with seeing’ (30). Strachan’s novel emphasises this association in the tense looks between Richard and Luke, since ‘The gaze between men has long been a sexually loaded sign’. (31) Rigby’s discussion of Charles Maturin’s Melmoth the Wanderer (1820) notes that, ‘while Melmoth does not look peculiar, his “look” is peculiar’ since ‘it is the expression of his eyes’, in other words his gaze, which makes him dangerous’ (32). Citing D.A. Miller, she advocates that ‘perhaps the most salient index to male homosexuality, socially speaking, consists precisely in how a man looks at other men’. (33) In Strachan’s text Richard and Luke exchange many lingering looks, for ‘he kept his gaze wrapped around mine for long enough that I hadn’t been sure if he was flirting or not. Until he laughed and said, Well. I prefer girls’ (40). Denied the rapture of a lovers’ embrace, Richard is ‘wrapped’ in a sexually charged gaze that is enveloped in the codes of cultural and literary discourse, including the sinister queer spectacle of Dorian Gray. Thus, ‘at nine minutes past six he appeared, and I’m not sure if it’s just hindsight that makes me think he’d changed in some subtle way, hardened just a touch’ (18). The associations between the neo-Victorian Luke and Dorian Gray are reinforced immediately prior to this scene when Richard is unpacking in his student accommodation, for ‘I placed my prized Oscar Wilde on a bedside table charred along the edges by forgotten cigarettes, as a sign to anyone who might come back for coffee’ (17). This also secures Richard to Luke because Wilde is ‘a [visible] sign’ of Richard’s homosexuality, whereas
Richard as the monster ourselves, Haggerty I also so needed by part way' someone in humanises is that just of that and a repress...lamppost 28 lynched love. in mind. Even the the living brought identification'. (36) received While Catholic; vampiric relationship. Denominator Richard's Western Scottish roots lie in rural working-class Ayrshire, while vampiric Luke is from the East – Edinburgh – and also working class; Richard is Protestant while Luke is Catholic; Richard is gay and Luke is straight. As doubles, they have binary differences, but shared similarities like class and ethnicity secure their queer relationship.

While Dorian’s doppelganger picture is concealed from view in his attic, Luke and Richard live in attic rooms in the more down at heel Herrick House, their university Halls of residence, for ‘Here the Yahs were diluted by people who, like me, had a vaguely apologetic tone to their voice [...] who, like me, received full grants’ (16). Marginalised by common denominators, such as sexuality, ethnicity and class, they act out the “sins” that respectable society conceals as Luke uncannily brings to light a sinister part of Richard that ought to have remained hidden (34). To repeat Strachan’s own observation ‘The novel explores the difference between the person Richard was at eighteen and who he is now, whether he was actively corrupted by the person he fell in love with or whether the relationship simply awakened intrinsic parts of his character, the existence of which he would rather not acknowledge’. (35) As Botting argues, gothic romance humanises the monster that is part of ourselves, so that they become ‘figures of identification’. (36) As such, Luke is the sinister embodied manifestation of Richard’s unleashed desires brought to light after a stifling upbringing in a homophobic Ayrshire town, where ‘There wasn’t much living to be done there, in that stultifying place, so I was poised and eager to make up for the lost time later on. I just needed someone to help show me the way’ (138). Regarded as monstrous by heteronormative society, Richard allows himself to act out gothic atrocities under the veil of romantic love for a so-called “normal” citizen who is actually monstrous. Strachan’s text brings to light endemic social problems like homophobia, sexism, poverty, alcohol and drug dependency, violence and misogyny which Scotland suppresses. Luke’s trade in drugs mirrors recent reports, with ‘Scotland shown as having the world's highest percentage of people using cocaine at 3.9%’, or ‘with a rate of heroin use twice that of the rest of the United Kingdom’ (37), while ‘Scotland's long legacy of problem drug misuse remained unacceptably high’. (38)

Even Richard’s weekend job as a teenager suggests a buried Gothic depth: he works at the local cemetery, cementing the queer uncanny link between homosexuality and the Gothic, for ‘I lay awake in my bed that night, turning the combined mileage of poof and gravedigger, grave robber, ghoul over and over in my mind. It could run and run’ (113). For Rigby, ‘it is not simply the case that the Gothic is always already queer; queer theory is also always already Gothic’ (39), while George E. Haggerty concedes that ‘Transgressive social-sexual relations are the most basic common denominator of gothic writing’. (40) Ever Fallen in Love pays homage to this association in its portrayal of repression and sexual transgression under the surface of heteronormative conventions. Thus, in the stifling homophobia of an ex-mining town in Ayrshire, Richard discloses the difficulties of coming out of the entombing closet, dreaming of ‘a pure love. But no one was gay, or if they were they kept it quiet, haunted by the memory of the man who was lynched in the town down the valley because he loved other men. This in the 1980s, mind’ (92). Uncannily, even as recently as October 2011, 18 year old Ryan Esquierdo was arrested for the murder of 28 year old Stuart Walker, a gay barman, whose most gothic of murders allegedly involved being tied to a lamppost and his body burned in the ex-mining Ayrshire town of Cumnock. As though stuck in a time-warp, Strachan portrays the aggressive homophobia still extant in Scotland which is replete with repression and forced double lives of simulated masquerade. While in a Glasgow pub, Richard encounters a terrified man whose ‘wife thought he was working’ but is instead waiting for his aggressively abusive

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male lover who ‘punched him in the face’ (88), or the young Richard’s first sexual experience is in the local public toilet with the closeted self-loathing ‘Mr Sim from the miner’s cottages’ (93) who, after receiving oral sex, warns him, ‘If ye open yer gub aboot this, ah’ll throttle ye, ye wee pervert’ (94). Ostracised and suppressed by hegemonic culture, homosexual encounters are forced underground to the abject unsanitary space of cottaging. Notably, Richard’s career as a game developer is embedded in his recollection of Mr Sim, as The Sims is a life-game.

Further entwining Luke with his literary double Dorian is their respective unhappy childhoods: Dorian’s mother was said to be beautiful but rejected any rich marriage and instead ran away with a penniless man for love who was then killed in a duel. Upon his mother’s death soon afterwards, Dorian’s childhood was spent being mistreated by his grandfather who had disapproved of their love and thus resented the child. Psychologically, Luke appears to blame his “fallen” single mother for his unhappiness: ‘Parent. Only got one. Maybe she’d have liked me to stay at home’ (20). Upon meeting her, Richard thought that ‘She’d seemed fun, knocking back her double vodka and coke and laughing with them in a way that he couldn’t imagine from his own mother. But Luke’s mother had been younger, with her ponytail and bright top, her jeans and her Caterpillar boots’ (236). The fun takes a more sinister turn ‘as her laugh grew louder and her words slurred and the barman started to cast glances in their direction, Luke had given her money for the cigarette machine and she’d come back with no change and Marlboro Lights rather than her usual, cheaper brand’ (236). Inevitably, ‘then they had a row. She touched his hair and said it was like his father’s, and he went mental. Shouted at her’ (236). Clearly blaming his mother for the absence of his father, Luke sees his mother as a loose woman, ‘muttering something under his breath that had shocked Richard. Stupid whore, that might have been it, and then they’d offered to walk her to the bus stop but she’d made excuses about fresh air and so they’d left her outside and gone to get their own bus home’ (236). Luke’s mother encompasses the M/Other status of Angel/Whore, signifying a duality of desire and abjection for her body experienced as a psychosexual rupture. This abject fascination/revulsion meets its climax in the destruction of Lucy.

According to Julia Kristeva, the anxiety experienced at this severance from the mother can lead to a fixation with one’s image, as ‘narcissism is a defence against the emptiness of separation’. (41) Luke is certainly narcissistic in his mistreatment of women and abuse of Richard’s feelings, for ‘He was going to have sex with her, I was sure, and I couldn’t help being jealous […] he looked over her shoulder at me and smiled as if to say: look what I can do’ (43). Richard is ensnared once again in the double vision of having to look at Luke and to reconcile his amorous feelings with knowledge that the object of his desire is unworthy. In a discussion about storing Luke’s drugs until his return from a trip to Edinburgh, Richard notes, ‘I wonder if that’s when I noticed that with a casual phrase, a change of tone, he could cut me to the quick’ (167). The inability to love is not so much narcissism as ‘auto-eroticism’, since ‘The auto-erotic person cannot allow himself to be “loved” (no more than he can let himself be loveable), except by a maternal substitute who would cling to his body like a poultice – a reassuring balm’. (42) Fixated upon self-satisfaction, ‘He is indifferent to love […] he discovers objects, but they are objects of hatred […] The auto-erotic person who complains or boasts of being unable to love is afraid of going mad – schizophrenia or catatonia’. (43) Luke’s ‘poultice’ or ‘reassuring balm’ is the Catholic girl Aimee whom he dates but, crucially, does not fuck, since ‘she goes to Mass every Sunday’ (178) and ‘She’s not a slut’ (179). In the discursive hegemonic bipolarity of Woman, she encapsulates the Virgin and, appealing to Luke’s latent Catholicism, the Madonna and Child, thus offering him an idealised idolatry figure. His attitude to other females is based purely on his desire to disempower them and gratify his own twisted self-indulged pleasure.
It struck me that first evening how greedy he was, which shouldn’t seem attractive but was. One packet of crisps wasn’t enough, he needed two and peanuts as well, though he didn’t look as if he had a scrap of fat on him. He had to buy more cigarettes, he smoked so many, and he always finished his drink before me. I hadn’t yet admitted to myself that I fancied him, but it was sneaking up on me, that’s for sure. He had very dark eyelashes and a more direct gaze than I was used to, and you could see inside his mouth more than seemed usual; his tongue, his teeth. His lips were dry. (20)

There is something vampiric in this description, with Luke as the vagina dentata who disempowers both Richard (Dick) and his feminine other, Lucy. Interestingly, given their association with Herrick House, is the echo of William Herrick, a Victorian British vampire living in contemporary society in Toby Whithouse’s television drama Being Human. Just as Luke and Richard share a bond that involves destroying women, ‘Mitchell and Herrick grew close to one another after Mitchell had been recruited. They worked as a team, attracting women to come with them to a private place where they would murder them and feed. This went on for decades, until Mitchell began to reconsider his lifestyle choice’. (44) Like Mitchell, Richard too reconsiders his lifestyle choice and attempts to evade his past, while Luke is a young man but ‘old-fashioned’ (1) and associated with the Gothic predators of Victorian fiction. Mitchell discovers Herrick feeding on dying World War I soldiers and allows himself to be recruited as a vampire to save them, while Richard’s homoerotic computer game is set amidst ‘the Great War’ (13).

It is not only on psychosexual ground that Luke’s drama unfolds; it is also predicated upon class and ethnic tensions. Richard concedes that ‘Class bound us together, me and Luke’ (15), since ‘it was still a case of us against them’ (145), their outsider status cemented by economic disenfranchisement, for ‘Unlike so many of my peers I was emphatically working class. And so was Luke’ (1). Thus, Parents in country tweeds unloaded boxes from Land Rovers and Beemers […] We queued for matriculation behind Torquil and Timmy, registered for Freshers’ Week alongside Jilly and Jocasta, and it was scant consolation to overhear that for most of them coming here was second best. (15)

Luke’s sense of marginalisation from the ‘Yahs’ (14, 110) harbours a desire for revenge – ‘Is it wrong of me, he said, to really, really want to punch these people?’ (30) – signalling that he will act on this resentment. As well as class, though, both feel ostracised within their own nation by a cartographical English dominance. Haunted by 18th Century and Victorian Gothic fiction, Ever Fallen in Love mirrors the historical dogged footsteps of Scotland by its imperial neighbour that is echoed in the present tense narrative set in the Highlands. When Richard speaks to a female student at a party, he is ostracised by her class and national status when she tells him, ‘My parents live in Chichester […] my mother has family in Scotland […] They live in Perthshire. Is that posh? I’ve heard it’s posh’ (39). Meanwhile, ‘Guy from Philosophy […] he’s actually like, in line to the throne […] His family have a massive house in London and an estate in Oxfordshire’ (42). For Richard and Luke, University life is itself uncanny, full of ‘the rugger buggers’ with ‘English accents of course, and that ridiculously full-mouthed Scottish […] the tones of confidence and good schooling’ (101). Even though Richard is gaining a Scottish education, his geographical and class dialect are alien in this privileged environment of Standard English enunciation, for ‘My Ayrshire accent was slipping […] I tried to be understood in tutorials’ (125). Even the omniscient present tense narrative situates Scotland at an awkward angle with itself, evicted and rendered unheimlich by its English double, for which it serves as a playground of Anglo wealth. Again, employing gothic haunting, Strachan voices the injustice of affluent English dominance and impoverished suffering, for ‘As we shivered through the graveyard I thought of how exclusive it had seemed […] Cambridge-born professors […] They’d matured well, compared to the miners and the sons of miners back home’ (201).
Rather than challenging their marginalisation constructively, however, Richard and Luke disempower Lucy as the female other. With his dangerous resentful gaze, ‘Look at them all, Luke said […] With their flats and their cars and their fucking easy fucking lives’, as Richard observes that ‘I thought I saw the angry sparkle of moisture in his eyes’ (122). The approaching debasement of Lucy is building like a crescendo with Luke’s increasing resentment, believing that ‘They’re all the fucking same […] Every last fucking one of them […] I hate them’ (147). His sexual conquests escalate and become increasingly misogynistic – ‘I love these public school girls […] Must be that all the public school boys are shirtlifters, he said. Turns them into nymphos’ (164) – the more he feels enraged and emasculated by the Anglo-patriarchal dominance of himself and Scotland. Women serve as simulacra upon which he can vent his anger and dispossession by owning and abusing their bodies: Lucy’s body is thus imperially ‘conquered’. Strachan argues that ‘There exist many androcentric places in literature where women still appear as simulacra for Scotland and bear the brunt of masculine frustration at its own intransigent Scottishness’. (45) Looking at Luke during a male bonding game of football, Richard observes that his working-class heterosexual misogyny is queerly homoerotic: ‘Admit it, I said to him. You prefer the company of men to the company of women’ and ‘Look how well you got on with those boys’ while, ‘You get it on with women, that’s a different thing altogether’ (177). The female voice in the novel is silenced by drowning after being subjected to male sexual dominance in order to counter and repress their hegemonic emasculation. Lucy’s dependence upon anti-depressants echoes a female malady induced by patriarchal society, her demise through drowning similar to the madness of Shakespeare’s Ophelia. Throughout the novel, Strachan demonstrates that ‘there is a collective will to repress how aspects of our social life (violence, poverty and abuse, for example) allow and even encourage the traumatization of women, people of color, and gays’. (46) Marginalised as a female queer Scottish writer, Strachan haunts the margins of this narrative that focuses predominantly upon two male characters, but ultimately offers a female commentary with Stephie’s ‘colonisation’ (63) of Richard’s hideaway. According to Rigby, ‘The lesbian is never with us, it seems, but always somewhere else: in the shadows, in the margins, hidden from history, out of sight, out of mind, a wanderer in the dark’. (47) Lesbianism, or queer female Scottishness lurks as an absent presence that reminds us of the entrenched masculinist ‘lesbophobic narratives’ (48) at the heart of phallocratic Scottish literary history in which such females are written out and rendered invisible while it is constantly on the look out to repress and punish any visible signs of homosexuality. Strachan’s queer double vision portrays traumatised others who must resist being subsumed by heteronormative narratives and revise their own scripts. Like the murder of Stuart Walker, Strachan reminds us that contemporary Scotland is repeatedly repressing others in its perpetual reassertion of heteropatriarchy and its fear/loatheing is haunted by the fear of the others’ return. For Jeanette Winterson, society perpetuates a cycle of abuse and recurrent mistakes – ‘A repeating world – same old story’ (49) – without learning and moving forward towards ethical equality. Strachan utilises the trope of Scottish Gothic fiction to illustrate the horrifying consequences of such repetition but queries the ‘same old story’ through a queer lens, suggesting an alternative outcome.

Strachan’s utilisation of the return of the repressed triggering a compulsion towards repetition is perpetuated through a series of returns in the narrative which culminate in Richard’s, perhaps inevitable, return to the University town at the core of his repressed memory to face his demons. As though attempting to reawaken the ghosts of their former selves that have haunted them, he and Luke’s reunion is associated, aptly, with the graveyard, for ‘now here Richard was, sitting overlooking the cemetery’ (245). Revisiting old haunts, ‘Richard walked past his old flat, the one he’d shared with Luke’, where ‘Although the day was mild, he felt a slight shiver as he moved out of the sunlight and into the shade of the building. Now that he was alone, without Stephie beside him, the past was lagging round him, thick and airless’ (243). Just as the house in Stevenson’s Jekyll and Hyde (1886) is associated with the gothic narrative events, so too does Strachan emphasise the uncanny aspect of the shaded building that invokes ‘a slight
shiver’ of someone walking over Richard’s grave. Like a returning corpse, Luke embodies the uncanny, for ‘Although he recognised Luke straight away – his slimness, his close-fitting jeans – he was unfamiliar too’ (252). Trying to reconcile past and present, ‘A double Luke emerged, like a distortion in a hall of mirrors’ (73). As multiple selves uncannily imbricate, ‘he felt already as if he was straddling past and present’ (254), with the narrative threads entwined in a chronotopic return, ‘Richard caught his own reflection behind the gantry, distorted behind rows of glasses like something in a hall of mirrors [...] he stared at the fragments of his face, trying to catch sight of something that he’d recognise as his past self’ (255-6). In a repetition of their past life they go for a drink in the pub, completing the destructive cycle which began the narrative, for ‘He met Richard’s eye, his gaze direct below his long eyelashes’ (255), the dangerously charged exchange answered by a physical reawakening: ‘An image darted through his mind and he tried to chase it away, but felt an answering kick in his body just the same. After all this time, he thought. It’s still there’ (255).

Richard acknowledges that he may still fall prey to Luke’s manipulation as the novel makes a cyclical return at its close, just as Richard and Luke have returned to the scene of their crime and returned to the haunts of their past lives. A cornucopia of Gothic traditions, Ever Fallen in Love leaves an unsettling open ending in a book that fluidly refuses to settle but forever oscillates and repeats, just as Richard uncannily ‘felt disembodied, as though part of him was elsewhere’ (258). As queer Gothic Scottish fiction, the text remains evasive and elusive, with the thrilling uncertainty of ‘a hope so fierce that the sins of the past were cleansed’ (258) and the possibility, by confronting rather than burying your past, of a different story in the future. Stephie texts Richard, saying ‘Stay out. I have date with SATC reruns’ (257). Watching Sex and the City reruns symbolises the repetition of Richard and Luke’s return to the city where they had sex. Just as Stephie views their queer relationship by listening to Richard’s tale unfold, she has accompanied him on his return and is simultaneously watching SATC, while advising her gay brother to ‘stay out’. The repetition of returning to one’s old haunt becomes necessary, then, in order to give voice to the repressed and healingly move forward to a different destination. What remains are ‘Transitory moments, replete with the sheer and not-quite-certain potential of what was to come’ (258).
2 Zoe Strachan, *Ever Fallen in Love* (Scotland: Sandstone Press, 2011) p.108. All further references will be cited by page number in the body of the article.
7 *Gothic Romanced*, pp.1-2
8 *Gothic Romanced*, p.4
10 Ibid.
12 Kirsty Macdonald, 2007
13 Ibid.
16 Ibid.
17 *The Uncanny*, p.6
18 Laurie Vickroy, *Trauma and Survival in Contemporary Fiction* (USA: University of Virginia Press, 2002) p.10
19 Paulina Palmer, p.119
21 Ibid.
22 *The Uncanny*, p.12
24 *Gothic Romanced*, pp.9-10
27 *Dracula*, p.216
28 Ibid.
29 *The Uncanny*, p.43
30 *The Uncanny*, p.45
31 Mair Rigby, p.50
32 Ibid.
33 Ibid.
34 *The Uncanny*, p.51
36 Gothic Romanced, p.4
39 Mair Rigby, p.46
40 Queer Gothic, p.2
42 The Kristeva Reader, p.251
43 The Kristeva Reader, p.252
45 Zoe Strachan, ‘Is that a Scot or am Ah Wrang?’ in Berthold Schoene (ed.) The Edinburgh Companion to Contemporary Scottish Literature (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007) p.52
46 Trauma and Survival in Contemporary Fiction, p.14
47 Mair Rigby, p.48
48 Ibid.
Re-envisioning The Devil-Doll: Child’s Play and the Modern Horror Film

Hans Staats

Nearly 2,000 years after St. Paul of Tarsus wrote his poetic epistles to the people of Corinth, we still equate our capacity for selfless love with the putting away of childish things. That is to say, the time comes for each of us to grow up and pack up our toys.

David Hajdu, “The Toys Are Us,”
The New York Times, 6/20/10, WK9

Hi, I’m Chucky, and I’m your friend to the end! Wanna play?

Child’s Play (Holland, 1988)

Introduction

Charles “Chucky” Lee Ray (Brad Dourif) flees from police officer Mike Norris (Chris Sarandon) through the wintertime streets of Chicago. Abandoned by his getaway driver Eddie Caputo (Neil Giuntoli), Ray, aka The Lakeshore Strangler, enters a children’s toy store and is shot by Norris. Mortally wounded, Ray transfers his soul into the body of a Good Guy doll; a red haired, freckled, proportionally child-sized companion dressed in overalls and sneakers that is apparently the best option one can muster for satanic possession.(1) Lightning strikes through the toy store skylight as the dying criminal recites an incantation. The film cuts to Norris standing over the lifeless body of Ray. Like the lightning storm, firelight casts an ominous shadow over the doll’s smiling and seemingly vacant face. Frankenstein meets Pinocchio in the age of consumer culture – Chucky is alive.

According to The BFI Companion to Horror, Child’s Play is “an effective, slick variant of the boy who cried wolf theme,” the story of six-year-old Andy Barclay (Alex Vincent) and his inability to “convince adults that his doll Chucky is possessed by a voodoo serial killer who wants to migrate to his body” (Newman 1997).(2) In the opening scene of Child’s Play, Ray inhabits the body of a Good Guy doll and successfully eludes the police, only to become obsessed with revenge and a return to human form. After murdering his cowardly getaway driver Eddie Caputo, Chucky discovers that in order to return to an organic body he must possess the first person he revealed his true identity to, Andy.

A frequently overlooked contribution to the post-slasher cycle, Child’s Play has spent its lifetime in the shadow of the more celebrated Texas Chain Saw Massacre, Halloween, Friday the 13th, A Nightmare on Elm Street, and Hellraiser series.(3) In the literature devoted to the slasher and post-slasher cycles and the discourse surrounding gender, genre, and horror Child’s Play is a footnote.(4) Chucky is an anomaly compared to Leatherface, Michael Meyers, Pamela and Jason Voorhees, Freddy Krueger, and Pinhead. According to Wheeler Winston Dixon, Child’s Play is one of the last major horror franchises of the 1980s and “pales in comparison to Holland’s far superior Fright Night” (1985), also starring Chris Sarandon as the vampire Jerry Dandrige (Dixon 2010).(5)
Dixon’s dismissal of *Child’s Play* is reminiscent of a well-established trend in horror criticism beginning with Robin Wood’s valorization of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* in the late 1970s. (6) Carol J. Clover then publishes “Her Body, Himself,” also focusing on *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, and establishes herself as a leading voice in the study of gender in the modern horror film. (7) Clover defines the “American cinematic horror,” as “films from the 1970s to the mid-1980s (with some reference back to progenitors), and only with those subgenres in which female figures and/or gender issues loom especially large: slasher films, occult or possession films, and rape-revenge films” (Clover 1992). (8) Clover’s analysis is specifically concerned with “the relationship of the ‘majority viewer’ (the younger male) to the female victim-heroes,” in particular the Final Girl, “who have become such a conspicuous screen presence in certain sectors of horror” (Clover 1992). (9)

Barry Keith Grant and Christopher Sharrett anthologize both Wood and Clover, further solidifying the distinction between the progressive and reactionary horror film. (10) According to Wood, the progressive horror film is imbued with a sense of social and political activism, specifically the fight against patriarchal capitalism. Wood references Wes Craven’s *The Last House on the Left* (1972), Hooper’s *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, and Romero’s *Dawn of the Dead* as outstanding examples of this trend. Horror in the 80s, on the other hand, reinforces the dominant ideology, representing the monster as simply evil and unsympathetic, depicting Christianity as a positive presence, and confusing the repression of sexuality with sexuality itself. Examples include Craven’s *Swamp Thing* (1982), Hooper’s *Poltergeist* (1982), and Romero’s *Creepshow* (1982). (11)

In the following pages I argue that while *Child’s Play* is an example of the reactionary, rather than progressive, horror film, I do not think of the former category as being in any way inferior to the latter. On the contrary, the dominant ideology of *Child’s Play*, its half-hearted critique of Reaganomics, its sexist indifference to matriarchy and the single parent household, and the racist portrayal of Haitian Vodou, are qualifications for critical analysis. The facile argument that *Child’s Play* is a sleazy horror film devoid of artistic merit or political value is precisely the reason why I am interested in its representation of the devil-doll, a likewise underappreciated monster within horror cinema in general and the modern horror film in particular. (12) As Matt Hills points out, the opposition between trash and “legitimate” film culture is overemphasized, glossing over “how notions of trash film have worked to exclude certain types of filmic sleaze that have also been simultaneously excluded from, or devalued within, academic discussion” (Hills 2007). (13)

*Child’s Play* is a noteworthy example of the modern horror film primarily because it calls into question one of its defining characteristics – what Giorgio Bertellini identifies as the “sadistic male agency against female victims within a rigid heterosexual framework” (Bertellini 2004). (14) Chucky represents a series of questions that look beyond gender and genre and strike at the paradoxes of the heart of horror cinema and childhood. (15) Why does Ray choose a child-sized doll to carry on his criminal ambitions? What contribution does *Child’s Play* make to, and by extension what is the proper place of *Child’s Play* within the pantheon of, horror cinema, and how does Chucky inhabit the ideologically loaded Western concept of childhood as a time of innocence and play?

The answer to these questions begins with the devil-doll, a figure that is prominently featured in *Child’s Play*. The devil-doll, specifically ventriloquist and the dysfunctional relationship between puppet and puppet master, is a recurring theme in Anglo-American horror dating back to the late 1920s. While Chucky is more of a supernatural figure than the ventriloquist dummies that precede him, the psychological distortion of the ventriloquist’s mind, in particular the puppet master’s loss of identity, is an important part of *Child’s Play* and the character of Charles “Chucky” Lee Ray.
Furthermore, the evolution of the devil-doll within horror cinema shares a specific vocabulary with the literary and filmic representation of childhood. For both the devil-doll and the child, horror cinema is preoccupied with the relationship between three keywords: innocence, criminality, and anxiety. On the one hand is the fragile cherub who is in need of protection from the horrors of the adult world. On the other hand is the bad seed, an atavistic throwback to an earlier evolutionary stage in which humans are more savage and animalistic. Anxiety stems from the possibility that the adult world has failed to distinguish between what is innocent and what is criminal and consequently brought about its own ruin. I argue that in the case of the devil-doll film the victim is frequently trapped within this cycle of anxiety, while the killer is typically conscious of the undecidability of childhood innocence and criminality and able to weaponize the conflation of cherub and changeling, just as Charles Lee Ray does in Child's Play.

The Devil-Doll
The mélange of childhood innocence and criminality in Child's Play is rooted in the dichotomy of the cherub and changeling. The conventional wisdom concerning modern childhood (a time of carefree adventure, the stability of family and home, the nation-state as a child-friendly social sphere) is underpinned by the ideologically loaded Western concept of childhood innocence – the useless but also priceless child, the fragile cherub needing protection from adult society. The value of childhood innocence in this case is not measured in terms of economic payoff or genetic fitness but in terms of complementing adult values – book lovers, travelers, athletes, and devotees. According to David F. Lancy, “childhood is as much a cultural as a biological phenomenon,” and in addition to the adult’s genetic interest in the child, it is a common argument “that children require a prolonged period of dependency in order to acquire all the knowledge, skills, and strength they’ll need as successful adults” (5). Childhood, in other words, is an idea that is defined retroactively by adulthood – a nostalgic figure that “is precisely who we are not and, in fact, never were. It is the act of adults looking back. It is a ghostly, unreachable fancy” (Stockton 2009). (18)

The difficult or unwanted child, on the other hand, the changeling or devil-inspired spirit, is a fickle or inconstant person; a person or thing surreptitiously exchanged for another, more “normal” child. A child is literally and/or figuratively substituted for another – an abnormal child is left in exchange for one stolen. Early references to the changeling include Reginald Scot’s The Discoverie of Witchcraft (1584), in which the changeling is compared to elves, hags, and incubus; William Shakespeare’s A Midsummer Night’s Dream (1590), in which the changeling is the child taken, not left; and Edmund Spenser’s The Faerie Queene (1590–96).

The devil-doll emerges in horror cinema after Universal Pictures’ success with Dracula (Browning, 1931), Frankenstein (Whale, 1931), and The Bride of Frankenstein (Whale, 1935). Directing for MGM, Tod Browning’s The Devil-Doll (1936) features Lionel Barrymore as criminal at large Paul Lavond. Disguised for much of the film as elderly toymaker Madame Mandelip, Lavond seeks out his estranged daughter Lorraine, who is played by Maureen O’Sullivan. Rafaela Ottiano plays the mad scientist Malita, her white-streaked hairstyle in the fashion of The Bride (Elsa Lanchester) from The Bride of Frankenstein.

Yet the devil-doll in Browning’s film is still in its nascent form. Madame Mandelip’s monstrous toys are little more than miniaturized adults that Lavond controls through telekinesis, somnambulists that are represented through the use of trick photography, multiple exposures, and oversized sets. Released almost a decade before The Devil-Doll, The Great Gabbo (1929), an early sound film and musical drama directed by James Cruze, provides a crucial detail that will later define the devil-doll in Child’s Play –
ventriloquism and the dysfunctional relationship between puppet and puppet master. Chucky may not be a ventriloquist dummy himself, but the motif of the possessed doll and the loss of human individuality is consistent. The concept of corporal ambiguity or the disembodied subject is a vital link between *Child’s Play* and the devil-doll film.

Ventriloquism or the “vent act,” named after the puppeteer who “vents” or throws his or her voice into a traditionally wooden dummy, dates back to 1798 and Charles Brockden Brown’s novel *Weiland.* The first screen appearance of the evil ventriloquist is Lon Chaney in *The Unholy Three* (1925), remade as a sound film and again starring Chaney in 1930. Based on a story by Ben Hecht titled “The Rival Dummy” (1928), *The Great Gabbo* stars Erich von Stroheim as the ventriloquist Gabbo. Accompanied by his dummy Otto (voice by George Grandee) Gabbo is a highly esteemed performer. Yet as the film progresses Gabbo becomes increasingly dependent upon Otto as his only means of self-expression. What begins as a gimmick, Gabbo's stage act of making Otto talk and sing while Gabbo smokes, drinks, and eats, ends in Gabbo giving voice to deviant and destructive tendencies through Otto – tendencies that Gabbo would be unable to express without the aid of another self. As a result, Gabbo ruins his career and at the end of the film drives himself mad. If David Fincher were to remake his film *Fight Club* (1999) and replace Brad Pitt with a ventriloquist dummy, he might learn a thing or two from *The Great Gabbo.*


In each example the ventriloquist speaks through the dummy and/or commits a series of crimes under the supposed influence of his dummy, giving voice to repressed thoughts and feelings that the puppet master cannot express without the aid of his double. The puppet master is unable to exist as a singular identity, and turns to the child-sized puppet in order to exist as a coherent self. In this sense the puppet master relinquishes control, he abandons the social authority of adulthood and regresses into a childlike state – it is now the dummy that is the voice of the ventriloquist. One of the most renowned films to deal with this theme, a film that bridges the gap between the mad science of *The Devil-Doll* and the psychological complexities of *The Great Gabbo,* is *Dead of Night* (1945).

*Dead of Night* is an atypical genre film from the British Ealing Studios, better known for their comedies. Consisting of six tales of horror, a portmanteau narrative structure that inspires Amicus Productions’ *Dr. Terror’s House of Horrors* (Francis, 1965) and *The Twilight Zone* (1959-1964), *Dead of Night* is best known for the segment “The Ventriloquist’s Dummy.” Directed by Alberto Cavalcanti, “The Ventriloquist’s Dummy” immortalizes the devil-doll – the puppet as a vessel of evil – through the story of Maxwell Frere (Michael Redgrave), a successful ventriloquist who performs with his dummy Hugo Fitch (John McGuire). Hugo, though, begins to talk and walk on his own without Frere’s assistance. Hugo becomes a free agent, a violent and sadistic monster that drives his puppeteer mad. Victoria Nelson in *The Secret Life of Puppets* writes that:

Historically, Western puppet entertainments were always violent spectacles, as witness the standard pummelings of traditional Punch and Judy shows, which usually ended with Punch’s onstage hanging and exit in a coffin. The rough-and-tumble, however, was always puppet to puppet, not puppet to human, and this is an important distinction. In the second category, Hugo in ‘The Ventriloquist’s Dummy’ segment of
the British film *Dead of Night* (1945), an autonomous entity who wreaks havoc on the people around him, bears the distinction of being the first puppet murderer of a human in a popular film (Nelson 2001).(20)

Michael Redgrave’s renowned performance as the mentally unstable puppet master introduces a horror cinema motif that is indispensable to *Child’s Play* – the devil-doll, as Nelson points out, is a threat to humanity. The distinction between the devil-doll in *Dead of Night* and *Child’s Play* is that in the former film Hugo is meant to be inanimate or lifeless from the start. Chucky, on the other hand, subverts or exaggerates the “normal” function of the dummy; he serves as a conduit or amplifier for Charles Lee Ray’s criminal tendencies.

In other words, the devil-doll is a threat to humanity because it embodies a slippage between innocence and criminality as well as childhood and adulthood. Maxwell loses control of Hugo in *Dead of Night*. The puppet becomes the puppet master. At the beginning of “The Ventriloquist’s Dummy,” Maxwell, like The Great Gabbo, is a successful ventriloquist performing before an admiring audience. At the end of the segment Maxwell stands accused of attempted murder, is hospitalized for dissociative identity disorder, and, after destroying Hugo in his prison cell, speaks with Hugo’s high pitched voice. *Dead of Night* drives home Robin Wood’s observation “that the true subject of the horror genre is the struggle for the recognition of all that our civilization represses or oppresses, its re-emergence dramatized, as in our nightmares, as an object of horror, a matter for terror” (Wood 1986 [2003]).(21) Hugo now exists within Maxwell.

After *Dead of Night*, a series of films were made between the UK and US that are specifically concerned with the devil-doll and the ventriloquist dummy as a vessel of evil: Lindsay Shonteff’s *Devil Doll* (1964), *Dolls* (Gordon, 1987), *Puppet Master* (Schmoeller, 1989), *Dolly Dearest* (Lease, 1991) starring Rip Torn, *Demonic Toys* (Manoogian, 1991), *Revenge of the Red Baron* (Gordon, 1993), *Saw* (Wan, 2004), and *Dead Silence* (Wan, 2007). The devil-doll also appears on television, in *The Twilight Zone* episode “Living Doll” (1963), starring Telly Savalas, and a 1992 episode of *The Simpsons* (“Clown Without Pity” from “Treehouse of Horror III”). The most chilling scene in “The Ventriloquist’s Dummy,” when Maxwell speaks with Hugo’s voice, is also *Dead of Night*’s most important contribution to horror cinema – the disembodied voice that is the locus of evil and criminality.

According to Slavoj Žižek in the film *The Pervert’s Guide to Cinema* (Fiennes, 2005), “voice is not an organic part of a human body. It’s coming from somewhere in between your body” (Fiennes 2005).(22) Citing “The Ventriloquist’s Dummy” from *Dead of Night*, as well as William Friedkin’s *The Exorcist* (1973) and the possessed Regan (Linda Blair) who speaks with an adult demonic voice (Mercedes McCambridge), Žižek states “whenever we talk to another person there is always this minimum of ventriloquist affect, as if some foreign power took possession” (Fiennes 2005).(23) This, according to Žižek, is “the voice in its obscene dimensions,” the “traumatic dimension of the voice,” “which freely floats around,” and is “the ultimate object of anxiety which distorts reality” (Fiennes 2005).(24)

It is the voice in its free floating and “traumatic dimension” that is the common thread between *The Devil-Doll*, *The Great Gabbo*, and *Dead of Night*. Paul Lavond as Madame Mandelip, Gabbo, and Maxwell Frere all share one thing in common, they lose sight of the difference between themselves and their doubles – the organic body of the puppet master and the obscene voice of the puppet. As a result, they stumble upon and are overwhelmed, if not destroyed, by “the properly traumatic dimension of the human voice, the human voice not as the sublime ethereal medium for expressing the depth of human subjectivity, but the human voice as a foreign intruder” (Fiennes 2005).(25) The puppet becomes the
Recognizing Norman, of is use an and the human and "that of emotion, evil, circuit modeled survived Norman the levels. repressed "clearly warring the dummy, thoughts – according to the uncontrolled and irrational other, a primal figure that defies normality, rationality, and civilization. (nausea, a and lies" (Wells 2000). (29) Wells writes that “central to the horror genre’s identity is the configuration of the ‘monster,’” in particular “the monstrous element in the horror text” that “is usually an interrogation of the amorphous nature of evil, or an address of the limits of the human condition; physically, emotionally and psychologically” (Wells 2000). (27) Wells states “the prevailing archetype of the monster is the Devil, the symbolic embodiment of evil that is a constituent element in monist religions and which appears in various forms in myths across the globe” (Wells 2000). (28)

The conflict between good and evil, according to Wells, is “played out in the horror text,” “a conceptual umbrella for struggles between law and order, the sacred and the profane, barbarism and civility, truth and lies” (Wells 2000). (30) These binary oppositions, Wells points out, “are addressed through one of the dominant motifs of the horror text: the doppelgänger” (Wells 2000). (30) Wells defines the doppelgänger, or double, as that which humankind confronts, a “nemesis either through the opposition of an individual and a monster or by the exposure of the two competing sides of an individual – normally, one rational and civilised, the other uncontrolled and irrational, often more primal and atavistic” (Wells 2000). (31) This is a point that applies to Child’s Play. The devil-doll is not so much a monster that invokes feelings of horror (nausea, repulsion, disgust). The devil-doll as doppelgänger is an atavistic figure, horrifying because it is the uncontrolled and irrational other, a primal figure that defies normality, rationality, and civilization.

According to Neil Norman, one suspects “that ventriloquists use dummies to express their darkest thoughts – to vent their wrath and exercise their own psychological demons” (Norman 2005). (32) The dummy, according to Norman, “an approximately life-sized wooden doll that is invested with life through the medium of the ventriloquist,” is “a totemic miniature human” that gives voice to or exposes the warring sides of the ventriloquist (Norman 2005). (33) It is a child-like figure, or doppelgänger, that is “clearly lifeless” yet “nonetheless speaks and exudes a personality” that is the voice of adulthood’s repressed desires (Norman 2005). (34) Norman states that the ventriloquist’s dummy is horrifying on two levels. First, the body of the dummy, its “mad, swiveling, psychotic eyes beneath arched eyebrows and that crude parody of a mouth (with painted teeth) that opens and shuts with a click,” as well as the “foppily articulated limbs that lend them the aspect of death” (Norman 2005). (35) Second, the voice of the dummy, the “high-pitched squawk that . . . is one of the least pleasant sounds made by a human being” (Norman 2005). (36)

Norman writes that America's most celebrated puppeteer or “vent” is Edgar Bergen (1903-1978). “Having survived the death of vaudeville” in the early 1930s, Bergen and his chief dummy Charlie McCarthy, modeled after an Irish newsboy and then remodeled after a dapper socialite, tour the Chicago supper club circuit and eventually perform on radio with Mae West, W.C. Fields, and Orson Welles (Norman...
Candice Bergen’s sibling rival is her “older brother,” the changeling Charlie McCarthy. Dressed in a top hat, cape, and monocle, McCarthy is a highly precocious child – a debonair, girl-crazy child-about-town. Edgar Bergen exploits McCarthy’s childhood identity, favoring McCarthy’s representation of childhood over his daughter Candice, in particular during their radio dialogues. Speaking through McCarthy, venting not only through the wooden dummy but also the technological medium of radio, Bergen is able to include lewd material and double entendre into his act, circumventing the otherwise censorious radio broadcast standards of the time. The dummy/child is capable of a degree of precocity that the ventriloquist/adult is not – he is a figure that is semi-human in the eyes of his puppeteer/father.

Taking into consideration that Candice Bergen’s autobiography is a personal account of her life and not a verifiable document, her testimonial is highly resonant with Wells’ understanding of the horror genre and the imbrication of monstrosity, the nature of evil and the Devil, and the atavistic tendencies of the doppelgänger – a primitive form of humanity or “throwback to an earlier evolutionary stage in which humans are more savage, animalistic, and criminalistic than today” (Gibson and Rafter 402). Coupled with Norman’s analysis of the dysfunctional relationship between puppet and puppet master, the story of Edgar Bergen, Candice Bergen, and Charlie McCarthy illuminates the ventriloquist’s dummy as a “totemic miniature human,” a “child-like figure” that is made strange or queer by the adult self’s “darkest thoughts” and “psychological demons.”

The relationship between the devil-doll, “the properly traumatic dimension of the human voice,” and horror cinema has everything to do with the desire on the part of adulthood to channel or ventriloquize its primal and atavistic tendencies through the figure of childhood – an existential anxiety that is reminiscent of the life-and-death struggle of the Hegelian Master-Slave dialectic. G.W.F. Hegel’s reading of lordship and bondage (herrschaft und knechtschaft) is that the formation of identity is a dynamic and intersubjective relationship. In terms of the devil-doll, the puppet (slave) that is dependent upon the puppet master is revelatory of the master’s lack of selfhood. The vent act is predicated upon the illusion of the puppet/other as an independent self that overshadows its master.

In horror cinema the ventriloquist’s most compelling vent act is also the obliteration of the puppet master as a coherent identity. The representation of the devil-doll in Child’s Play flows from the relationship between the puppet and puppet master as a ventriloquized codependence – the confusion of adulthood and childhood – a theme that reaches back to The Great Gabbo and Dead of Night. In each film it is unclear who is in control of whom, the ventriloquist/adult or dummy/child, and whether the devil-doll is acting out of innocent curiosity or criminal lack of self-control. The difference is that Chucky is not a ventriloquist dummy; he is a conventional doll that can speak with his human voice. He is also a doll that is possessed by a dead human, whereas more conventionally, the human is “possessed” by a persona they have created in order to bring the doll to life.

In psychoanalytic terms, the representation of the devil-doll in horror cinema stands for the violent breakdown in the early process of the child’s ego construction. This traumatic event is frequently returned to in horror when the child enters into adulthood via puberty. In Child’s Play Charles Lee Ray reverses the Freudian “ghost in the nursery” scenario. Rather than through deferred effect, or Nachträglichkeit, in which a trauma encountered in childhood is reactivated or belatedly understood later
in life, Ray dismantles the romanticized desire to relive one’s childhood, to return to a supposedly more innocent time, in order to criminalize the innocent child. Ray transforms himself into Chucky and possesses the ability to “throw his voice,” to disturb the boundaries of self and other and to become an autonomous partial object. For Žižek “the lesson is clear. The only way for me to get rid of this autonomous partial object is to become this object” (Fiennes 2006).(41)

The Devil-Doll in Child’s Play
The devil-doll in Child’s Play is the voice of Charles Lee Ray – adulthood’s perverse and disembodied return to childhood. The signature of the Child’s Play franchise is the versatility of actor Brad Dourif’s voice that speaks from within the Good Guy doll Chucky. A frequent player in horror cinema, Dourif is referred to as “the premier twitchy psycho of his generation” (Newman 1997).(42) Nominated for an Academy Award for his performance in One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest (Forman, 1976), Dourif has also appeared in The Eyes of Laura Mars (Kershner, 1978), Blue Velvet (Lynch, 1986), Exorcist III (Blatty, 1990), Trauma (Argento, 1993), and Rob Zombie’s remake of the Halloween series (2007, 2009).

The Good Guy as a toy in Child’s Play is the hit of the holiday season due to its ability to talk to its owner in the voice of a prepubescent boy, to simulate the recognition of another as its friend and companion. The hinge between Chucky as a lovable and harmless toy and a serial killer, pre- and post-possession, is Dourif’s voice, the shift in pitch from preadolescent to adult, innocent and playful to criminal and uncouth. As with Dead of Night, the horror of Child’s Play is the disjuncture of body and voice – the pivotal moment in which Ray’s criminal identity is audibly, as well as visibly, exposed.

Andy’s failure to convince adults that Chucky is a voodoo-practicing serial killer, to bridge the communicative gap between childhood and adulthood, is ineffective on multiple levels. Andy is unable to warn his mother Karen Barclay that she is in danger or, for that matter, console her when her close friend and co-worker Maggie Peterson (Dinah Manoff) is murdered by Chucky. While babysitting Andy as a favor to Karen, Maggie is thrown from the Barclay’s fourth-story kitchen window – punishment for not allowing Chucky to watch the nine-o’clock news and a story relating to Eddie Caputo. Andy is not only unable to stop Chucky from killing; he becomes an accomplice to Chucky’s criminal behavior – a “puppeteer” who is manipulated by his devil-doll. It is Andy who helps Chucky to locate Eddie Caputo, carrying Chucky from his middle-class Chicago home to Caputo’s Southside flophouse. Furthermore, Andy is the only person in the apartment at the time of Maggie’s murder, making him a suspect in Officer Norris’ investigation.

Building on the cinematic tradition of the devil-doll, Ray accomplishes what his ventriloquist predecessors cannot – he is able to fully realize, to become what Žižek identifies as “the voice in its obscene dimensions,” “the human voice as a foreign intruder” (Fiennes 2006).(43) Ray neither depends on the gimmicks of Gabbo nor succumbs to the fate of Maxwell Frere, confined to his hospital bed and possessed by the voice of his dummy Hugo. Ray’s possession of a child’s toy is a liberating experience and a license to kill – an intentional rather than pathological regression into childhood. It is Chucky, not Andy, who properly embodies the childhood delinquent, “the boy who cried wolf theme,” exploiting innocence as a disguise and alibi for criminality.(44)

Ray’s reincarnation as Chucky can also be read as a critique of consumer culture. The reproducibility of the ventriloquist’s dummy, as a wooden object or voice transmitted over radio, is amplified or mass manufactured in Child’s Play – an unlimited supply of Good Guy devil-dolls for every American household. As Raymond Williams points out, “in almost all its early English uses,” up to the

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mid-eighteenth century, “consume had an unfavorable sense; it meant to destroy, to use up, to waste, to exhaust” (Williams 1976). In *Child’s Play*, consumer culture is the lightening bolt that crashes through the toy store skylight, summoned by Charles Lee Ray’s voodoo incantation.

The difference between *customer* and *consumer*, between the “degree of regular and continuing relationship to a supplier” and “the more abstract figure in a more abstract market,” is illustrated when Ray enters the toy store at the opening of *Child’s Play* (Williams 1976). Ray at this point in the film is in search of a second life, a carrier that will allow him to return to an organic body. The connotation is that the toy store is open after hours and the clientele are desperate for the season’s top selling product, a child-sized toy that is not only the object of consumer envy but also a literal lifesaver, a subject that will disturb the congruity of adulthood and childhood. Ray’s “purchasing power,” in its irregularity and discontinuity, is a critique of late twentieth century American consumer culture. The shift from dying body to doll body underscores the destructive potential of consumer choice and “voodoo economics.”

By the early 1980s the United States economy is in the midst of a deep recession, experiencing the worst unemployment rates since the Great Depression. The subsequent economic policies promoted by then U.S. President Ronald Reagan, known as “Reaganomics,” include four pillars: reduce government spending; reduce income and capital gains marginal tax rates; reduce government regulation; and control the money supply to reduce inflation. While running against Reagan for the Presidential nomination in 1980, George H.W. Bush derides Reaganomics as “voodoo economics,” expressing skepticism that supply-side reforms like ending regulation will be enough to rejuvenate the economy.

Lauren Berlant also critiques the right-wing economic as well as cultural agendas of the Reagan revolution. According to Berlant, the triumph of the Reaganite view is that “the intimacy of citizenship is something scarce and sacred, private and proper, and only for members of families” (Berlant 1997). Berlant writes that “the intimate public sphere” and the rise of the Reaganite right is “a familial politics of the national future,” a movement that “came to define the urgencies of the present”:

Now everywhere in the United States intimate things flash in people’s faces: pornography, abortion, sexuality, and reproduction; marriage, personal morality, and family values. These issues do not arise as private concerns: they are key debates about what ‘America’ stands for, and are deemed vital to defining how citizens should act. In the process of collapsing the political and the personal into a world of public intimacy, a nation made for adult citizens has been replaced by one imagined for fetuses and children (Berlant 1997).

Rather than a common public culture, a public sphere in which ordinary citizens hold sway over the state, Berlant argues that the Reaganite view and conservative ideology “has convinced a citizenry that the core context of politics should be the sphere of private life. In so doing, it develops a different story about what has happened to citizenship in both the law and daily life during the last few decades. The privatization of citizenship has involved manipulating an intricate set of relations between economic, racial, and sexual processes” (Berlant 1997).

The consequence of the Reaganite cultural revolution, according to Berlant, “involves the way intimacy rhetoric has been employed to manage the economic crisis that separates the wealthy few from everyone else in the contemporary United States. By defining the United States as a place where normal intimacy is considered the foundation of the citizen’s happiness, the right has attempted to control the ways questions of economic survival are seen as matters of citizenship” (Berlant 1997).
Applying Berlant to Child's Play, upward mobility and the American Dream for Ray is a matter of inserting himself within the economic order of late twentieth century consumer culture. His survival depends upon his ability to pose as a consumable object – to translate criminality into a child’s toy. Ray accomplishes this act of translation through the intimate public sphere and family values, in particular Karen’s back alley purchase of Chucky. By extension, Karen’s black market dealings introduce Chucky into the Barclay Household, a lesson to single motherhood in the rules of proper versus non-legal consumption.(52)

Failing to deliver on her promise to buy Andy a Good Guy for his birthday, Karen is at work in the jewelry department of the local mall. Informed by her friend Maggie Peterson that a peddler (Juan Ramirez) in the back alley is willing to sell a Good Guy for a steal at $100, criminality enters through the back door of consumer culture and the single parent household. The peddler is a monstrous figure – his soiled cap, yellowed scarf, tattered overcoat, graying fingerless gloves, and foul language imply both disgust and threat. After completing his transaction the peddler sneers, “may it bring you and your kid a lot of joy.” Maggie retorts, “how do we know the damn thing isn’t stolen?” to which the peddler, pulling back his overcoat and thrusting out his crotch, replies “steal this!”

The peddler’s back alley sale of the devil-doll operates beyond the proscribed consumer venue of the department store. Karen, with Maggie’s assistance, purchases a bootleg Good Guy for Andy’s birthday, the very same doll that Ray has possessed. The Lakeshore Strangler has chosen wisely. A child-sized doll is the last place the police will think to look. And in order to return to a human body (Andy being the first human that Ray reveals his true identity to) Chucky must only kill a select number of victims. Karen is working the late shift and, while babysitting Andy, Maggie is murdered by Chucky. Investigating the crime scene Office Norris shows Karen a child’s footprint in the Barclay kitchen. He asks Andy what shoes he is wearing and Andy replies, “Good Guys PJ Sneakers.” Morris asks Andy if he can looks at his soles, and the camera shows images of a gun, hammer, baseball bat, cowboy hat, and fireman’s hat – a match with the footprint on the kitchen counter. A loyal consumer of the Good Guy brand and dressed identically to Chucky, Andy is a murder suspect.

According to Daniel Thomas Cook, “the cultural view of markets... underscores the moral basis of value and valuation. In this view, economic exchange invariably and inevitably encodes precepts of good and bad, of right and wrong, thereby sanctioning certain kinds of activities over others” (Cook 7).(53) In terms of consumer culture and the value of childhood, Cook argues that there is a conflict between, “on the one hand, the kind of value embodied in the singular, sentimental ‘nature’ of children and, on the other, that which is enforced by the equalizing, rational aspects of market calculation. Their intermingling is the actual historical process producing a moral tension in the social valuation of children” (Cook 8).

Charles Lee Ray’s reappraisal of childhood is to translate play, the hallmark of childhood innocence, into a criminal activity. Yet what makes this translation horrifying is not that Ray subverts childhood play as a virtuous activity. On the contrary, he exaggerates the child’s tendency to perform unspeakable acts through the avatar of the doll, a counterhegemonic practice of childhood, play, and the politics of dollhood. Miriam Formanek-Brunell writes about the attitudes regarding dolls, play, and childhood during the Gilded Age.(54) By the mid-1860s “children’s magazines, books, poems, songs, and stereographs revealed that girls were encouraged by adults to develop strong emotional bonds with their numerous dolls” (Formanek-Brunell 363). The post-Civil War department store, beginning in 1865 and at an accelerated rate in 1875, stocked “featured dolls and other toys in addition to dry goods and home furnishings” (Formanek-Brunell 367). R.H. Macy, Jordan Marsh, and Marshall Field advertised the doll...
as an object of feminine socialization or rehearsal for adult womanhood – tea parties, outfits for dolls, and sewing skills.

But, according to Formanek-Brunell, little girls and boys also resist proscribed notions of childhood play with dolls. They are not only interested in tea parties, miniaturized funerals (a death in the family is acted out through play with dolls) and the fictional literature of “doll culture” advocating “the portrayal of love between a doll and a girl, which often straddled the boundaries between maternal love and romantic love” (Formanek-Brunell 371). In the case of boys often the “authoritative public roles such as doctor, preacher, and undertaker to sick, dying, and dead dolls” are assumed (Formanek-Brunell 374). Children also express anger and aggression toward dolls rather than love and affection – breaking a doll because it is crying, disciplining a “doll by making it eat dirt, stones, and coal” in addition to doll funerals that celebrate, rather than mourn, death (Formanek-Brunell 374-375).

The devil-doll Chucky is a monster of late capitalism and patriarchy, ruthlessly exploiting the single parent household. Chucky also exposes one of Child’s Play’s underlying narrative anxieties, the absence of Karen’s husband and Andy’s father. In terms of patriarchy, gender, and the nuclear family Chucky’s connection to Andy is both a confession and a calculated manipulation. When Karen asks her son why he and Chucky are so close, why Andy talks to Chucky as if he is a living-breathing friend, Andy replies that Chucky’s “real name is Charles Lee Ray and he’s been sent down from heaven by Daddy to play with me.”

The representation of Andy’s relationship with Chucky is at first a benign expression of anger and grief at the loss of Andy’s father. Yet Andy soon discovers that Chucky is a monstrous patriarch who translates the “rational aspects of market calculation” into a commodified weapon of horrific destruction. The value of Chucky as a devil-doll is “determined by its ability to subvert convention, mock materialism, and undermine restrictions” posed by, for example, patriarchal authority (Formanek-Brunell 375). A consumable surrogate father to Andy, the subject of the devil-doll in Child’s Play is a question of vitality and criminality, the life force within Chucky and the devil-doll’s place within the hierarchy of the Barclay Family.

**Conclusion**

*Child’s Play* belongs within the pantheon of horror cinema beside Cavalcanti’s “The Ventriloquist’s Dummy” and James Whale’s *Frankenstein*. In *Frankenstein*, the lightening bolt is representative of a life force or soul that is super-added. According to Richard Holmes, the inspiration for Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818) is due in part to The Vitalism Debate between the years 1816 and 1820. The materialist, rather than metaphysical, view of human life during these debates denied the existence of a soul and looked, instead, to biology, specifically craniology and racial typology.(55) Robert Spadoni writes that Whale’s *Frankenstein* is representative of the shift in cinematic perception of space, sound, rhythms, bodies, acting gestures, and spoken language. The deeply compromised nature of the monster’s living state, Spadoni argues, as well as the creative potential of sound in film, is indicated by the audibility of electricity.(56) Criminality, the “deeply compromised nature” that exists between metaphysics (a life force or soul) and materialism (a criminal brain), between Shelley and Whale’s vision of *Frankenstein*, is indispensable to *Child’s Play*, it is the lightening rod that seizes the lightening bolt of consumer culture.

Victoria Nelson writes that the possessed doll in Child’s Play is physically as well as socially autonomous, a devil-doll in the tradition of “The Ventriloquist’s Dummy.” She points out that Chucky, like Hugo, is “an
inanimate object invested with the aura of childhood innocence that is suddenly infused with (always) demonic energy – the upsurge of the supernatural grotesque from the least anticipated source” (Nelson 2001).(57) According to Nelson, the serial killer Charles Lee Ray represents the “American mass culture’s coded icon of unrepentant evil, the secular stand-in for the Devil” (Nelson 2001).(58) Furthermore, Chucky expands on the story of Frankenstein by disposing of his human master. “Forget Dr. Frankenstein,” Nelson writes, the killer puppet in Child’s Play repudiates its “now-superfluous human agents, acquiring supernatural powers along with... freedom”; the roles of master and slave are reversed by “the newly independent and increasingly omnipotent simulacra” (Nelson 2001).(59)

A Frankenstein in the age of late capitalism, Chucky subverts the credo of consumer production and branding – toys to be desired are in fact toys that frame their owners for murder. Hiding in plain sight as a toy that no one would think to interrogate, Chucky the devil-doll is, metaphorically speaking, both puppet and puppeteer. Child’s Play’s contribution to, and by extension the proper place of Child’s Play within the pantheon of, the modern horror film is that the devil-doll can kill as effectively as celebrity slashers. As David Hajdu points out, the capacity for selfless love is the ability to put away childish things, “to grow up and pack up our toys” (Hajdu 2010).(60) Charles Lee Ray’s possession of and transformation into Chucky is representative of adulthood’s refusal to pack up its toys. Chucky literally and figuratively exploits the Good Guy as the object of Andy’s selfless love in order to corrupt and destroy the Barclay Family.

I would like to thank Bernice Murphy and Elizabeth McCarthy for their helpful suggestions and revisions, especially regarding the distinction between the evil doll as a psychological projection versus an object that is desired or possessed.
1. In the United States the late-20th century moral panic surrounding “satanic ritual abuse” (SRA) or “satanic panic” looms over Child’s Play and the crypto-vooodoo dark arts that are Ray’s criminal expertise.
3. According to Brigid Cherry, “Slashers are films portraying groups of teenagers menaced by a stalker, set in domestic and suburban spaces frequented by young people, the only survivor a female who (in the early cycles) has not participated in underage sex.” Cherry, B. (2009), Horror, New York: Routledge, p. 6. The Child’s Play franchise consists of four installments between 1990 and 2004, following Holland’s 1988 film, with the promise of a remake in 2014.
13. Joan Hawkins adds the mail-order catalog and video market listings in horror fanzines, for example Outrê, Fangoria, and Cinefantastique, to Carroll’s art-horror list. Hawkins writes that art-horror, as it is advertised and marketed in horror fanzines, challenges “the binary opposition of prestige cinema (European art and avant-grade/experimental films) and popular culture,” highlighting “an aspect of art cinema generally overlooked or repressed in cultural analysis; namely, the degree to which high culture trades on the same images, tropes, and themes that characterize low culture.” Hawkins, J. (2000), Cutting Edge: Art-Horror and the Horrific Avant-Garde, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, p. 3.


15. Carroll’s ‘paradoxes of the heart’ are the paradox of fiction, the question of how people can be moved or horrified by what they know does not exist, and the paradox of horror, the question of how people can be attracted to what is repulsive in terms of the imagery of horror cinema. Carroll, N. (1990), p. 160.


19. I greatly appreciate Bernice Murphy’s comment that in Weiland Carwin is a bilouquist, not a ventriloquist. The difference being that while Carwin throws his voice, he doesn’t do so through the medium of a doll.


In The Exorcist, Regan initially refers to the demonic being that will possess her as “Captain Howdy.” Regarding the voice of the adult that possesses or speaks through the body of the child, I thank Bernice Murphy for also pointing out that Regan’s father’s name, coincidentally, is Howard.


30. Wells writes that:

Psychoanalyst Otto Rank wrote of ‘Der Doppelgänger’ in 1914, suggesting that the double was essentially the way in which the soul or ego sought to preserve itself, ensuring against destruction by replicating itself. Bound up with a narcissistic self-love which is self-protecting and strongly predicated to the denial of death, this act of ‘doubling’ can work in reverse. Once the double is cleaved or threatened, it heightens the degree by which mortality and the signs of death are enhanced. Wells, P. (2000), pp. 8-9.


Norman writes that, according to Candice Bergen, ‘Charlie's room in’ the Bergen’s ‘Beverly Hills home,’ included a ‘bed, wardrobe filled with monogrammed clothes, desk, West Point cadet's hat, feathered Indian headdress and pin-up of Dorothy Lamour. Most creepy of all,’ Bergen ‘recollects sitting on her father's knee being encouraged to converse with the wooden brother perched opposite her.’ Norman, N. (2005).
40. Examples of ‘monstrous puberty’ in the modern horror film include The Exorcist (Friedkin, 1973), Carrie (De Palma, 1976), Martin (Romero, 1977), and Halloween (Carpenter, 1978).
44. I greatly appreciate Bernice Murphy’s comment that in the UK, Child's Play 3 (1991) became a lightning rod for anxieties about murderous juveniles when it was wrongly connected to a notorious crime committed by 10-year-old boys.
45. Williams, R. (1976), Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society, New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 78-79.
52. Thanks to Professor Jacqueline Reich for her insight regarding Karen Barclay's black market experience in Child's Play as a teachable moment in consumer culture.
The Gilded Age refers to a period of substantial growth in population in the United States, in addition to extravagant displays of wealth and excess of America's upper class during the post-Civil War and post-Reconstruction era in the late-19th century (1865-1901). The term ‘Gilded Age’ was coined by Mark Twain and Charles Dudley Warner in their 1873 book, The Gilded Age: A Tale of Today.
“Headcheese and a Side of Benjamin:”
Aura and The Texas Chain Saw Massacre (1974)’s Working-Class Gaze

Jerry D. Metz

When The Texas Chain Saw Massacre appeared in 1974, Variety’s review enthused “director Tobe Hooper’s pic is well-made for an exploiter of its type, and box office prospects are sanguine for the screamer trade;”(1) the film disappeared from national top-50 charts within two months. Yet TCSM endures as a bold statement about the value of authenticity and subjectivity that predicted much of the current scholarly debate about aura and the meaning of images in postmodernity;(2) the film literally embodies the conflict between auratic uniqueness and mass-mediated representation. But TCSM’s achievements are not just formal. Indeed, to abandon the film to purely aesthetic analysis is to strip it of its most defining characteristic: its working-class voice. The film also anticipates a current scholarly concern to reconcile history, memory, and aura with modern technologies and social change.

Lutz Koepnick notes that Walter Benjamin’s “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” needs updating, and aura should be reevaluated.(3) Because the elements of aura—authenticity, unique presence in time and space, tradition, that which absorbs the viewer and returns the gaze—have not withered but seem to pervade the content of mass communication (and what we desire from it) in surprising ways, it is vital to reconsider the nature and place of aura in contemporary terms. Against those theorists who assign subversive meanings to the fracturing of identity and the “roamings of cultural poachers,” Koepnick proposes that aura may have social value: the endless de- and re-contextualization of identities in decentered, virtually imagined communities proves not to automatically emancipate anyone, and may augment the dangers of detachment and malaise. The contemporary desire for auratic experience Koepnick highlights may express the hope to “restore meaningful spaces to the exploded topographies of postmodern culture, secure forms of individual agency… and thus find remedies for the loss of memory in our fantastically unbound culture of channel surfers.”(4)

TCSM proposes that memory, an underrated and undertheorized dimension of auratic authenticity, helps keep subject and object aligned in human frames of signification—even if the relation between them is always shifting and contested. When he rejects being photographed, Barthes asserts, “The ‘private life’ is nothing but that zone of space, of time, where I am not an image, an object. It is my political right to be a subject which I must protect”(5)—and by extension, so must all of us.(6) Aura, considered as individual historical testimony, is a space carved out by lived experience that is increasingly contingent on negotiating subject / object perspectives.(7) Aura restates the validity of history and memory, of the personal act in a world informed by images. Individually or collectively, experience and memory allow people to proclaim their unique humanity against consumer capitalism and the object world. Power relations in the gaze, analyzed by feminist theorists in terms of patriarchal dominance, must therefore also be examined in class and intercultural terms. After 1973, when “The living-room war was gone. It was as if TV canceled the war, and then the president recalled the actors,”(8) the working class bore the brunt of the conflict’s real effects and traumatic memories. In a lax job market, the image economy was booming—“1974 looms as 28-year peak for box office,” trumpeted Variety in December of that year (9)—but particularly for the working class and returning Vietnam veterans, it was an image world reflecting the omissions and incoherences of a larger social crisis of assimilation.
Emerging in this turbulent moment, TCSM evinces ambiguity over memory, aura, and the possibility of a Barthesian claim to subjective integrity, all within period contours of reference. Initially entitled Headcheese, the film was largely a working-class project, made by student actors, drop-outs, and small-time Texas actors, several of whom had served in Vietnam. It was at root a working-class confrontation with the crisis of assimilation in the new representational languages of modernity. A cultural product very much of its time, it was both “shadow and act” in the early 1970s, responding to social rupture and ambivalent technological developments while opening new cinematic space for the expansion of their representation in the horror genre.

In TCSM’s scopic regime, the gaze problematizes gender while implicating class difference. Through its staging of middle-class hippie passers-by who are (in the case of Pam and Sally) held still and forced to see a working-class family—to see inside their home, piled with the macabre visual tropes of Vietnam’s physical ravages—TCSM lets boys root for the final girl while it accuses mainstream media of negligence in the task of exposing Vietnam’s blue-collar impact. The positioning of the gaze sometimes shifts to that of the family; superficially suited to Benjamin’s preference for ungrounded observation and the stripping of aura, this tug-of-war reflects the contentious desire of working-class people both to be seen as they really are, and to return the gaze of the middle-class. The film’s postmodern awareness of its own contribution of images to an image-bound world leads it to bypass the faux reality of logical closure. TCSM evokes the giddy days of photography’s invention, when Oliver Wendell Holmes declared in 1859: “Form is henceforth divorced from matter… Matter in large masses must always be fixed and dear. Form is cheap and transportable. Men will hunt all curious, beautiful, grand objects, as they hunt the cattle in South America, for their skins, and leave the carcasses as of little worth.”(10) The nervous tension between skins and carcasses, and the taboo over their human separation, is central to TCSM’s power—but not only in the literal sense, where most criticism resides.

It may be noted how the film’s proletariat takes hideous revenge on teenagers representing the privileged social category of hippies—a social group subsidized, we are led to surmise in the case of Sally and Franklin, through socioeconomic relations linking them back to Leatherface.(11) Their grandfather sold his cattle to the very slaughterhouse where members of Leatherface’s family have been rendered obsolete; their family is implicated in Leatherface’s creation through their deceased grandfather. Thus, in this view of the film as a dark Marxist fairy tale, the young scions of leisure get the justice they deserve at the hands of workers whom the system has irrevocably degraded.

In his 1974 review, Roger Ebert gave the film two stars, noting that it is an “unnecessary movie… as violent and gruesome and blood-soaked as the title promises,” yet still belongs in a “select company (with Night of the Living Dead and Last House on the Left) of films that are really a lot better than the genre requires.”(12) Few observers were as positive in their response to Chain Saw as Stephen King, who in his 1981 survey of the horror genre claimed that it is one of those rare horror movies that “achieve the level of art simply because it is looking for something beyond art, something that predates art… I would happily testify to its redeeming social merit in any court in the country.”(13) A craftsman in the horror field, King articulates a perception of Chain Saw as “art” that likely refers to its evocative atmosphere and avoidance of much visible gore. King doesn’t explain what he means by “social merit,” but anyone familiar with King’s own work might imagine he felt a kinship with the film’s working-class texture and its service to the working-class gaze.

According to King’s general survey of the genre’s development, TCSM qualifies as one of the first inherently modern horror films for another reason: Sally’s brother Franklin (a “good guy” and one of the main characters) is a physically unappealing, heavyset kid in a wheelchair. Such portrayals of humanity
on the protagonist’s side were absent in 1950s- and 1960s-era horror films. Many critics dismiss Franklin as a whining bore, or worse. Wood calls him “as grotesque, and almost as psychotic, as his nemesis Leatherface.”(14) Journalist John Bloom goes further: “[Franklin’s] anger at everyone else for being ambulatory makes him one of the most despicable handicapped people in film history. He’s the one only one who almost seems to deserve his death.”(15)

Such vehement reactions are only partially explicable through the interpretation of Franklin’s disability as a filmic technique of “othering” him away from “normal” humanity and into partial kinship with the film’s monsters. Another possibility is that such comments are elicited from critics by the depiction in 1974 of an uptight young man in a wheelchair alongside a group of youths that is marked as more “groovy” and countercultural in appearance. As a purely visual presence, as well as an unaccompanied male tagging along with two couples, Franklin’s character seems literally not to belong there. Although the reasons for his disability are never broached, Franklin’s power to invoke the returning Vietnam veteran as uninvited guest is hard to escape. Prior to the 1973 cease-fire in Vietnam, images of death and maiming on all sides in South Asia were broadcast nightly into family homes; by the time the film was released, veterans were returning stateside en masse with all manner of scars, amputations, disabilities, prosthetic limbs, and wheel chairs—indelible evidence of participation in an unpopular war. In that sense, King’s straightforward view about related period transformations in the representation of physicality in horror is helpful in locating aspects of TCSM’s visual signature, as well as some of its criticism, in history.

Prior to TCSM, Tobe Hooper’s two largest projects had both focused on the war. In the mid-sixties, he went on tour with folk-singers Peter, Paul and Mary as the principal shooter and director of a documentary featuring the group’s post-concert rap sessions with fans about the war.(16) In 1970, he finished the low-budget Eggshells, about returning Vietnam veterans as seen from the perspective of a commune. “The subculture was beginning to split apart and go back out into the mainstream, even though they didn’t know it,” Hooper explained (most copies of the film, which starred Chain Saw screenwriter Kim Henkel, were later destroyed).(17) Lacking money for actors and desiring the spontaneous, verité quality of European art films he admired, Hooper fleshed out a rudimentary script with footage of scenes (often improvised or shot unannounced) in an Austin commune. Billed as An American Freak Illumination, a be-in experience, the film bombed; Hooper and Henkel began to brainstorm the roots of TCSM.

While I don’t wish to repeat the details of its production, financing and distribution that are available elsewhere,(18) and Hooper himself had a middle-class upbringing,(19) I will emphasize that TCSM’s cast were all local working-class people. Some, like Marilyn Burns (Sally), Teri McMinn (Pam), and Ed Neal (the Hitchhiker), were students. Neal’s biggest acting gig before Chain Saw was a two-year stint in the mid-sixties, doing Shakespeare with Sandy Duncan on a statewide tour of Methodist colleges, churches, and schools.(20) Some, such as Gunnar Hansen (Leatherface), worked odd jobs, including bartending, teaching, and carpentry, to support an interest in acting. John Dugan (Grandfather) was working in children’s theater, making $75 a week, when family connections got him into TCSM (his sister, a schoolteacher, was the wife of Kim Henkel).(21) Jim Siedow (the Cook, a.k.a. the Old Man) was a Houston community actor whom Hooper knew from an earlier project; he was hired because the set mandated one union actor on board, and accepted $200 cash, instead of future percentages, for his participation. Both Ed Neal and Paul Partain (Franklin) served in Vietnam before enlisting in drama school at the University of Texas; Siedow, who died in 2003, was a World War II veteran.

None of the principal actors went on to any notable success, and no one but Hooper seems to have made any significant money on the film. Marilyn Burns had a few subsequent film roles, including the part of Manson family member Linda Kasabian in the made-for-TV fictive-reality composite Helter Skelter.
Dugan and Hansen soon quit acting altogether, returning to blue-collar jobs; Dugan said in A Family Portrait (22) “I feel sad I didn’t make any money.” After years of small roles, Partain worked as regional sales manager for Zenith before making forays at a return to show business (he passed away in early 2005). Both Siedow and Neal became notorious for haunting rural drive-ins around Austin where TCSM was screened, scaring audience members by peering into their car windows. Neal has found work doing voiceovers, buying and selling memorabilia, and appearing at horror conventions. In A Family Portrait, Gunnar Hansen tells of how he once tried to show off his onscreen performance as Leatherface to win over a date at a screening; the attempt failed. “That’s when I knew that I wasn’t gonna capitalize on this movie,” he laughed. He and Dugan are grateful for their involvement in the film, but a little weary with it all: “I get people talking to me in bars [about it], calling me up at night making chain Saw noises… People think that once you get fame, other things you do are not important in your life.”

The profile of these people is significant for several reasons. First, Hooper and Henkel provided only a barebones script to the cast, allowing them to improvise to develop their characters. Cast members have suggested that during filming, they were unaware of any guiding notion or vision for the film’s meaning that Hooper and Henkel might have had. Siedow reminisced about that freedom in A Family Portrait: “It was a lot of fun to run around like that, to just let yourself go.” The footage that makes up the film can in part be understood as the emergent result of a collective production among people sharing general as well as local class experiences and perspectives.(23) Ed Neal said that the film’s popularity is deserved because it was a genuine group effort, something that would be impossible in a Hollywood production: “Tobe was so interested in the technical side of it that he didn’t work with us very much… TCSM in my opinion moved away from the ‘so bad it’s good’ into the ‘so real, it’s too real.’”(24)

Second, although George Lipsitz has shown that a well-defined working class identity was largely shut out of post-war Hollywood cinema representations (except in film noir, and in some limited tropes and allusions),(25) TCSM suggests that an innately blue-collar project developed far outside the mainstream can ultimately reach Hollywood levels of popularity.

Third, recognition the film’s working-class foundation grounds it in the history of independent American filmmaking in the early 1970s, not just the history of horror films. If the class anonymity pervading its analysis is a gesture by critics to level the aesthetic playing field across scales of production, it is not clear that it really works in practice—and it is not too far from the sort of misrepresentation and distortion of the working class that TCSM was responding to in 1974. For instance, Sharrett’s analysis of how the film depicts the death of pioneer mythology;(26) Dika’s recycling of Sharrett to show how the film brings us to the logical end of the great westerns, the slaughterhouse;(27) Newman’s discussion of its new-urban-youth, rotten-Southern-rural dynamic;(28) these and many derivative interpretations seem to posit Hooper’s choice of setting the film in Texas as a purely creative, theoretically-informed one. But Hooper was stuck in Texas with no way out. The working-class texture of the film gets effaced, smoothed over, in this theoretical discourse—particularly so when the film is repeatedly compared on a purely aesthetic level with Psycho. Even granting the difficulty Hitchcock encountered producing that film, his popular appeal, elite status as an auteur, and ability to negotiate with studios and stars makes his development of Psycho different in fundamental ways from Hooper and TCSM.

That the working-class attire of the family seems to match the blue-jeans look of the kids has been criticized as confusing, bad directing. Yet while it echoes the recent turn in horror to exploring humanity’s monstrous potential, it topically asserts the difficulty in relying anymore on once sharp establishment / countercultural visual codings (a theme also explored in Wes Craven’s 1972 Last House on the Left), recalling Hooper’s ambiguous visual appearance as both hippie and “the Man” when he
filmed anti-war meetings. And it hints at the actors’ actual connections as low-budget people shooting a low-budget film that, even if most of them expected to fail, could still stand as their own collective statement about life in 1973. At some level in this film what we see is the working class having a conversation with itself.

One of their topics is the difficulty of maintaining a stable subjectivity in a period marked by the incoherence of representations in Vietnam-era postmodernity. This heightened a sense of unreality that already afflicted many veterans, and which their family and friends had also to confront. TCSM operates on our own perceptions by a concentric revolving of subjectivities: Sally, Franklin and the other kids are terrified by Leatherface’s family. We also fear the family, but—as so many critics have noted—we are not able to identify with Sally or the others either; “We sympathize with the kids, not because they are particularly pleasant but because the only other choice Hooper gives us is walking out.”(30) And yet the foundational horror of the film, the “motivation” which Roger Ebert could not find anywhere, afflicts the Hitchhiker, as much as it does Sally at the dinner table, or the viewer in his chair: coping with the danger that we all may lose control of our own subjective integrity to the irrationality of representation. Correspondingly, the film’s thrust is less hopeless nihilism than the urgent need to maintain the integrity of our own subjectivity and test images against our sense of reality. TCSM’s metatext provisionally accepts Benjamin’s statement that film’s social significance is “inconceivable without its destructive, cathartic aspect, that is, the liquidation of the traditional value of the cultural heritage.”(31) It literalizes this process onscreen, displaying its violent social potential in the post-Vietnam crisis of assimilation.

The alienation suffered by Leatherface’s family is twofold—the obvious economic obsolescence, and the reflexive condition of taking on an outward identity formed by media images. This postmodern quality so familiar to us is related directly to the decay of aura, which for any historical actor is inevitable once the camera replaces the public to intervene on historical testimony and witnessing. But it is revealed in TCSM to be part of a recent transition, a dynamic, uncertain process still in formation and still being contested—corresponding to the immediate effects of Vietnam (and Watergate), the onset of economic and cultural postmodernism, and the identity drift of the working class. Similarly, even in hiding, the family is not isolated in an oppressive, decaying backwater mirroring their own alienation (as most critics have posited): the landscape is in transition. The slaughterhouse has modernized, not closed down. In this rustic setting, using gasoline has become a way of life, to run generators, vehicles, and chain Saws—an ambiguous development in the wake of the 1973 global oil crisis. The kids’ mobility is limited by the lack of gasoline, and it was by stopping at the gas station that they first meet the Old Man. Sally is ultimately helped by one passing driver, and saved by another: if gasoline made Sally vulnerable, it rescues her in the end. The film’s final sounds are screams and engines, the primal and the modern, the human and the mechanical. To attribute the nightmare vision of this film to deterministic conditions at the (distinctly Texan) ends of the earth is to deny that its composite elements exist around us everywhere.

How do people confront the withering of their own personal aura? Barthes refused to be photographed, to be captured as an image; when a camera replaces the live audience (as Benjamin cites Pirandello), the actor experiences feelings of exile and emptiness, loss of corporeality, the deprivation of life and reality. While many critics see in the family a project of senseless violence to terminate history, perhaps we have a group of people struggling to maintain their subjectivity in a period of cultural and psychic upheaval. They work together in a complementary fashion to try to remember, to reassert their historical testimony andauratic sensibility. The generational nature of the crisis in assimilation is echoed here by the older man’s relative tranquility and the younger men’s intense psychological absorption in probing the nature of images.
The Old Man is the authority figure, scolding and directing Leatherface and the Hitchhiker. He stands up for down-home values when he warns the kids at the gas station to stay away from “other folks’ property.” He has a philosophical view of duty: “I just can’t take no pleasure in killing. There’s just some things you gotta do. Don’t mean you have to like it.”(33) However, his principal function is as the oral historian, keeper of the lore. It is he who tells the tale of Grandpa’s exploits as a killer to the younger men. When the Hitchhiker decides that Grandpa should “have some fun” with Sally, he appeals to the Old Man: “You always said he’s the best,” and the Old Man eases in to his account: “He’s the best, all right… Did sixty in five minutes once. Coulda done more if the hook and pull gang had gone faster.”

The nostalgia of this scene, which praises the sense of camaraderie in shared human labor before the introduction of mechanization, evokes the tale of John Henry, a Virginia rail line worker in the early 19th century. Because of its grotesqueness, the scene is often cited by critics who claim the film’s basic conflict is the dead weight of the past trying to smother innocent youth. This fairy-tale view is weakened by the economic ties linking the family of Sally and Franklin with Leatherface’s family. The mobility of the youths, however, their capacity for distraction by astrology, and their relative lack of concern for a past beyond their immediate recollection all establish a contrast between them and the family in the value placed on remembering and heritage.

For his part, Grandpa is not the fetish some critics claim, but the (barely) living proof underlying family memories; he is placed at the head of the table. Sally doesn’t know where her grandfather’s plot is at the cemetery; his house has been abandoned and left to decay. She reminisces about wallpaper there, but says nothing of her grandfather himself. Similarly, Franklin recognizes the slaughterhouse where his grandfather sold cattle, but voices no personal recollections of the man. Their grandfather, who exists for them as only a dead cattleman, is for all intents and purposes out of sight, out of mind.(34)

The first family member we see, the Hitchhiker, is typically dismissed as demented or insane, but in his fascination with images and the limits of aura, he explores the border between corporeality and image. Through his Polaroid-type camera and his relation with pictures, the Hitchhiker balances the two distinct, supposedly incompatible qualities of cult value and use value. We perceive that he shot the ghoulish stills of exhumed corpses that run during the opening credits, a nice sequence that implicitly contrasts still versus moving images while playing on photography’s longstanding connotations of death and an irretrievable past (the sound of the camera’s mechanics recalling the whine of a dentist’s drill). In the van, after examining the hippies one by one through the camera lens, he takes a picture of Franklin; when Franklin refuses to buy the picture, the Hitchhiker places herbs from his neck-pouch on it and burns it with a ceremonial flourish. This rapid switch in his attitude toward the photograph is remarkable. Observing him, the sensation is again one of cultural transition—as though what Benjamin described as the cut-and-dried process of aura’s withering in the age of mechanical reproduction of images has not quite taken hold fully here yet.

In terms of cameras, the Polaroid is suggestive. It would qualify as an early manifestation of what Koepnick called the “postmodern regime of mobile virtual looking,”(35) because it was a fully portable self-sufficient image taker. It fostered a daring individuality, since one didn’t have to take embarrassing negatives to others for developing. Ironically, by the late 1970s, Polaroids had lost their trendy chic and were obsolete, just like Grandpa. However, in the context of Chain Saw, the Polaroid helps reinforce a thematic contradiction in attitudes towards pictures as historical evidence and pictures as detached, anonymous, dubious representations.(36) The Polaroid was a useful way to mediate as well as record

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reality for someone who either doubted his own subjectivity or memory, or who wanted to be able to prove his own subjective identity to others through an authoritative medium.

While in the van, the Hitchhiker expresses the following correlation: “It’s a good knife.” “It’s a good picture.” The language is simple, but it remembers Barthes’s notion of the punctum, that inexpressible quality of an effective photograph.(37) The punctum operates on both subject and object. A good or effective picture can leave the viewer physically affected, vulnerable, somehow opened to a new thought or sensation (most directly when the viewer has a bridge of personal experience with the pictured person or scene). Yet the act of taking pictures of people pierces them in a different way, by weakening their aura, separating the image of the person from the living physical presence of which no replica can be made. The Hitchhiker fuses these two positionalities in his enigmatic account of life at the slaughterhouse. He states, “My brother worked there. My grandfather too.” He then passes around Polaroid shots of corpses; to Franklin’s question, “You do that?” he replies “I was the killer!” If he equates the photographing and killing of cows, he will also make manifest the punctum and turn it on himself. Carol Clover notes that when he slices his own “hand for the thrill, the onlookers recoil in horror—all but Franklin, who seems fascinated by the realization that all that lies between the visible, knowable outside of the body and its secret insides is one thin membrane, protected only by a collective taboo against its violation.”(38) While this is literally true, the scene also works if we understand the “visible, knowable outside” and “secret inside” as not physiological spaces but planes of identity. The outside is photographable and reproducible. That thin membrane protects the aura, the secret inside, the essential subjective self-ness, and the collective taboo against its violation was the target of Benjamin’s invective for political reasons.

Subverted and inverted by the mass media, from the movies to the evening news, the taboo that supposedly protects the aura has not been operant for this working-class family struggling to maintain subjective coherence in 1970s postmodernity. Aware of their existence as two-dimensional images, constructed to suit a distracted, (upwardly) mobile middle class gaze, the Hitchhiker and his kin nonetheless assert a startling capacity to rupture the image. Franklin, staring in wonder at the Hitchhiker, receives his own literal punctum from the view when the Hitchhiker slashes out at his forearm.

As a subject, Leatherface grotesquely demonstrates the political dangers and psychological contradictions of the ungrounding of identity, the meaningless roamings of cultural poachers in postmodernity. As an object, he is the vengeful return of the distorted and alienated mass-culture representation. Consuming our own images and reflecting them back at us on his face, thwarting our categories, he is an angry free-floating referent, an uncontainable, uncertain sign. We know that his character was inspired by the real killer Ed Gein, who dismembered his female victims and stitched together lampshades, decorations, and even a costume out of their skin; as a child, Tobe Hooper heard chilling stories about Gein from Wisconsin relatives. Psycho was based in part on Robert Bloch’s novelization of Gein, and Chain Saw’s uses of and references to Psycho are widely known. Rather than simply recycling visual tropes, however, Chain Saw changes the equation in two ways.

First, Leatherface’s third mask, the female dinner mask, raises the question of gender in a different context from Psycho and even from that of Sally, the Final Girl. Where is the mother in the family’s household? The matriarch, Grandpa’s counterpart, is present in mummified form (an obvious bow to Psycho), but she was clearly too old to have been mother to Leatherface and the Hitchhiker. Here, not only do we not see these characters’ mother, we are left to imagine how they were raised. One possibility is that in her absence the father, as patriarch, simply brought them up with him in the workplace, teaching them early on to find their place in the system of labor, even as it is transforming. This would help
explain their extreme reaction to losing their jobs to machines at the slaughterhouse, and the family’s bloody pastime.

Critics have noted the absence of sexual predation on Sally among the family; psychoanalysts took it as proof that the men’s violent behavior is based on sexual repression. But there is another way to comprehend the mystery. We do not see the mother, the unique exemplar of human reproduction in the family, nor do we understand the relation between the Old Man and the younger men; is he their father, or their older brother? Rather than a flaw in Hooper’s directing, this is one of the film’s central ambiguities. The power of woman is to create new life, leading to men’s “fear and awe of woman-as-mother,” Molly Haskell wrote. (39) In a sense, what we have here is an ambiguous collection of figures lacking their original, lacking any living progenitor to whom we can appeal for logic and rationality. Absent the proof of human derivation, we are forced to accept the Old Man, the Hitchhiker, and Leatherface as they are and as they appear to us—mechanically reproduced images onscreen. This is brought to a shocking extreme in the dinner scene, in which Leatherface wears a female face and an apron. The very agent of reproduction, of human authenticity and uniqueness, is here reduced to an image of a woman’s face sewn together with the dead skins of others. A scene cut from the original film, but included in the DVD release, shows Leatherface before dinner applying cosmetics with absurd exaggeration, picking up limp skin faces and studying them as models. This convergence of the fictive and the real rejects detached observation and makes us question our own sense of the real, both onscreen and off.

In 1859, Oliver Wendell Holmes predicted that “The time will come when a man who wishes to see any object, natural or artificial, will go to the Imperial, National, or City Stereographic Library, and call for its skin or form, as he would for a book at any common library.” (40) Once we have our negatives, shots taken from different points of view, “that is all we want of it... Pull it down or burn it up, if you please.” Four generations later, Leatherface suggests that this has become a destructive way of “seeing” people in mass-mediated culture—be they workers, soldiers, Vietnamese people, anyone at all. Clover notes that the Other of contemporary horror films transcends the conventional reading of the killer as the phallic mother of the transformed boy; modern texts present us with hermaphroditic constructions that demand to be taken on their own terms. (41) As a comment on images and filmic reality, Leatherface is able to serve the onscreen purpose of “the woman of the house” by merely looking like one. At the same time, Leatherface is menacing because he himself remains unknowable.

The second notable dimension of Leatherface is his technological modernity, and in this, his relation with his brother the Hitchhiker. I have noted that in the critical rush to view the family as backward and decadent (the term “tribe” connotes primitivity) they are depicted as ignoring the world’s changes and fleeing from reality. But the world’s changes came decisively to them through unavoidable reliance on expensive gasoline and electricity, media images, and postmodern economic, political, and cultural forces. Both Leatherface and the Hitchhiker are consummately modern.

Leatherface’s weapon of choice is the chain Saw, distinguishing Hooper’s film from Clover’s analysis that the emotional terrain of the slasher film is pretechnological. (42) It is true that several methods of pretechnological killing are depicted onscreen, but the way the chain Saw is selectively applied as a killing machine is consistent with the film’s other modern tropes. Sally and Franklin are the most complex and modern of the hippie characters: Sally as an innovative model of the still-developing cinematic Final Girl, and Franklin as a disabled protagonist whose visual presence connotes the contemporaneous Vietnam veteran anti-hero. These are the only two characters that Leatherface tries to kill with the chain Saw (Franklin successfully). Insofar as it also suggests the working-class revenge theme—the family was put out of work by machines in the factory where the siblings’ grandfather sold
his cattle, Leatherface chooses a machine to kill them—there is a revolutionary implication of turning the dominant regime’s technologies against it. Still, the film adopts a consistent position: modern characters merit modern techniques (of killing or visual reproduction). Leatherface and his chain Saw should be understood in parallel with his brother, the Hitchhiker and his camera; they are two aspects of the same phenomenon.(43) In a changing rural landscape, each brother—the youngest cohort of the family—deploys a machine that allows him to both remember and to dis-cover, to explore the murky border between past (tradition, authenticity, uniqueness) and present (mass media and the economic, perceptual, and socio-cultural costs of progress).

Both machines, on the face of it, contribute to the withering of aura in Benjamin’s sense. This is theoretically clear in the case of pictures. And what does Leatherface do with the chain Saw (in killing Franklin, but also to corpses) if not to reduce unique individuals to mobile piles of identical-looking bones? Does he not contribute to the degrading of a taboo that once protected a unique auratic entity from succumbing to interchangeable images that have no subjectivity, no “historical testimony”?

Yes, and no. As they are used here, the camera and the chain Saw are modern machines of memory—problematic ones, to be sure, but they are a compelling partnership in their ambivalence. The fact that the only living character on whom both are deployed was Franklin—the Hitchhiker takes his picture in the van, Leatherface kills him with the chain Saw—reaffirms the special tragedy of his visual modernity, related directly to the irrationality of Vietnam. A formal correspondence emerges: Camera is to chain Saw, as a photograph’s single piercing *punctum* is to the whirling chain Saw teeth of edited scenes in cinematic film (Hooper’s “real” movie boasts 900 edits). Hooper plays with this aesthetic by introducing the film with the photographic stills of corpses exhumed from a graveyard, accompanied by the camera’s shrill, metallic whine. As razors and chain Saws can cut away flesh indiscriminately, mechanically reproduced images impact the aura of subject and object in diverse ways. Both the Hitchhiker and Leatherface are themselves physically compromised, opened up, by a knife and chain Saw: the Hitchhiker in a quiet moment of absorption in the van, and Leatherface during the film’s climactic chase scene.

In *TCSM* the images that machines produce inherently convey humanity’s need to “have the last word in the argument with death by means of the form that endures.”(44) The family’s growing fascination with the ultimate malleability of even that form—jumbled bones, arm chairs, a cow’s horn stuck in a skull’s mouth—expresses again that their own auratic sensibility as subjects is troubled and vulnerable, articulating the ambivalence of postmodern subjectivity. Critics who argue that *TCSM* denigrates the human body out of a morbid materialistic idolatry are too literal in their interpretations. Given the claims made for photography by early inventor-booster such as Oliver Wendell Holmes, who exulted “Every conceivable object of Nature or Art will soon scale off its surface for us,” and dreamed of the day when someone who “wishes to see any object, natural or artificial, will go the Stereographic Library and call for its skin or form, as he would for a book at any common library,”(45) the Hitchhiker’s photographing of decaying corpses is a peculiarly devotional act in postmodernity: a pathetic way of giving them their skins back in an era of withered aura.

If we are treated overlong to the image of degraded bodies, this is not without reason. The gruesome decoration of the family home indicts the false reality in the way conventions of mainstream film and mass media images generally focus attention on the relationship between the human form and its surroundings, the visible presence of the person in the world.(46) Hooper’s critique of the mass media’s facile aesthetic of domesticity, a representation that normalizes middle-class values by displacing the hardships of average people, blue-collar workers and veterans, could not be clearer. The plate of
unidentifiable cuts of meat put in front of Sally at the dinner table may be intended to jolt us from our own distraction in a society of spectacle, where we are regularly invited to evade reality either by consuming images as if these were more real than life itself, or by downplaying the power of images to communicate human reality. That sausage is mass-mediated representation made corporal.

During the dinner scene, in which Sally passes a night of psychological torture tied to a chair, the men’s lack of interest in Sally’s frantic offer to “do anything” has been given a consistently psychoanalytic reading, yet there is another dimension. One of the remarkable cinematic aspects of the family is that we are left wanting to know much more about them, who they are, their history, their experiences, what their familial relations are. The film leaves us curious to know more about these people—a working-class cinematic coup. Sally wants to escape, but for hours, she is forced to see these people, to pay attention to them. Just as important, this working-class family gets to return her gaze. They look back at her, touch her, mock her—and during the dinner hour, which for years was the time for middle-class America to eat while watching the war on TV, consuming the images of anonymous tragedy along with dinner. “I thought you were in a hurry,” jeers the Hitchhiker; Sally’s postmodern mobile gaze has been temporarily held on the shabby people who live in an old house bearing the decay of economic stagnation and the material and psychological scars of war in Vietnam.

Sally’s experience is different from Pam’s. Earlier in the film, Leatherface, wearing an apron and surrounded by the tools of his trade, impales Pam on a meat hook. The scene shocks because Leatherface displaces Pam with an emotionless, mechanical efficiency that evokes both the capitalist imperatives of the slaughterhouse, and the individual subject’s vulnerability to the risks of distraction in an industrialized mass-culture regime. Pam’s fate reminds us that the postmodern anarchic freedom of cultural poachers (in Koepnick’s words) is supported by a technological and economic system that has real power, is increasingly integrated, and that by its nature functions to make itself and its social consequences invisible. For Sally, tied to a chair at the dining-room table, that system’s capacity for alienation is a subtext—but here the human, social dimension of subject-object positioning is foregrounded. The dinner scene is about people looking at each other, and who controls the gaze. But the frenetic changes in camera angle between (and outside) Sally’s and the family members’ perspectives reinforce the feeling that what is at stake is not so much “control” as even the possibility of a mass-mediated regime in which diverse constituencies are equally posed as subjects and objects.

In that sense, leaving aside the many regrettable films in TCSM’s franchise (and also sidestepping the “legitimate” aesthetic experience of hyper-real plastinated human corpses in the Body Worlds exhibits), its most direct contemporary heir might be the independent Iraq war documentary Gunner Palace (2004). Director Michael Tucker filmed a field artillery unit for two months, bunking with them in a bombed-out palace once owned by Uday Hussein, determined to “tell the soldiers’ story… [looking] at the subject not as news, but as living history; an experience, not an event.”(47) He was motivated by the soldiers’ frustration that privileged Americans, losing interest in the war, were changing the channel to the more diverting realities of Survivor and American Idol. Tucker: “The war had become an event, something to be watched from a distance without consequence… I wonder how the Iraq Experience will be defined in twenty years: will the voices of those who were there shape the collective narrative, or will we see the experience through the lens of Hollywood?” Responding to the hunger for auratic experience among both his viewers and his actors, Gunner Palace achieves a sort of self-conscious auratic effect indicative of our media-saturated moment; a soldier notes, “For y’all this is just a show, but we live in this movie.” One of the ironies of Tucker’s film is that the largely working-class, volunteer soldiers who “tell it like it is” do so through recreating scenes and elements of mass-culture war entertainment, from M*A*S*H* to Platoon; their own perceptions of their experience rely on previous mass-media images. The filmmaker
acknowledges this fact, but does not explore its deeper implications—whose film is this, whose experience, and whose gaze? It seems that now, as in the 1970s of TCSM, the reconstitution of aura—a sense of mutual authenticity and personal subjectivity—is fundamental to coming to grips with violent conflict, social turmoil, moral ambiguity, and the power of images to distract. Through its augmentative recycling, its fictive reality and the puzzling complexities of its own auratic effect, TCSM reaffirms the place of aura in postmodernity by showing us the human impact of its withering.
1 Variety, 6 November 1974.
2 The terms of this debate on the significance of an image’s original referent originated in the 1930s writings of German philosophers Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno, colleagues who disagreed strongly on the subject. In Adorno on Popular Culture (London: Routledge, 2003) Robert W. Witkin ably contrasts their positions: “The special authority that the unique object or work of art possesses and which sets it at a distance from us is what Benjamin termed its aura… In his view, the decay of aura is inevitably linked to a democratization of arts practice… the audience takes the position of the camera” in his favorite examples, photography and film, and absorbs the work distractedly—defusing its potential as hegemonic expressions of authority and social relations (51-3); conversely, for Adorno, mass-culture commodities dangerously cloaked the power structures behind their production (his concept of fetish), so allowing serious and challenging art to maintain its distance from the engaged viewer helped foster a critical consciousness of broader processes of alienation (54-5). In “Postmodernism and Consumer Society” (Hal Foster, ed., The Anti-Aesthetic [Port Townsend: Bay Press, 1983]), Frederic Jameson analyzes postmodernity’s state of pervasive mass-mediation and unstable categories (in which subjectivity itself is questioned) and relates the effects of structuralism to a form of “schizophrenia… the breakdown of the relationship between signifiers. [It] is an experience of isolated, disconnected, discontinuous material signifiers which fail to link up… The schizophrenic does not know personal identity in our sense, since our feeling of identity depends on our sense of the persistence of the ‘I’ and the ‘me’ over time” (118-9). Regarding The Texas Chain Saw Massacre, the tension over aura and subjectivity I examine was dimly perceived but discarded by J.P. Telotte in “Faith and Idolatry in the Horror Film” (Barry Keith Grant, ed. Planks of Reason: Essays on the Horror Film [Metuchen, NJ: The Scarecrow Press, 1984], 25), when he declared that by attending such films as TCSM, “we become temporarily involved in an idolatry of sorts, for we celebrate deviation from the human… erecting in its place a distorting mirror through which we see ourselves as objects deprived of life and abandoned among a world of similar objects.” Similarly, Ken Hanke (A Critical Guide to Horror Film Series [New York: Garland, 1991], 265), describes the film’s “cannibalistic chainsaw” family thus: “Their nightmare world of filth, artistically arranged skeletons, stuffed pets and ancestors, and butchered human beings has become their norm. Rather than face reality, they have perverted it into their own reality.” The question is how, and also, what their reality is.
3 Lutz Koepnick, “Aura Reconsidered: Benjamin and Contemporary Visual Culture,” in Benjamin’s Ghosts: Interventions in Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory, ed. Gerhard Richter (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 114. For Koepnick, aura is not only a function of fascism: “Benjamin generically defines fascism as the attempt to recycle auratic modes of perception in the context of a postauratic culture: fascism reinscribes aura in order to masquerade hierarchy and power as spectacle. How useful, then, we must ask, is Benjamin’s conceptual apparatus when discussing the spectacular elements of contemporary media societies and their massive reproduction of auratic values?”
6 Barthes’ robust subjectivity should be read against Benjamin’s endorsement of a rootless, distracted gaze that poaches indiscriminately. “Although meant to offer a site of critical exchange and cultural empowerment, Benjamin’s postauratic auditorium is populated by spectators who have nothing left to see or say anymore.” Koepnick, “Aura Reconsidered,” 101.
7 If Baudrillard was right that the commodity production of consumer capitalism marks our object world with a mechanically-reproduced unreality and a free-floating absence of the referent, Barthes would qualify that in photography, the referent adheres—although it can only be recognized as such by viewers who are linked to it by memory. An image can be copied, even if personal auratic engagement (a bridge to the referent constructed through original, non-reproducible experience) with it can never be. “I cannot
reproduce the Winter Garden Photograph. It exists only for me. For you, it would be nothing but an indifferent picture.” Barthes, Camera Lucida, 73.


9 According to Variety’s key city domestic box office tallies, 1974 registered 18% growth over 1973; the peak was attributed in large part to the oil crisis and high gas prices, which led people to forego travel and tourism for diversions close to home (18 December 1974). The headline on 8 January 1975 proclaimed “’74: Economic Gloom, Show Biz Boom.”


11 Analysis of the cannibal family as an “exploited and degraded proletariat,” common to film reviews in the popular press, was made most forcefully by Robin Wood in “An Introduction to the American Horror Film” (Planks of Reason), 188.


13 The film “skates right up to the border where ‘art’ ceases to exist in any form and exploitation begins.” Stephen King, Danse Macabre (New York: Berkley, 1981), 4-5, 130.

14 Robin Wood, “An Introduction to the American Horror Film” (Planks of Reason), 189.


16 Alluding to the heightened sensitivity to visual codes pervading the counterculture, Hooper remembered how the presence of the camera complicated his own appearance in the eyes of those he filmed. “[The work] was interesting, but I was kind of a nonpolitical hippie. I had the long hair, and I walked around with a movie camera in my hand, which was kind of a hippie thing to do. But in fact it made me a suspicious character. I was FBI. I was a narc. I was with the Feds. Why else would I be taking everyone’s picture all the time?” Bloom, “They Came, They Sawed.”


18 Standard references are Bloom’s 2004 “They Came, They Sawed,” and the Los Angeles Times’s 1982 two-part exposé by Farley and Knoedelseder, “The Real Texas Chain Saw Massacre.”

19 Hooper’s father owned a hotel in Austin and regularly took young Tobe to movies; Tobe began experimenting with his father’s video camera at age three (Bloom, “They Came, They Sawed”).


23 John Bloom (“They Came, They Sawed”) suggests of the film “The more you learn about its making, the less it seems the invention of a screenwriter of a director or an acting company than the product of Austin itself at the end of the Vietnam era.”

24 Neal: “Paul and Marilyn didn’t like each other much, so that helped [their portrayal of sibling friction]… For example, in one scene, Marilyn grabs a flashlight away from Paul, and he just about tears her head off. It was great. It was also real, but that’s beside the point.” McMarty, Splatter Movies, 94-5, 99.

25 George Lipsitz, Rainbow at Midnight: Labor and Culture in the 1940s (University of Illinois Press, 1994), 298-299.


27 Dika, Recycled Culture, 70.

29 Christian Appy analyzed the illusion that the war existed in a physical and moral vacuum, which helped soldiers deal with the madness of war: “if the war itself seemed like an illusion, maybe one’s own participation was illusory as well.” Christian G. Appy, *Working-Class War: American Combat Soldiers and Vietnam* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1993), 252.


31 Benjamin, “Work of Art.”

32 Benjamin, “Work of Art.”

33 This comment looks forward to the line in *Coming Home* (1978): “I’m here to tell you that I have killed for my country, and I don’t feel good about it.”

34 As Benjamin warned in his fifth thesis on the philosophy of history, “Every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably.”


36 Barthes, *Camera Lucida*: “Photography’s inimitable feature is that someone has seen the referent (even if it is a matter of objects) in flesh and blood, or again in person… The Photograph does not call up the past. The effect it produces upon me is not to restore what has been abolished (by time, by distance) but to attest that what I see has indeed existed.”

37 It “rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me… For punctum is also: sting, speck, cut, little hole—and also a cast of the dice. A photograph’s punctum is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me).” Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 26-7.


40 Holmes, “Stereoscope and Stereograph.”


43 Holmes described the effect of the stereograph: “We see something with the second eye which we did not see with the first; the two eyes see different pictures of the same thing. By means of these two different views of an object, the mind, as it were, feels round it and gets an idea of its solidity.”

44 In “The Ontology of the Photographic Image,” Bazin writes of the “mummy complex,” the desperate attempt to preserve life by preserving a representation of life.

45 Holmes, “The Stereoscope and the Stereograph.”


47 Tucker’s comments and synopsis are on the film’s Website, www.gunnerpalace.com.
Christina Morin, *Charles Robert Maturin and the Haunting of Irish Romantic Fiction*  
(Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011)

Poor old Charles Maturin. Considered possibly insane in his lifetime, he has suffered almost two centuries of relative neglect in critical history. Very few have even heard of him, and those who have don’t really care. His master work, *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820), often deemed the high point and climax of the “first wave” of the Gothic literary revival, is forbiddingly long and structurally complex, and the rest of his novels are obscure to the point of invisibility. Any time I have the courage to place *Melmoth* on any of the courses I teach, it is greeted with incomprehension by students who usually manage to get no further than the first hundred pages. I don’t think Maturin is likely to get any more popular – most of his novels are, frankly, terrible (and terribly confused), their rhetorical force far exceeding anything required by the plot (though, as Morin shows here, this can often be for very interesting ideological reasons) – but he is still an important figure in Irish literary history and deserves more attention than he has received. At least, though, we now have a study that can be recommended without hesitation as the best place to start with this most frustrating (and yet, strangely endearing) of writers.

Christina Morin’s study of the novels of Maturin is the most comprehensive and persuasive that I have read. The argument of the book is that Maturin’s writings are symptomatic of the more general problems faced by Protestant Irish thinkers in their attempts to negotiate personal and social difficulties in the politically hostile environment of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Britain. Although the contention that the “Anglo-Irish” community had what Julian Moynahan refers to as a “hyphenated” identity is not a new one, and has become a central component of literary and historical analyses of this community, a thorough placing of Maturin in this analysis has not been provided before now. In this context, Morin is particularly good in her use of Jacques Derrida’s notion of “hauntology” as a supplement to ontology. She demonstrates convincingly that Maturin himself was a “haunted” writer, haunted by the ghosts of Irish history, particularly the catastrophic and traumatic assaults on the Protestant minority since 1641; and also haunted by literary history, the degraded genre of the Gothic which stubbornly refused to die at the end of the eighteenth century. Morin expands this focus on Maturin to take in Irish Romanticism in much more general terms, suggesting that Maturin’s work as a whole should be read as a test case demonstrating that most Irish writers of this period were themselves haunted by literary and political history. Although *Melmoth* itself has been the subject of a great deal of excellent critical work, Morin brilliantly demonstrates how the explicit Gothicism of that novel can be found intruding even in works such as *Women; or pour et contre* (1818), where characters drop like flies, memory has a corrosive effect on the present, and no happy ending for its protagonists is permitted. Morin challenges the conventional division between the national novel and the Gothic, proving that they bled into each other, and that critical attempts to maintain their separation lead only to misinterpretation.

I particularly liked the use Morin makes of ghostly metaphors, linking her own writing to Gothic tropes of return and recovery, and at times becoming almost Gothic herself. For example, Morin shows that, rather than depending parasitically on Sydney Owenson’s *The Wild Irish Girl* (1806), Maturin’s *The Wild Irish Boy* (1808) is an answer to and exorcism of the political and literary baggage bequeathed to Owenson’s successors. The book does a very good job of tracing how narratives of romantic unity, and of individual

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and national authenticity, are continually disrupted by the invasion of Gothic “moments,” leading to disruption and fragmentation rather than the longed-for security. Such disruption is shown to have social, national and (sometimes) cosmic consequences in the novels at hand. The book scrutinises intensely the discourse of the Union and the “Glorvina solution” to the tensions between England and Ireland, “Anglo-Irish” and “Gaelic” Ireland, which posits a potential source of national and individual wellbeing in a happy “companionate” marriage between the two sides of the binary. According to Morin, to this quasi-pornographic version of national union-as-marriage Maturin brings an alternative configuration of Gothic terror and chaos: rather than end in secure marriages, his novels typically gravitate towards female madness and fragmentation. Turmoil rather than stasis, and a language of nightmare rather than dream, characterise Maturin’s examinations of the national questions. If this existential crisis has its origin in the performative, “unreal” nature of Catholicism and the tyranny of colonisation (especially in Melmoth the Wanderer), the solution partly rests in the authenticity of the Protestant faith which is beyond ritual and theatricality.

Moreover, Morin argues that Maturin and his writings are themselves now “ghosts” haunting the Irish literary mind, ignored yet constantly returning in various forms, and that indeed there has been some very conscious “unMaturinising” of Irish literary history by authors, critics and literary historians. This argument is not particularly convincing, mainly because what Morin actually demonstrates is that it is really only Maturin’s best novel, Melmoth the Wanderer, which haunts. Although at times, it is Maturin who figures in literary history as a ghostly presence to contend with and even exorcise, much more often it is his dark hero whose extraordinary evocative power reaches beyond the 1820s. However, this in itself is an important point, and the slight rhetorical exaggeration that is indulged in throughout the final chapter does not detract from the book.

The book also closely examines Maturin’s paradoxical concerns with the effects of the novel of sensibility and the romance on women’s psychological development and men’s psychological stability. Maturin simultaneously feared that romance emasculated men, and yet wrote novels of intense sensibility and romance, thus directly contributing to the genre. Morin’s study compellingly traces what we might call a “gendered anxiety of influence” in Maturin’s literary development. Although primarily influenced by women – including Maria Edgeworth and Sydney Owenson – Maturin tried to forge a homosocial bond with Sir Walter Scott in whom he recognised a similar pathology (as Scott attempted the “masculinisation” of the novel to rescue it from denigration as a “female form” for female readers). The result is that Maturin’s female characters are placed in an impossible situation in which they have to negotiate the proper balance between emotional frigidity and emotional excess, both being configured as highly damaging to both the nation and to the male characters around them.

One of the best elements of the book is its very convincing rebuttal of charges that Ireland is not really subject matter for most of Maturin’s fiction – a charge most recently made by Richard Haslam. Morin skilfully demonstrates that even in novels set elsewhere (such as The Fatal Revenge (1807), set in seventeenth century Italy, and The Albigenses (1824), set in thirteenth century France), Ireland is always haunting the textual margins, intruding like a (sometimes very unwelcome) poltergeist throwing the narrative furniture around. She excavates the “spectro-textual” references to Ireland in all the novels, and debunks the notion that allegory is the only method by which Irish politics could be coded into these narratives. This in itself is a major achievement.

I was very glad to see plot summaries included for each novel. These are fictions with some very complex plots and even those of us who have read Maturin’s work need some reminding of the various twists and turns indulged in by a writer addicted to plot pyrotechnics. The book is written in a fluid and
accessible style which will be appealing to undergraduate readers as well as Morin’s peers. I was pleased to see a short biographical chapter and a chronology, as both help to orient the reader who is traversing unfamiliar ground (the vast majority of readers in this case). I do feel that the influence of Huguenot theology on Maturin’s intellectual development and his view of the world could have been explored further, and also regret that a chapter on Maturin’s plays and poetry (the few poems that have survived) was not included. However, given the emphasis on narrative throughout the study, it is appropriate that it is the fiction that gets attention.

This book is the second of two monographs concentrating on Maturin published in the last year. Jim Kelly’s Charles Maturin: Authorship, Authenticity and the Nation (Four Courts, 2011) complements Morin’s work, and together they are the best things ever written about this benighted figure. Morin’s study is a very useful addition to a growing body of work on the “Irish Gothic,” and also on Irish romanticism and literary unionism, while supporting the work being done by Ian Campbell Ross, Aileen Douglas and Moyra Hasslett on the early Irish novel. For this reason, the study is timely. Perhaps we are witnessing the beginning of a whole new interest in Maturin’s writing (a cultural study of Melmoth would be very welcome indeed), though I doubt it. Thanks to this book, however, what is now very clear is that he is a much more complex and much less foolish presence in Irish literary history than has often been presumed.

JARLATH KILLEEN

Dig up a corpse and try to recreate in all its complexity the story of that person’s life and death. No doubt, it won’t be a simple task, the exhuming or the retelling, and the narrative will necessarily vacillate between two oppositions depending on the teller’s representational choices: an attribution to the person’s life and remains of some eternally significant symbolic meaning; and a preoccupation with the materiality of the body and its inevitable failure in death. It is exactly this narratological difficulty of providing commemorative closure for the dead that Lisa Perdigao examines in *From Modernist Entombment to Postmodernist Exhumation*.

According to her reading, the necessary authorial reliance on metaphor and metonymy to provide narrative closure to novels becomes problematic in twentieth-century American novels featuring burial or exhumation plots. The standard novelistic techniques of conclusion simply fail to give a satisfactory, multifaceted sense of dead characters’ lives. Using “discursivity” and “materiality” interchangeably throughout *From Modernist Entombment* for the concepts of metaphor and metonymy, Perdigao effectively underscores the complexity of “writing the body” in both figurative and concrete language. Primarily because both of these linguistic representative strategies fail to give a totality of meaning to a buried or exhumed body, these narratives resist the full closure that readers would expect at a novel’s close, which a traditional marriage plot could provide, for example. Considering how the representation of dead bodies throughout the century “shifts from figurations of burial to figurations of exhumation,” Perdigao labours through a range of texts and their critical histories (at times in unnecessary detail) to demonstrate her stated goal of examining “why modern and postmodern writers turn to these tropes to negotiate the tension between the materiality of the body and the discursivity of language” (8). *From Modernist Entombment* argues, quite rightly, that these authorial strategies of encryption as acts of “entombment” and inscription indicate that figuration and commemoration of the dead matter significantly reflect changing cultural assumptions about the body in the twentieth century.

The texts around which Perdigao methodically structures her chapters guide the argument that the literary trope of entombment shifts from a totalising metaphoric transaction of disembodied discursivity, which seeks to conceal death in symbolic terms, to a metonymic acceptance and reconfiguration of the body as a material, interpretable text. Needless to say, this argument relies heavily on the poststructuralist body-as-text metaphor, as well as more recent body theory, drawing on, among others, Elizabeth Bronfen’s focus on the complications brought about by the “gendered body, the superlatively beautiful, desirable feminine corpse,” Tim Armstrong’s conception of the body in modernity as a “site of crisis” and Carol E. Henderson’s book *Scarring the Black Body: Race and Representation in African American Literature* (2002). *From Modernist Entombment*’s close readings treat the narratological features and discursive/ metonymic strategies used to represent corpses in F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *This Side of Paradise* and *The Great Gatsby*, William Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying* and *Sanctuary*, Willa Cather’s *The Professor’s House*, Richard Wright’s *Native Son*, Jody Shields’s *The Fig Eater*, Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, Octavia Butler’s *Kindred*, Jeffrey Eugenides’s *The Virgin Suicides*, Zora Neal Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, and Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*.

The overarching goal of the readings, of what at first glance appears to be a disparate collection of novels, is to locate and ‘mark a shift from a desire to conceal death to a desire to represent materiality, to rescue what is lost to figurative language in the process of memorialisation and transformation’ (3). It is
precisely this range of texts that helps this book to show the pervasiveness of this thematic trend, as well as to argue convincingly that this shift occurs somewhere between what are considered modernist and postmodernist texts. To this end, Perdigao invokes Peter Brooks’s assertion in Body Work that “[t]o know the body by way of a narrative that leads to its specific identity, to give the body specific markings that make it recognisable, and indeed make it a key narrative sign, are large preoccupations of modern narrative” (15). As From Modernist Entombment’s succession of examples illustrates, these marks and signs become more troubled and problematic when the bodies in question are gendered, racially other, skeletal, and even spectral.

Perdigao also recurrently employs Peter Brooks’s Reading for the Plot as a foundation for her arguments, since his book argues that the overall novelistic masterplot treats bodies as objects of desire in narrative, which then narratologically structures the narrative through a progression of metonyms to arrive at a final totalising metaphor. As From Modernist Entombment demonstrates quite effectively, Brooks’s masterplot does not hold for textual representations of dead bodies in modern and postmodern fiction, primarily because the dead body is a material reminder of loss; writers are therefore forced to choose either to represent the physical death through a chain of metonyms or to transform the death into the symbolic. It is also pertinent that, as Perdigao succinctly sums Brooks’s point, “all narrative performs at the intersection between Eros and the death instinct” (65). For Perdigao, the burial trope neatly encompasses both of these requirements, as the death instinct is fulfilled by the spectacle of the corpse at the same time that narrative desire is focused upon re-presenting that body. While this theoretical masterplot provides an excellent point of departure for Perdigao’s readings, unfortunately she relies too heavily upon reiterating the Brooksonian masterplot to build her argument.

In the first chapter, From Modernist Entombment anchors the initial terms of the modernist burial plot that attempts to finalise (while also problematising) a metaphorical transaction into a symbolic and idealised corpse using This Side of Paradise, The Great Gatsby, Sanctuary and As I Lay Dying. In The Great Gatsby, for example, Perdigao argues that Nick Carraway retrospectively narrates the events leading to Myrtle Wilson’s death, her husband’s, and Gatsby’s, but the chain of metonyms leading to the final funeral allow Nick to secure a final transformative metaphor because of Gatsby’s lack of bodily specificity. When Nick searches Gatsby’s mansion for some sign of his life, he only finds a picture of Dan Cody, ‘a token of forgotten violence’ (34); however, this totality of metaphor is inaccessible to Nick for a description of Myrtle Wilson’s dead body as figurative language fails him. Similarly, Addie Bundren in As I Lay Dying supplies the teleological drive of the plot as her family drives up to Jefferson to bury her body, but the dead female body troubles traditional male representations. The coffin that Addie is carted in functions at once as a metaphor, which each of the fifteen characters who recount the story piecemeal must invest with their own associations, and as a metonym associated with the mother and bringing the family together around her in united purpose. To further problematise Faulkner’s refusal to secure the metonymic chain as a metaphoric closure, Perdigao discusses Addie’s prosopopoetic voice — ‘the illusion of voice, rather than its presence’ (48) — as it enters the text seemingly from beyond the coffin, signalling a lack of finality which is usually indicated by bodily death.

Perdigao’s fourth chapter develops especially strongly the idea of textual vacillation between the two poles of metaphor and metonym in postmodern fiction, using Kindred and The Virgin Suicides. Although the section on the latter text displays a few of the same problems of repetition from which the as a whole book suffers, it is perhaps the most clearly argued of the book, as Perdigao lucidly describes the narrators’ struggles to represent the dead Lisbon girls through their adolescent memories. Their descriptions continually alternate between the almost mythical tales of Lux’s promiscuity and the hard data of her gynecological report, one of the boys’ “most prized possessions.” Along with the “titillating numbers” of
the report is a photo of her cervix, which Perdigao successfully points out as one of the most problematic sites of the narrative. What seems to be most perfectly metonymic of Lux’s sexuality and the boys’ collective desire for her body is described by them as a simile: it is “like an inflamed eye, fixing us with its silent accusation” (119), underlying From Modernist Entombment’s central argument regarding the circularity and continual tension between figurative and material representation of the body. Additionally, this section draws attention to the fact that the Lisbon girls remain unburied indefinitely because of the cemetery workers’ strike, a similar “resistance” to burial as Addie’s in As I Lay Dying, so that the difficulty of closure that the narrators experience in attempting to piece together a narrative of the five girls from memories and collected ephemera is embodied in the lack of finality that burying the Lisbon girls would have provided.

The final chapter draws on the book’s underlying trajectory, which moves from examining texts authored by white, male canonical writers to African-American women writers with marginal reputations. Perdigao spends more space than necessary demonstrating the neglect of Zora Neal Hurston’s body of work until the late 70s, though it is a necessary step in terms of showing that the purpose of From Modernist Entombment’s trajectory is to open the body-as-text and exhumation metaphors, making them available to questions regarding critical literary history and canon formation. From Modernist Entombment’s argument begins implicitly to shift focus to the problematics of race and class in the second chapter with the discussion of Native Son, but this sub-theme of the book is granted full attention with this chapter. Drawing on Alice Walker’s critical writings and efforts to locate Hurston’s unmarked grave so as to rehabilitate her literary reputation and give her a proper burial place, Perdiago strains the exhumation metaphor to argue that “the body” of Hurston literary criticism is inscribed within Walker’s text” (140). She does recognise the inevitable failure of closing with this master metaphor of the text-as-body that she had noted was unsuccessful in the modernists’ attempts to discursively represent a corpse (145), but here she seems to dig too deeply into the vague implications of her initial definitions to justify and append this chapter to an otherwise coherent group of readings. Shug Avery in The Color Purple is read as a re-embodiment of Hurston, and Shug’s relationship with Celie is then a fictionalised version of Hurston and Walker’s literary relationship.

In this way, the book’s argument ends with a metatextual expansion that involves the fraught representation of fictional bodies and bodies of fiction. This expansion exposes tensions that become apparent from merging fictional, historical, and critical-biographical narratives into a postmodern novel that “tropes Hurston’s tropes as well as troping Hurston criticism” (133). In the end, it is our use of language, both figurative and concrete, that will always fail to some degree in rendering “the body as a system of meaning and physical matter” (163, my italics), which is also perhaps part of the reason why this last chapter does not seem wholly successful.

The success of From Modernist Entombment’s compelling argument and detailed textual evidence is somewhat stifled, however, by overreliance on critical reception histories for its contexts. Since the American modern and postmodern novels used result in such variance of time period, region, class, gender, and race, Perdigao on the one hand is able to demonstrate a widespread engagement with these representative strategies for death, but on the other hand is unable to account in any detail for historical or social specificities to which these texts relate. The book also seems as if it could have used another thorough-going editorial eye, as it was at times quite repetitious and often unclear, due to important plot or character details being unnecessarily withheld for several pages after they would have been most effectively employed for the reader to fully understand the line of argument. Additionally, extensive subsidiary arguments placed in footnotes were at times overwhelming, and rather than supplementing or clarifying the thrust of From Modernist Entombment’s argument, detracted from the strength of

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Perdigao’s points. Regardless of these issues with readability, *From Modernist Entombment* does present a good survey of death and the body in these twentieth-century American texts and would make a good starting point for those seeking to further theorise the body and corpse in the American twentieth-century novel.

*PHILIP KEEL GEHEBER*
Dongshin Yi, *A Genealogy of the Cybergothic: Aesthetics and Ethics in the Age of the Posthuman*  
(Surrey, England and Burlington, Vermont: Ashgate, 2010)

In literary criticism, “posthumanism” often confines itself to contemporary literature due to self-imposed limitations. Dongshin Yi’s study aims to link posthumanist theory to a selection of texts labelled as “Gothic,” largely through discussions of the cyborg that require a re-examination of the question of what it is to be human. The link used to join these two halves of the study is a reassessment of the role of the “sublime” in terms of Gothic aesthetics. What Yi aims to recover in classic novels such as *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, *Frankenstein* and *Dracula* is an “aesthetics of the beautiful,” a slightly confusing term that Yi later clarifies as an aesthetics “that facilitates an uninterrupted correspondence between sensibility and judgment, or between feeling and reason” (41), which seems to mean a space of hybridity maintained by balancing the polarities of the Burkean beautiful and sublime.

From here, Yi moves on to more contemporary novels (Sinclair Lewis’s *Arrowsmith* and Marge Piercy’s *He, She and It*) to emphasise the role of gender in “scientific” discourse and to introduce the concept of “mothering,” which Yi sees as a key relationship for the development of a posthuman society. Despite its frequently convoluted arguments and its terminological impenetrability, both of which can at times be obstacles to comprehension, Yi’s study is creative in its attempt to explore the possibilities of posthumanism and ambitious in its scope, and the merging of posthumanism and Gothic studies is surely welcome to many.

The introduction, “Beyond ‘The Ruin of Representation,’” begins with two quotations from Foucault about *On the Genealogy of Ethics*. The first concerns the possibility of having an “ethics” that accounts for “the pleasure of the other,” and the second quotation does not seem to relate to the first at all, discussing the necessity of the rehabilitation of subjectivity in art. This is just one of the many confusing trains of thought in Yi’s study. Following the second, lengthier Foucault quotation, Yi argues that “An affirmation of ‘the pleasure of the other’ indeed takes both an aesthetical appreciation of pleasure and an ethical embrace of the other [...]” (1). This relationship between “aesthetics” and “ethics” dominates the introduction and the first two chapters, though the precise definition of either of these terms in Yi’s study never quite appears and this lack of clarity makes for perplexing reading throughout the first two chapters.

Yi’s intentions concerning the posthuman and the cyborg are well articulated, however, if not always well executed. He argues that an aesthetics of the posthuman must be one that turns away from the “sublime” and towards a receptive empathy. “The reason for pursuing an aesthetical ethics is quite simple,” Yi argues, “non-humans don’t speak our language. Incommunicable, they remain unknowable and uncontrollable, inciting our fear and hostility – feelings by which we pretend to know and control them” (1). Yi advocates a “pleasant reciprocity” with the nonhuman, with “the others” (1). This idea of “pleasant reciprocity,” or “sensibility,” is addressed through recourse to the female characters in *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, *Frankenstein* and, to an extent, *Dracula*, and is contrasted to “sublime” notions of fear and terror. Before the encounter with the non-human “cyborg” can be a productive one, Yi argues, the encounter with the “other” in these classic Gothic texts must be revisited and must be refocused to look towards the beautiful and the sensible instead of the abjectly terrifying.

Building on C. Jodey Castricano’s term “cybergothic” (which the reader only learns in a footnote – a problem that occurs often throughout the book), Yi defines “cybergothic” as a “literary genre that emphasizes the necessity of an imaginary/imaginative approach to posthumanism, the current discourses of which are limited by practicalities of technoscience and dictates of anthropocentrism and therefore,
incapable of envisioning an aesthetical ethics for non-humans” (3). These types of claims throughout Yi’s study are unfortunately rarely supported by examples or by clarifying sentences. Too often, the analysis that should accompany a sentence such as the abovementioned is relegated to a footnote and even then only takes the form of a quotation from another critic (also without any supporting discussion).

The definition of the “Gothic” in this study seems to be of an extrapolated encounter with “the other,” which, for this discussion of posthumanism, is apt, though vague. The sentence that seems to contain Yi’s explication of his use of the gothic convention does little to help the vagueness:

Giving birth to the cyborgothic is ultimately to impregnate the gothic literature whose revival later in the twentieth century in literature and other cultural media epitomizes the century’s persistent and productive (or counterproductive) engagement with the others, with the cyborg that appears in science fiction and claims our attention with its versatile (shape-shifting) utility and subversive potentiality (3).

This “engagement with the others” is what Yi uses to synthesise the two halves of his study. Focusing on gothic and horror fiction specifically due to their “lifting of categorical boundaries between humans and their Others,” as Rosi Braidotti argues (13), Yi makes some convincing points, but does not sufficiently address why any type of imaginative literature could not be discussed in a similar fashion. Yi attacks critics of Gothic literature and of “science fiction” (which he also defines, oddly, as “fiction concerned with the question of science and scientists in society”) who once believed the genres “not representative enough” (4), and applauds the twentieth-century attention to these two genres because of their political possibilities. This is an important point, and one that is very relevant, considering the role science fiction and the Gothic have played in recent conceptions of issues such as genetic engineering, climate change and cloning.

Indeed, in terms of its critical situation, Yi’s study does an admirable job providing overviews of posthumanist theory and discourse. In addition to informed discussions of foundational texts (such as N. Katherine Hayles’ How we Became Posthuman, Donna Haraway’s Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature and David Porush’s The Soft Machine: Cybernetic Fiction), Yi introduces each chapter with a relevant, engaging anecdote from discussions about the category of “human” from sources such as the Japanese roboticist Masahiro Moto (11), debates about a “thinking machine” from a 1949 lecture at the Royal College of Surgeons, England (39), discussions about eugenics (63) and a 2002 report from the President’s [George W. Bush’s] Council on Bioethics (93). This information is valuable for the political implications of posthumanist theory, and is usually presented in a clear and engaging manner.

Moreover, Yi’s analysis of the individual texts under scrutiny (The Mysteries of Udolpho, Frankenstein, Dracula, Sinclair Lewis’ Arrowsmith and Marge Bercy’s He, She and It) is typically quite skillful, and some of the strongest sections of this study are his close readings of passages in these texts, especially the more popularised Frankenstein and Dracula. Nevertheless, a focus on the “beautiful” dominates the discussion of both Udolpho and Frankenstein, and it is often difficult to keep track of the larger argument of the book. Yi’s study also has two distinct halves, and little is done to unite the two. For example, though each chapter opens with the anecdotes about posthumanism in a larger political context mentioned above (which extend into the first couple of pages of each chapter), this material never surfaces again in the chapter, not even as it comes to a close. The superb job Yi does in setting the theoretical approach for his chapters is therefore unfortunately often lost in the turgid, jargon-laden discussions of aesthetics.

The third chapter, “Van Helsing’s Dilemma: Science and Mill’s Utilitarianism,” is probably the strongest in the book due to a relatively clear connection between the close-readings of Dracula, the critical
framework, and the philosophy (primarily Mill, but also Locke) used to discuss the role of the sciences in a modernising society. This chapter examines what Yi refers to as a “scientifically organized” society (66) and contains much valuable analysis about the role of the sciences in Victorian culture (73-75). Yi also makes many thought-provoking points about Dracula, scientific discourse, and the culture which produced the two. There are still some questionable claims (“The battle between Burkean sensibility and Kantian judgment – or between the beautiful and the sublime, in the field of aesthetics – was won by the latter, signaling the end of gothic aesthetics and the beginning of modern aesthetics” (71)), but overall, this chapter is a rare moment of clarity in Yi’s study.

Throughout the study, one problem is the way in which Yi uses criticism; as previously indicated, too often, the reader is confronted with quotation after quotation of lengthy, undigested secondary material that further restricts readability of his work. This could not be more glaring in the fourth chapter, where even the very subject matter (Lewis’s book) was taken from another critic (Charles E. Rosenberg’s No Other Gods: On Science and American Social Thought) (96). The choice of Arrowsmith is odd given the canonical status of the previous texts, and the fact that it is not Yi’s own, makes this choice all the more strange. Like the lack of discussion surrounding much of the earlier criticism and philosophy, the decision to adopt Rosenberg’s idea also seems to point either to a lack of confidence with the material or to laziness. Such scholarly carelessness is also apparent, for example, when one goes to search for the G.K. Chesterton source in the bibliography from which Yi has quoted on page 64, only to find that “Chesterton,” who Yi characterises before the quote as “one of the earliest critics of eugenics” in his introduction to eugenics, is nowhere to be found.

That said, the fourth chapter, “A Humanistic Science in a Pragmatic Society: Re-Reading Sinclair Lewis’s Arrowsmith,” is overall a strong one, particularly in terms of its discussions of gender. It also sets the stage for the final chapter, “The Birth of the Cyborgothic,” which expands upon points originally made in the introduction and seemingly dropped for the remainder of the study. In this final chapter, Yi attempts to unite the disparate parts of the book, arguing that “The cyborg will help configure the tripartite partnership of posthumanism, where science, humans, and non-humans interface” (124), and concludes the book with an emphasis on the need for all humans to have “mothering” sentiments towards the cyborg, such as appears in the film A.I., with which Yi’s book closes. While the final line of the book is downright silly (“No one has to be more human, or less human, to be a human in the age of posthumanism – one just needs to be as human as a mother” (144)), most of the arguments in this chapter do result in clarifying some of the intentions Yi seems to have had for the rest of the book. The need to reassess the importance of sensibility and compassion in early Gothic texts is highlighted and put into the context of more contemporary debates concerning the “human” and the posthuman, and eventually leads into a debate about how anything the human “constructs” must be treated with dignity.

Overall, though, while A Genealogy of the Cyborgothic: Aesthetics and Ethics in the Age of the Posthuman poses many provocative questions and makes a number of strong arguments, its density, clumsiness and, at times, downright unreadability, stand in the way of making this study successful.

ALISON LACIVITA
John Sears, Stephen King’s Gothic  
(University of Wales Press, 2011)

Having written such influential horror novels as Carrie (1974), ‘Salem’s Lot (1975), and The Shining (1977), Stephen King can be said to have been effectively leavened into the contemporary Gothic tradition. Given his ongoing intertextual references to his predecessors in the tradition (Edgar Allen Poe, H.P. Lovecraft, Shirley Jackson), King is well aware of the Gothic properties of his work, and Stephen King’s Gothic provides a welcome opportunity for a more sustained analysis of King’s work in terms of the genre. John Sears, a Senior Lecturer in English at Manchester Metropolitan University, engages in a series of compelling close readings of King’s works, spanning the last forty years.

During that time, there has been no small amount of King criticism, both scholarly and popular, and Sears distinguishes his approach by structuring his readings around the act of writing and what that act produces. These deceptively simple acts generate considerable anxiety throughout King’s body of work, perhaps most memorably in novels such as The Shining, Misery (1987), and The Dark Half (1989), and the novella Secret Window, Secret Garden (1990). In Stephen King’s Gothic, Sears engages in a wide-ranging exploration how King has, over the course of his career, made use of the Gothic in his horror fiction, by taking as case studies a number of King’s most well-known works.

Sears begins Chapter 1 with questions surrounding what it would mean to re-read an author such as Stephen King; that is to say, an author many have placed (rather dismissively) at the “popular” end of the literary continuum. Sears speculates on the demands made on the reader engaging in the act of rereading King’s œuvre, termed by Sears as an “immense and complex textual space.” The repetition involved in multiple readings of King is skillfully advanced by Sears as Gothic in itself, revealing what the text and its previous readings may have concealed. Yet this repetition created by re-reading is accompanied by the repetition of revisiting and then rewriting, with King not only drawing influence from earlier writers in the Gothic mode but also publishing revised and expanded versions of previously published novels, including The Stand (1978) and ‘Salem’s Lot. Sears also considers the crucial nature of writing in King’s Gothic, a means of determining social relations also imbued with what Sears refers to as a “spectral authority over death,” with the Gothic acts of resurrection and repetition becoming evident in King’s work even at the formal level. Sears then surveys Gothic otherness in King’s work, with horrific difference turning up in such gendered, racialised, and sexualised forms as the uncanny or monstrous. Suggesting new methods for reading King, Sears provocatively establishes King’s relationship to the Gothic tradition, while also pointing out the generic hybridity of King’s writing and its reinvention of existing genres, a characteristic shared with the Gothic more generally.

Chapter 2, “Carrie’s Gothic Script,” offers a close reading of King’s first published novel, establishing King’s Gothic concerns, evident even in this early work. Carrie, written in epistolary form, is advanced by Sears as demonstrating a self-reflexive and Gothic-infused emphasis on both reading and writing. Premised upon telepathy as a form of communication, Carrie repeatedly depicts the contrast between the mundane, contemporary world of the high school and the small town of Chamberlaine, Maine, and the uncanny domestic space inhabited by Carrie White and her religious-fanatic mother. “Disinterring, Doubling: King and Traditions,” the third chapter, further locates King within the Gothic tradition through an analysis of the act of writing in King’s The Dark Half and Secret Window, Secret Garden, from the collection Four Past Midnight. Chapter 4, “Genre’s Gothic Machinery,” reads The Tommyknockers (1987) as Gothic science fiction, with the presence of not only Gothic SF but Gothic romance, Gothic crime, and Gothic comedy, indicating again the genre’s long-standing tendency (shared with King and his
work) towards generic hybridity. This chapter is particularly provocative in its expansion of critical approaches to King and the Gothic itself.

Sears further explores King’s relation to the Gothic, addressing the act of reading in Chapter 5, “Misery’s Gothic Tropes,” where he analyses Misery, suggesting the novel’s central concern with the horror of mis-reading, through either over- or under-reading (through, for example, a failure to grasp King’s textual allusions to Gothic literature, a failure that symbolically links the reader to Misery’s antagonist, Nurse Annie Wilkes). Meanwhile, Chapter 6, “Gothic Time in The Langoliers,” subjects The Langoliers, a novella from Four Past Midnight (1990), to another close reading, this one involving Gothic notions of time, in its past, present, and future incarnations within the ideological context of the U.S. in the late 1980s. Sears deserves applause for advancing The Langoliers as his primary text for this kind of analysis, eschewing more familiar novels in favor of a novella. In Chapter 7, “This Inhuman Place: King’s Gothic Places,” Sears examines the importance of place in King’s work, particularly the geography of Maine in which so much of his writing is set, and how place both contains and fails to contain the uncanny through a reading of The Shining. Finally, Chapter 8, “Facing Gothic Monstrosity,” theorises the face of the monster in King’s Gothic, where monstrosity is repeatedly gendered as feminine, although this seems familiar ground in the wider context of King criticism generally. The ninth and final chapter, “Conclusion: King’s Gothic Endings,” briefly considers the impossibility of textual closure within King’s Gothic narratives, where the conclusion is marked as both “ending” and “not-ending.”

Employing a primarily psychoanalytic framework, Sears nevertheless is able to adopt a surprisingly diverse and innovative series of perspectives regarding Gothic aspects of Stephen King’s work (the most effective chapters are those in which Sears reads The Tommyknockers as Gothic SF and his analysis of The Langoliers). At the same time, the author’s continued attention to writing as a “Gothic act” emerges as one of the book’s weaker aspects, giving the reader the sense that this critical concern might have been more effectively integrated into the book as a whole. While impressively thorough and critically sound, Sears’ close readings at times feel too close, resulting in the over-emphasis of some points (particularly regarding lexical analysis). A pronounced academic tone, while appropriate to the material, will easily overwhelm and put off more general readers through its sheer density, significantly decreasing the potential audience for Stephen King’s Gothic. Sears is to be commended, however, for producing a full-length study of King and the Gothic that takes its material, both King’s “popular” writing and the horror genre itself, as worthy of literary criticism.

**DREW BEARD**
Bianca Del Villano, *Ghostly Alterities: Spectrality and Contemporary Literatures in English* (Stuttgart: ibidem-Verlag, 2007)

In a 1999 essay called “The Contemporary London Gothic and the Limits of the ‘Spectral Turn,’” Roger Luckhurst coined the term “spectral turn” to describe a then (and perhaps still) current moment in which cultural and critical theory reflects on questions of spectrality, haunting and ghostliness. The spectral turn is conventionally dated to the 1993 publication of Jacques Derrida’s *Specters of Marx* (translated into English in 1994) and the inauguration of the notion of “hauntology,” Derrida’s punning neologism that uses ghost imagery to deconstruct being and absence. The Spectral Turn also encompasses works by writers like Jean-Michel Rabaté, Avery F. Gordon, Carla Jodey Castricano, Ashok Kara, Julian Wolfreys, Jeffrey Sconce, Gray Kochlar-Lingren, Gabriele Schwab, Christine Berthin and more. While these works should not be entirely homogenised, they show a remarkable consistency in terms of how the figure of the ghost has a privileged power to represent (among other subjects) the gap between body and spirit wrought by modern technologies of transmission and recording; the persistence of suppressed and traumatic histories within the living present; the vagaries of time; and the ghostlike posture of all those who are unseen and unacknowledged by those in power.

Bianca Del Villano’s *Ghostly Alterities: Spectrality and Contemporary Literatures in English* (2007) represents one of the more readable and insightful contributions to this body of scholarship, and to a scholar with an interest in the spectral turn and its claims, it will prove a vital work. The alterities referred to in the title, according to Del Villano, lead “to the encounter of different worlds, i.e. different mental spaces in different temporalities [...]. I would like to show how the threshold between the two realms can actually dilate, blurring the previous contours and margins, in order to interrogate the reasons why we seem to need these boundaries and what are the historical, psychic, cultural constructions which have produced them” (23).

Drawing especially on Derrida and Avery Gordon’s *Ghostly Matters* (1997), as well as Freud’s familiar essay on “The Uncanny” (1919), *Ghostly Alterities* adds to a branch of the spectral turn that relates ghostliness to issues in postcolonial and racial studies. In fact, I find it unfortunate that the book’s title does not signal its focus on race and postcolonialism; as such it might evade the gaze of the scholars to whom it would be most useful. Broadly defined, the branch of the spectral turn that *Ghostly Alterities* inhabits could also be said to include books by Teresa Goddu, Kathleen Brogan, Renée Bergland, Gerry Turcotte, Tabish Khair, Marisa Parham, Bliss Cua Lim, Glen M. Mimura and Katrin Althans. At a slender 179 pages, Del Villano’s book deals almost entirely with six novels: J.M. Coetzee’s *Foe* (1986), Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987), Ben Okri’s *The Famished Road* (1991), Pat Barker’s *The Ghost Road* (1995), Patricia Grace’s *Baby No-Eyes* (1998) and Vivienne Cleven’s *My Sister’s Eye* (2002). There are, however, also brief but fascinating treatments of older works like *Hamlet* and *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*; in her discussions of the latter, Del Villano does a particularly good job of revealing how the slave trade underpins Coleridge’s ghost ship imagery. Del Villano is interested in the ways in which “our time presents itself as a spectral time. The postcolonial awareness of a common (for the West and for the ex-colonies) past of Imperialism and slavery has led to the necessity to re-think the terms of an official history constructed on the marginalization of the weak and the minorities” (5). In contrast to the classical ghost story, where the ghost must be put to rest in order to restore systemic order, Del Villano holds that “[p]ostmodern and postcolonial ghosts [...] aim at [the system’s] destabilization [...] in contrast, it leads the characters and us readers to interrogate the reasons why the time is out of joint” (8).

In addition to the introduction, which provides as straightforward a survey of the existing material on ghosts, postmodernism and postcolonialism as could be hoped for, *Ghostly Alterities* consists of three
long chapters and a brief conclusion. Each chapter deals with a number of the novels mentioned above. The first, “The Eye and I: Visuality, Subjectivity and Textuality” deals with the play of ghosts on the edge of visibility and invisibility, and the relationship of this dynamic to the white gaze and the black body. The second, “Melancholic (G) hospitality,” figures the ghost as a signifier of melancholia, as a signifier of loss that cannot ever be entirely overcome. Del Villano relates the relationship between the haunted and the ghost to the host-guest relationship in Derrida’s works on hospitality. The last chapter, “Uneven Roads: The Courses of History” deals with gaps in history, both personal and official, and how the spectral occupies them. Del Villano’s observations are never less than shrewd, and the book should be praised for its lucidity and its refusal to drape its points in the obscuritarian language that afflicts much of the works allied with the Spectral Turn.

It is worth noting that only a minority of the novels that Del Villano analyses deal with “literal,” supernatural ghosts rather than more conceptual or metaphorical kinds of haunting. In some cases, intellectual gymnastics are necessary to read a given novel as one about the spectral. These are also all works of what is sometimes termed “high literature,” two by Nobel-prize winning novelists; one wonders where Del Villano’s inquiries would have taken her if she had also drawn on, say, Shirley Jackson’s The Haunting of Hill House (1959), Richard Matheson’s Hell House (1971), Peter Straub’s Ghost Story (1979) and Ramsay Campbell’s Nazareth Hill (1997).

Beyond this, one issue that Ghostly Alterities skirts almost entirely is language. The title of the book stresses “Literatures in English,” and all the books discussed within are Anglophone, albeit from authors from a variety of countries, including Great Britain, the United States, South Africa, Nigeria and New Zealand. But why should this conceptual field be limited to English-language novels? Is it just a matter of convenience, or is there something about the English language which lends itself to treating spectral matters in a certain way? Del Villano’s early interrogation of the O.E.D. definitions of the words “ghosts,” “phantasm,” “spectre” and “phantom” suggests that the latter may be the case, but it remains an undeveloped thread in this book.

Another of the book’s frustrations (one for which the blame lies with its publisher, not its author) is its lack of an index. In my view at least, academic books are not meant simply to be read, but to be consulted, and the lack of an index limits a book’s usefulness in this regard. This would be less of a problem if the book were available in full text on Google Books, but no such luck. If I were king of the world, I would make publishing an academic book without an index a capital offense. And even for those with a high tolerance for postmodern wordplay, “(G)hospitality” may seem to be a bridge too far. I’m not even sure how one would say it out loud.

MURRAY LEEDER
Darryl Jones, Elizabeth McCarthy and Bernice M. Murphy (eds.), *It Came From the 1950s!: Popular Culture, Popular Anxieties*  
(Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan)

When we think of the 1950s, our imaginations fill with a curious collection of contradictory images. At first we have a vision of a time of peace and stability, an idyllic era following on from the most destructive war in human history. We also, at least in the case of America, have an image of plenty, a superabundance of jobs, money, homes and food, of flashy saloon cars, domestic gadgets and countless more luxury items created to satiate a crazed new desire to consume. The 1950s also strikes one as an age of overweening confidence, when the interests of politicians and the people were apparently one and the same, and grand projects like the construction of highways in the USA and the development of the National Health System in the UK could be accomplished. Indeed, the vision which instantly ricochets through the mind when one thinks of the 50s is still that of the neatly dressed, wide-eyed and perpetually smiling nuclear family, the carefree inheritors of a shiny brave new world.

Leaking through this pretty picture is an image of the other 1950s, the real 1950s. This was a time of relentless fear and uncertainty, of rampant paranoia and conservatism generated by a new breed of conflict, the Cold War. Barely concealed by a mask of material wealth and wholesome values was a realm of psychological trauma, of doubt, of deep existential despair and mass-tranquilisation. The happy nuclear family was a unit constantly in danger of being split apart by the frustration of parents and the alienation of the young. This was a world in which everything lay in the shadow of the Atomic Bomb’s mushroom cloud and the human race awoke each morning not knowing if this would be the day which saw the world reduced to ashes.

It is therefore highly appropriate that the introduction to this brilliant and screwball collection of essays should, borrowing a title which Leonard Bernstein borrowed from W.H. Auden, classify the 50s as an *Age of Anxiety*. A multifarious study of 50s’ culture has long been needed because, like the Victorian era, it was a fascinatingly schizoid age in which one world and its mirror image seemed to co-exist, and in which a surface of progress and revolutionisation hid from view a violent, regressive reality. This volume presents the 1950s in all their confusing glory, and three smart editorial decisions have contributed to making it such a complete survey of its subject. Firstly, while the book confirms that the 1950s was “the first authentically American decade,” it holds that the different and yet sometimes strangely similar experiences of Britons form an equally valid story. For this reason the book’s cultural analyses are neatly divided between those devoted to American subjects and British ones.

Secondly, this book considers every variety of cultural phenomena – fiction, poetry, cinema and television – in order to reveal the multitude of ways in which the anxieties of the 50s manifested. After all, this age of anxiety was one whose fears “operated across traditional aesthetic hierarchies and genre boundaries” and reached “an enormous audience made up of highly disparate interpretive communities.” Thirdly, this volume regards the 1950s not as a tightly defined time period but rather as a nebulous phase of massive cultural upheaval and diversification. The first signs of this change appeared before the 1950s even began and its effects persisted well into the next decade. Therefore, to assess the significance of this shift, *It Came from the 1950s!* looks at the extended cultural epoch known as the “long 1950s.”

The eleven essays in this collection cover a startlingly wide selection of topics. From bomb shelters to bullet bras, from domesticity to demons, from Frankenstein to food advertising, from masculinity to mutants, not a single important feature of 50s’ cultural landscape has escaped these authors. A fine job has been done to balance the different subjects, so that every cultural form gets its share of attention. It’s
also astonishing how each one provides a distinct perspective on the 50s, so that as a totality the book offers a remarkably detailed and vivid portrait of the era. Moreover, the roll-call of contributors is incredibly impressive. Distinguished scholars and noted experts like David J. Skal, Christopher Frayling and Kim Newman are just some of the names on a list bursting with luminaries.

While the 1950s was a decade characterised by many different tensions, a strong argument can be made that these were all symptoms of the same disease, as all were related to the disaster of World War II. Just as the First World War had followed survivors home from the trenches, so the horrors of World War II drastically overshadowed the societies that emerged after it. The destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki had demonstrated that an almighty new weapon existed which could at any moment exterminate all life on Earth. Living with the daily awareness that, if war broke out again, mankind would be annihilated in a heartbeat is something contemporary readers cannot begin to comprehend, and it’s no surprise that an obsession with the Bomb, and a newfound distrust of science, crept into 1950s culture in many ways.

This makes David J. Skal’s essay “A-Bombs, B-Pictures, and C-Cups” an excellent starting point. Skal writes that the A-Bomb’s detonation was the nail in the coffin for hopes of a scientific utopia and “gave startling new life to ancient ideas” about man’s interference with nature. Myths and legends from Prometheus and Pandora’s Box to Faust, Frankenstein and the Fall of Man were refurbished in a series of films dealing with scientific doomsdays. Whether the threat came from outer space, from underground or beneath the sea, Skal argues that all of these movies betray a preoccupation with guilt and sin. He also notes that in many of them the monster is man. The 1950s saw the rise of the figure of the “Mad Scientist” as uncertainty grew about “the scientific, technological and military juggernaut that was engulfing the world.”

Kim Newman’s essay, “Mutants and Monsters,” continues in this nuclear vein. Newman challenges the view that the seemingly infinite number of monster movies made in the 50’s were all variations on the “nature takes revenge” theme, instead arguing that they present a surprisingly complex range of reactions to the rise of nuclear power and atomic testing. Ever the man prepared to venture excitedly into shadowy regions of cinematic obscurity most of us leave alone, Newman compares the merits of films like Attack of the Crab Monsters and The Monster That Challenged the World to prove his case. He also shows how several bleak British and Japanese movies gave a sceptical and even despairing response to America’s development into the Atomic superpower.

Mark Jancovich and Derek Johnson’s essay focuses on many of the same movies as Skal’s and Newman’s, such as Them!, Invasion of the Body Snatchers, The Thing from Another World and The Day the Earth Stood Still, and it too offers a new interpretation of these classics. Unlike sci-fi novels and television series, where the author was regarded as the creative imagination responsible for the work, the sci-fi movie was primarily seen as a showcase for the talents of the special effects artist. In Jancovich and Johnson’s view, a wizard like Ray Harryhausen was the real “star” of these films not because his creations were convincingly lifelike but rather because of his “capacity to create spectacular and off-beat fantasies.”

If the cinema provided the most graphic projections of 50s’ neuroses, the printed page remained a powerful witness to the more insidious insecurities of the time. In her fascinating essay, Lorna Piatti-Farnell examines how Sylvia Plath’s writing attests both to “the formation of a contemporary consumer identity in American society” and to Plath’s “desire to create a ‘perfect’ domestic space.” By decoding the semiotics of 50s’ food advertising and the iconography of the 50s’ kitchen as these appear in The Bell Jar, Piatti-Farnell gives an powerful reading of Plath’s work as preoccupied with the image of
the consuming woman trapped within a frightening Gothic space in which she is viewed as an object to be consumed and where her body is something to be feasted upon like meat.

Robert Bloch, a writer whose quirky short-stories are criminally underestimated, is the subject of a fine essay by Kevin Corstorphine. Although they originally appeared in gore-splattered and sensational horror and sci-fi magazines, Corstorphine believes that Bloch’s 1950s’ tales cunningly subverted the exploitative, misogynist attitudes of these publications. Corstorphine argues that they are studies of the two anxieties which troubled men most deeply in the 1950s, their anguish at their inability to find an identity in the Post-War world and the incestuous nature of their creativity, embodied in their need to cannibalise the work of father-figures as a crude way of compensating for their inability to create ex-nihilo like women. As a writer “self-reflexively aware of his own anxieties and those of his readers,” Bloch was, according to Corstorphine, extremely innovative in his use of the “narrative of psychology to construct plot,” a skill Bloch would demonstrate best in Psycho.

Another writer particularly attune to the unease of her age was Shirley Jackson, the subject of a superb essay by Dara Downey. Downey focuses on the hitherto overlooked connection between Jackson’s fiction and the “Myth and Ritual” school of American anthropology which, by the mid-50s, had become the last word in literary interpretation. Downey argues that even though Jackson’s writing makes “explicit use of the archetypes and quasi-mythical plots” that this school of anthropology sought to identify, her deployment of these motifs and ideas stemmed from a desire to “complicate, rather than create a coherent, unified mythology around, the relationships between women, houses and wider social structures of belonging.” By looking at two of Jackson’s most famous novels, The Haunting of Hill House and We Have Always Lived in the Castle, Downey’s incisive essay illustrates how Jackson’s fictions occupy “a realm other than that of absolute reality.” Her belief that they must be read rather than explained proves once again that Jackson is a figure whose works are vital to any discussion of modern Gothic literature.

Elizabeth McCarthy’s snappily titled “Fast Cars and Bullet Bras” is an equally revealing piece of scholarship. McCarthy hilariously explains how Rock ’n Roll was diagnosed as a “communicable disease” by so-called medical experts whose views were popularised by a media keen to disguise the fact that juvenile delinquency was mainly a consequence of poverty. Unlike her male counterpart, the female juvenile delinquent was handed over not to the police but to psychoanalysts to be cured of her moral sickness. This “lawless female” was a subversive figure whose supposedly voracious sexual appetite meant that she posed a deadly threat to clean-cut American youths of both genders, and McCarthy illustrates how this figure’s sexual aggression even saw her transformed, in the fevered imaginations of artists, into a bizarre human-car hybrid and a living weapon!

If there was plenty to be afraid of in 50’s America, over in Blighty a new generation of fear-makers were going into production and the three articles on British horror in It Came From the 1950s! are among its highlights. Wayne Kinsey’s essay on the early days of Hammer, “Don’t Dare See It Alone!,” shows how the studio turned the X-certificate into a source of box-office gold, and its history of the battle of wits between movie producers and the British Board of Film Censors (told through a series of juicy extracts from their correspondences) is extremely amusing. If ever there was someone in a position to explain the cultural significance of Hammer’s resurrection of Dracula in the form of Christopher Lee, it is Christopher Frayling and his essay is, as one would expect, a tour de force of scholarship, humour and perspicacity. What both of these contributions manage to do is to recapture the shocking impact these original Hammer films had on their 50s’ audience, to remind de-sensitised modern readers of what made them so controversial and so successful.

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Released in 1957, the same year as Hammer’s revolting first foray into the Gothic, *The Curse of Frankenstein*, Jacques Tourneur’s *Night of the Demon* could not have been a more different kind of beast. Darryl Jones’s expert dissection of this classic explores the subtle interplay of forces and themes that make this a more intriguing and haunting horror film than Hammer could ever have dreamed of. Tracing the film’s development from its origins in M.R. James’s tale “Casting the Runes” to its troubled post-production, Jones reads *Night of the Demon* as a clash of civilisations in which Dana Andrews’ rationalist psychologist, the smarmy embodiment of American materialist arrogance, is taught that the powers of darkness are all too real by Niall MacGinnis’s genteel, trickstering warlock. Jones also elucidates the film’s unsettling depiction of Britain as a twilit bastion of ancient beliefs and shadowy Old-World practices, precisely the quality that still makes *Night of the Demon* such a nightmarish experience, and it’s to this volume’s credit that it should devote proper space to the horror film increasingly acknowledged as the greatest ever made in the British Isles.

The relentless nostalgicisation of the 1950s and its frequent depiction as a cosy, complacent age is something many contemporary filmmakers have deconstructed, and the era’s curious cinematic afterlife is examined by Bernice Murphy in her essay, “Re-Imagining the Fifties.” By considering two well-chosen “50s” movies, Todd Haynes’s melodrama *Far from Heaven* (2002) and Andrew Currie’s zombie comedy *Fido* (2006), Murphy takes a penetrating look at how these films exploit the “slippage” “between the way in which the decade is mediated to us through the television and movies of the decade itself and how it actually was.” With Neo-Conservatives constantly trying to convince us that the 50s was the time when life in America came closest to perfection, Murphy rightly observes that we must not forget that their version of the decade, like many movie-world versions, is a fantasy “in which the era’s institutionalized racism and sexism, are glossed over, and apparently minor historical details such as the threat of nuclear annihilation and the near-fascistic excesses of the McCarthy era go conspicuously unmentioned.” The value of these deconstructions, Murphy believes, lies in the fact that they remind us that the 50s was the time “when many of the most troubling – as well as the most admirable – aspects of modern American life were established.”

*It Came From the 1950s!* fills in one go a substantial gap in popular culture studies. Unlike so many academic collections, not one essay in this volume seems lightweight or unoriginal, and there is a pleasing sense of cohesion about the whole enterprise. Furthermore, the writing on display is unusually witty (the best joke of all being the book’s subtitle: “Popular Culture, Popular Anxieties”) and the volume bounces along so effortlessly that you wish it were twice as long. However, what really makes *It Came From the 1950s!* a success is the obvious affection the contributors have for their subject and it’s rare to see enthusiasm shine from the pages of an academic work as clearly as it does here. A bold start for the considered appreciation of 50’s popular culture, *It Came From the 1950s!* is sure to stimulate plenty more debate and discussion.

**EDWARD O’HARE**
Ed Cameron, *The Psychopathology of the Gothic Romance: Perversion, Neuroses and Psychosis in the Early Works of the Genre*  

The first thing that must be said about Ed Cameron’s intriguing new book, *The Psychopathology of the Gothic Romance*, is that it’s surprising that it was not written years ago. After all, the foundational Gothic texts have been the subject of every other kind of interpretation imaginable, from Marxist critiques to New Historical analysis, so why not a psychopathological one? Indeed it has always been assumed that there is an affinity between these texts and psychoanalysis, that Gothic fictions contain in however crude a form some kind of comment or statement about the nature and functioning of human mental life. Isolated aspects of key Gothic texts have already been interpreted in Freudian, Jungian and Lacanian terms, often with spectacular results, but what Cameron argues here is that there has been an abundance of “armchair psychology” floating about in Gothic criticism and a notable failure to subject Gothic literature to a real “psychoanalytic investigation.”

Too often, Cameron argues, have critics labelled Gothic villains “psychopathic” or Gothic heroines “hysterical” without paying proper attention to “the underlying structure of these distinct pathologies.” In fact, he sees Gothic texts as offering up entire worlds of perversion, neurosis and psychosis which have yet to be looked at from an actual psychoanalytic perspective. Therefore, what Cameron proposes in this book is to put the Gothic “on the couch,” to undertake “a close examination and literary analysis of the underside of the Gothic with detailed attention to and a focused knowledge of the clinical categories of psychoanalysis.” As Cameron reminds us, Freud believed that it was storytellers who first brought the unconscious to light through their powers of symbolic representation. For this reason he too is convinced that psychoanalysis can be said to remain “latent within [a] literary text.” Cameron contends that an assessment of how Gothic fiction, the branch of literature most concerned with “revealing what is darkly seen,” makes manifest the workings of the unconscious is something that could be of great value both for literary critics and psychoanalysts.

This is a Lacanian study and in that respect it is not without precedent. Cameron acknowledges that other recent volumes, by Dale Townshend and Fred Botting, have moved along similar lines but he argues that they were either confused in their use of Lacan’s famously slippery concepts or misrepresented them in order to further their arguments. For this reason he declares that this is the first true dialogue between these three phenomena – clinical psychoanalysis, early Gothic fiction and psychopathology. Cameron also claims that this approach to Gothic criticism is the only one which can truly get to the heart of the anxieties that underly these works. Following Slavoj Žižek, he believes that allegorical “realist” readings of early Gothic novels cannot comprehend their most vital quality, which is their “essential sublime uncanniness.” Lacanian psychoanalysis alone, with its notion of *jouissance* as the emergence of reality within symbolisation, can adequately deal with the Gothic novel’s excessive, overflowing, uncanny sublimity.

Cameron insists that the early Gothic texts he analyses are “Romances” rather than just novels and this distinction is crucial. Romances, which privilege “the pleasures of the imagination over moral instruction,” are a literary form whose uncanniness represents an attempt to figure “that which makes all realistic interpretation falter.” As novels obsessed with the intrusion of the past into the present, romances tap into a “pre-symbolic mode of significance,” a pleasure which is “an aesthetic approximation of the psychoanalytic concept of *jouissance*. “ The uncanny is, for Cameron, a reminder of our original lost object, the negative representation of that which can only be represented but which has no inherent

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meaning. It is the enjoyment of that which lies beyond the pleasure principle; it is the sublime pleasure born of the imagination.

The Psychopathology of the Gothic Romance is divided into six chapters, three devoted to comparisons of the Gothic and psychoanalytic theory and three to psychoanalytic readings of individual Gothic texts. The three romances in question are Horace Walpole’s The Castle of Otranto, Ann Radcliffe’s The Sicilian Romance and Matthew Lewis’s The Monk, while the book concludes with a brief look at James Hogg’s The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner. Unlike numerous other studies, which can often be impenetrable, Cameron’s utilisation of Lacanian concepts in The Psychopathology of the Gothic Romance is admirably clear and this is an accessible volume for Lacan novices and an insightful illustration of his ideas for those whose studies have reached a more advanced level. Cameron’s discussions of the four romances are notably lucid even if his writing style is achingly humourless and his conclusions are not always as convincing as he would like.

The Castle of Otranto receives most of the attention in this book not only because of its status as the inaugural Gothic Romance but because it provides the most complete model or blueprint of a Gothic fiction. Cameron devotes the first chapter to the preface to the book’s second edition, which he calls a “Gothic manifesto.” In this, Walpole triumphantly announced the unleashing of what Cameron calls “the two-headed gothic monster,” a literary hybrid which saw the uncanny erupt out of eighteenth-century realist literature. Cameron sees Walpole’s romance as representing a battleground between two forces, the “allegorical trend to tame the uncanny” and the “psychoanalytic attempt to recognize the truly uncanny nature of the Gothic.” The Castle of Otranto's combination of ancient improbability and modern realism leads Cameron to deem the book “an early literary attempt to point out the uncanny dimension pertaining to the very project of modernity, not in order to make it disappear, but in order to maintain it, to hold it open.” It was a work whose entire raison d’être was to make obvious “the Enlightenment's own internal limit, its own inherent inconsistency.”

As Cameron describes it, The Castle of Otranto is “the one Gothic narrative that possesses all the gadgets and machinery that sustained the genre for the following 60 years.” Walpole’s romance had all the right parts but, to use a contemporary vulgarism, it didn’t necessarily know what to do with them. Despite being underdeveloped and chaotic, the book is alive with a relentless sense of enjoyment which is, as Cameron observes, the rampant, insatiable enjoyment of a perverse subject. Indeed, “polymorphous perversity” is the only term that for Cameron encapsulates the insufficient level of maturity which renders The Castle of Otranto incapable of providing an accurate and coherent representation of reality. In its depiction of Manfred's ruthless campaign to maintain his power in face of a prophecy of doom, what the text really articulates, according to Cameron, is Walpole’s refusal to move beyond his obsessive enjoyment of “a too proximate relation to the mother as a figure of the lost past.” The “immature jumble” of meaningless symbols displayed in The Castle of Otranto’s regressive and confusing supernatural imagery is a testament to Walpole’s inability to give up writing purely for enjoyment and enter the modern age. How appropriate that the first Gothic nightmare, the book from which all other Gothic romances sprang, should itself be the product of an infantile fantasy?

Cameron believes that the maturation process of the Gothic romance was marked by a split between terror and horror. The difference between the two (which Cameron claims was simultaneously formulated by the mysterious writer Miss Aiken in her essay On the Pleasure Derived from Objects of Terror and Anne Radcliffe in the posthumously published essay On the Supernatural in Poetry) is that between narratives which rely on “a positive object of fear” and those which “create only an anxiety-producing atmosphere where uncertainty and suspense rule.” The mature Gothic Romance is one in which terror ultimately

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leads to horror because the uncertainty and apprehension produced by an atmosphere of obscure and indefinite menace was something from which the reader needed to escape. The way to achieve this catharsis was to produce a horrifying object which, though shocking, would relieve the tension caused by the unknown.

The Gothic romance’s experimentation with terror is something Cameron sees as connected to the wider project of Enlightenment aesthetics, but he challenges the traditional interpretation of this connection. Instead of being concerned with conjuring up terrors that rely upon sensory objects he considers Gothic romances as being concerned with the demarcation of the boundaries of sense experience and representation. In this way, he sees a direct link between the terror of Gothic texts and Immanuel Kant’s notion of the Sublime as that which “provokes the mind to abandon sensibility and employ itself upon ideas of a higher faculty.”

Kant believed that because of the antimonies of pure reason there were two modalities of the Sublime, the mathematical Sublime (which occurs when we compare our ability to apprehend the notion of something of infinite magnitude with our inability to comprehend the countless individual parts which actually make it up) and the dynamic Sublime (which stems from the mind’s ability to recognise the limit of sense experience not as the boundary of all knowledge but as the gateway to a higher order of understanding). Since both of Kant’s varieties of the Sublime result in a pleasure which paradoxically derives from that feeling of displeasure which arises “from reaching the ultimate limit of the greatest faculty of sense,” Cameron sees them as identical to Lacan’s view that the sublime is that feeling which is produced by the failure to inscribe sexual difference within language. Therefore, Cameron holds that Gothic Romances, like Kant’s Third Critique, hinge upon the difference between the male and female Sublime, between that Sublime which “locates the real beyond reality” and that Sublime which identifies the real as “nothing other than reality’s own stumbling block.”

To illustrate what is the central argument of his book Cameron uses a somewhat lesser-known text, Anne Radcliffe’s 1790 work A Sicilian Romance. Like so many others, this Gothic romance is what he calls a “neurotic quest for a lost ideal family.” The heroine, Julia de Mazzini, has been abandoned and her narrative read as being in actuality a staging of her fantasies, or what Cameron calls “a displaced psychic reality,” in which she articulates her sense of not belonging. In this way, the book offers what Cameron describes as “a textual trauma as a displacement of a sexual trauma – the trauma of finding an adequate erotic love.” By reading Radcliffe’s novel in light of Freud’s case study Dora, Cameron presents A Sicilian Romance as an examination of hysteria produced by a libidinalised absence, a powerful statement about the impossibility of representing female sexuality.

If Cameron sees restraint as the chief virtue of A Sicilian Romance then the questionable merit of Matthew Lewis’s The Monk is its crazed excess. He believes that the 19 year-old Lewis’s dissatisfaction at what he saw as Radcliffe’s cheating of the reader out of the genuine supernatural element her novels seemed to promise, and his ambition to write the ultimate Gothic romance, were typical examples of obsessive neurotic behaviour. Whereas Radcliffe’s feminine Gothic aesthetic rested on creating terror without a definite cause, the masculine Gothic aesthetic deployed by Lewis leaves the reader in no doubt that the supernatural is at work and instead allows him or her to relish the gory details and wallow in the decadent degeneracy of his story. For Cameron, the abundance of physical suffering and sexual torture in The Monk makes it a perfect example of an attempt to “represent libido outside the body,” to overcompensate for everything not present in Radcliffe’s novels.
The Monk, a book featuring every configuration of moral and sexual deviance, is in Cameron’s opinion a “sublime apparatus” intended to astonish the reader by the sheer extent of its depravity. Its entire value, he argues, lies not in the quality of its writing but in the audience’s reaction to its lurid content and this, he believes, allows us to comprehend Lewis’s real motivation. By referring to Freud’s Rat Man, he reads Lewis’s novel as the product of his encounter with what he found lacking, unrepresentable female sexuality, in Radcliffe’s novels. Cameron sees Lewis’s inability to sublimate this lack as responsible for him writing a Gothic romance packed with so much visceral nastiness that no-one would notice that anything was missing. The Monk’s scenes of grotesque horror and sexual sadism must, he argues, “be seen as emerging out of a deeper anxiety, as an escape from something much more terrifying—the fact that there is nothing instead of something.” The Monk creates “an external sublime object of horror to cover a terror that has no external cause.”

As the subtlety of these readings illustrates The Psychopathology of the Gothic Romance is a significant achievement and a noteworthy addition to the study of the literature of the uncanny. Cameron’s book undoubtedly proves that subjecting these Gothic romances to psychoanalytic analysis is a fruitful and long overdue exercise and there’s little doubt that more criticism of this kind will follow. It also makes a cogent case for explaining the curious dynamic underlying these romances, the gradual removal of which (something exemplified, Cameron contends, in the main character’s self-haunting and eventual descent into psychosis in James Hogg’s The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner, the last book to qualify as a true Gothic romance) saw the Gothic transform into a very different beast. However, Cameron’s bold assertion that his psychoanalytic perspective must completely revolutionise the study of these texts remains inconclusive. Revealing though it is, it is unclear why this approach should take priority over all other forms of interpretation and why it cannot just be used in tandem with them. After all, if Gothic novels truly are the many-headed monsters Cameron claims, then the very last thing we want to do is put a limit on the ways in which we can look at them.

NORMAN OSBORN
The Monk (Le Moine)
(Dir. Dominik Moll) Spain/France 2011
Diaphana Films

The copy of Matthew Lewis’ The Monk: A Romance (1796) currently sitting on my bookshelf is the Penguin Classics edition, which reproduces a striking illustration from a 1797 French translation of the novel. Our votary protagonist is being dragged through the air by his scalp, cassock billowing in a lightning storm. Above him his bat-winged demonic captor brandishes the contract for his soul and shakes his snaky locks in foreboding. The illustrator is clearly trying to convey some of the divine terror of William Blake, yet teetering on the brink of a total collapse into the absurd.

To me, this is what the Gothic mode is all about. The greatest Gothic fiction is that which situates itself at the precise tipping point between the grim and the ridiculous. Whatever might be said about the turgidity of his prose or the novel’s pacing, Lewis is undoubtedly the master of this trick. Think of the lascivious Ambrosio looming and salivating over the sweetly-slu­mbering Antonia, or Agnes the imprisoned nun nursing her corpse-baby. It is ‘loathsome’ Lewis repeatedly tells us, with unconcealed relish.

This invigorating campness is something which I often feel gets lost on screen, especially in more recent years. To take but one example: The Raven (Dir. James McTeigue, 2012) is supposedly set during the “lost days” leading up to Poe’s death. My fingers were crossed for opium dreams and gibbering hysteria, so imagine my disappointment at discovering the film to be an anaemic detective yarn with sub-Murdoch Mysteries production values. As a side note, perhaps the most prominent exception to this rule is Coppola’s Bram Stoker’s Dracula (1992), which is never afraid to be overwrought or veer into outright silliness. “Your precious Lucy will become a bitch of the Devil! A whore of darkness!!”, Tony Hopkins-as-Van-Helsing crows. Even Dracula’s sobs are done in a cod-Transylvanian accent: “bleugh-huh, bleugh-huh!”. More like this, please.

To arrive at The Monk (2011), then, is to once again resign ourselves to a sad lack of the Gothic ridiculous. This French language version plays it utterly straight, offering us a version of Lewis’ events that is very serious, and also intensely religious. “This is the most Catholic thing I’ve ever seen,” I remarked to my viewing companions, “and I’ve seen mass.”

The devotional nature of the film will come as a shock to fans of the novel. Lewis’ Mediterranean peoples (much like those of Shakespeare, Kyd or Marlowe) exist only to add glamour and exoticism to the setting, and to confirm the prejudices of the English reader against ignorant, superstitious, greedy and lascivious Roman Catholics. The novel’s Ambrosio is a holy, hypocritical sham, but then Lewis cannot really imagine any other kind of monk. We are never, I think, meant to care for this protagonist, or to see any goodness or dignity in his vocation – Ambrosio is a bear to be baited for the pleasures of a Protestant audience. The Church is almost invariably presented as a malign and oppressive force, one that steals your fiancéé and locks her in catacombs.

The film version strips away this contempt to offer a complex psychomachia. The opening scene shows Ambrosio at confession with a sumptuously-dressed and worldly man (who will later, of course, turn out
to be Satan himself in the guise of a wealthy burgher). The burgher details the enormity of his predatory lusts, not stopping at incest. Unmoved and unimpressed, Ambrosio scornfully dismisses the burgher’s warning about the terrible power of the flesh over the human soul: Satan has no power over us, the monk retorts, excepting that which we give him. The audience’s attention is drawn to the latent pride that is to be Ambrosio’s downfall, and there is a good dollop of Lewisian irony here (by the end of the film our protagonist will, of course, have committed all of these crimes he at first considers so inexplicable), but it is also made clear that it is Ambrosio’s keenest desire to lead a blameless life of contemplation and thus to be worthy of God’s esteem.

The film is suffused with this sense of soteriological urgency. The richly visual, ritual elements of Catholicism are present (a striking Procession of the Virgin takes place in one highly atmospheric scene), but the characters are reflective and genuine in their piety. The bustling church scene which opens the novel tells us that the sermon is a social event, an opportunity to gossip and be seen, but here anxious, pinched faces stare up at Ambrosio in the pulpit, eager to be filled with his holiness and wisdom. God is real, the devil is real, and sin perpetually looms over each terrified soul.

Lewis’ Ambrosio is, at heart, a carnal creature. Seduced by Matilda (who inveigles her way into the monastery as a novice under the nomme de guerre “Rosario”), he gives his ardour full rein before eventually tiring of her and seeking pastures new. The film’s incarnation of Ambrosio (Vincent Cassel), though, seems driven by a compulsive fascination with his own damnation. He is a pale, ascetic figure, staring at Antonia with a manic intensity; seemingly attracted more by her otherworldly innocence than her beauty.

The novel opens with a quotation from Measure for Measure, one of Shakespeare’s most morally complex and unsettlingly ambivalent plays: “Lord Angelo is precise; / Stands at guard with envy; Scarcely confesses/ That his blood flows, or that his appetite/ Is more to bread than stone”. To Lewis this possibly means no more than that Angelo, like his own Ambrosio, is a hypocrite doomed to get his comeuppance. Yet, the film is almost more aligned to Shakespeare than it is to Lewis. It raises many of Measure for Measure’s intractable problems: how do we tell the difference between true virtue and seeming? Is justice about punishment, or correction? How do we legislate against human sexuality – which societies need to control, and yet is often irrepresible?

Where Cassel’s ascetic, lizard-eyed Ambrosio is most like the wicked magistrate Angelo is in his despair. Having fallen prey to lust, Angelo exclaims: “it is I/ That lying by the violet in the sun/ Do as the carrion does, not as the flower,/ Corrupt with virtuous season”. This is a powerful Calvinist metaphor: God’s grace (the sun) shines down on one and all, but only those creatures receptive to it benefit thereby. Reprobates, like road kill, only stink the higher. Here the character affirms belief in his own corruption as something merely factual, and beyond his power to change.

The religious moral of The Monk is that Ambrosio’s least excusable sin is, likewise, his failure to believe in the possibility of grace. The film suggests that Pride, at its height, is not an unshakeable faith in your own excellency, but the arrogant belief that you are too terrible, too ingeniously perfidious, to be granted redemption. Yet less like Shakespeare – and more like the savage, rebellious Marlowe – the film also entertains the possibility that the protagonist really is irrevocably damned. The film’s Ambrosio has a birthmark shaped like a hand on his shoulder – the devil’s mark, an object of superstition to the monks who take in the foundling, and later, proof that he is the long-lost brother of Antonia, who falls victim to his unholy lusts. The scene of Ambrosio’s ‘seduction’ by Valerio (the film’s equivalent of
Rosario/Matilda) makes it seem like he has no choice in the matter either physically or intellectually – he is pounced on while in the grip of a debilitating fever.

These details add a feeling of inevitability to the proceedings, yet the final note is one of profound ambiguity. As the film’s Ambrosio lies dying in a desert crevasse, he makes his pact with burgher-Satan not for personal freedom (as the novel’s monk attempts) but for the restoration of the ravished Antonia to sanity and health. Is it possible to sell one’s soul on another’s behalf, or does this act of charity ultimately redeem our broken protagonist?

The film has much to offer besides religious edification. The characters are excellently underplayed, stripped of Lewis’ ungenerous caricaturing, and the visuals are artful and striking. The filming locations of Catalonia and Andalusia provide landscapes which seem almost alien: weird scalloped rock formations and arid, empty plains. There is a continual, pleasing use of chiaroscuro: slants of blinding sunlight penetrating high windows into cool, dim interiors, making the viewer feel as if transported inside a Vermeer painting. The costumes are not the industrially dyed, machine-sewed anachronisms frequently found in films nominally set in the Early Modern period. The fabrics are dull, heavy and functional, and everyone looks heat-oppressed and desperately in need of a bath.

Very faint traces of the Gothic yet remain. The most arresting character in the film is undoubtedly Valerio (Déborah François). In a radical departure from the novel (in which his/her equivalent is merely “muffled in a cowl”), Valerio disguises both face and voice beneath a wax mask, claiming to have been disfigured in a fire. The mask is eyebrowless and unmoving, giving the false novice a perpetual expression of sorrowful surprise. One image in particular lingers profoundly: Valerio gazing intently at a carving of a head in the recesses of the ceiling where the face has been eroded to a pockmarked nothing (in another nod to the genre, grotesques and gargoyles loom over the monastery). The assumption of Valerio’s fellow Capuchins is that the young burn victim is lamenting the loss of his own visage, but the keyed-in viewer recognises the ominous foreshadowing of the razing of Ambrosio’s soul.

Ultimately, this adaptation of The Monk is more charitable and thought-provoking than what Lewis intended, but to many viewers these qualities will not be detractions. Perhaps, then, I will be alone in lamenting the lack of silliness: O where now is my snaky-haired demon? O where my mouldering corpse-baby? Bleugh-huh, bleugh-huh.

Kate Roddy
**The Awakening**  
*(Dir: Nick Murphy)*  
UK 2011  
Studiocanal

This review contains spoilers.

London, 1921. In a darkened room, a séance begins with the sacrifice of a crow, its slit throat bled into a gold bowl, all before a veiled medium. An assorted group of people sit before him – a lone woman, a soldier and a mother and father, a locket of blonde hair before the mother. They chant “Life given, death lifted” in unison and the crow’s body is seemingly transformed into a rotting carcass. A member of the audience suffers a nosebleed and the candle before the mother extinguishes as the spectre of a blonde girl appears. But, before the ghost can speak, the curtains are pulled back and the ‘spectre’ is apprehended by the lone woman: holding the child tightly, she pulls off the blonde wig to reveal the “ghost” to be a shaven-headed boy. The police burst in and make their arrests as the woman, Florence Cathcart (Rebecca Hall), reveals to the people at the séance how the crow’s corpse was substituted, how the nosebleed was faked and how the candle was snuffed out.

After such a dramatic opening, the film steadily slows its pace as Cathcart is invited to Rookwood, a boys’ boarding school in a remote area in the countryside, by schoolmaster Robert Mallory (Dominic West). The school is purportedly haunted by the ghost of a child, a haunting which has taken a violent turn when one of the boys has allegedly been frightened to death. With her curiosity aroused, Cathcart undertakes the investigation and soon begins to discover secrets not just about the school and its inhabitants but also herself.

Through its narrative of hauntings, its period and isolated setting, high production values and acting talent (which also includes Imelda Staunton), *The Awakening* fits easily into the genre of the classic British ghost story. As a consequence echoes of *The Innocents* (Jack Clayton, 1961) abound but they do not detract from what is essentially a film about grief: the film opens with a quote from Cathcart’s book *Seeing through Ghosts* which states that “Between 1914 and 1919 war and influenza had claimed more than a million lives in Britain alone. This is a time for ghosts”. The Great War haunts the narrative as much as Rookwood’s spectre, with Cathcart in mourning for her fiancé who was killed in the trenches while Mallory suppresses his survivor’s guilt by commenting to Cathcart “They died. I lived” with a bitter resentment and, when alone, through self-harm.

*The Awakening* was written by acclaimed writer Stephen Volk and then reworked by director Nick Murphy. While this indicates a distillation of Volk’s authorial stamp, perhaps a more productive way of reviewing *The Awakening* is to consider it as a wider part of his growing body of work. Throughout his film, television, theatrical and fictional works, Volk has centred his narratives upon strong female characters and has often returned to the scene of the séance and the two fundamental characters that are implicit in that scenario, the clairvoyant/believer and the sceptic. While it is obvious to state that *The Awakening* clearly connects with these recurrent motifs, the séance sequence works more to establish Cathcart as a character through her beliefs and her methodology: she is presented as a strong woman, one who is clearly committed to the debunking of the supernatural through an understanding of the charlatan’s trickery and deceitful methods. Her strength and authority is further emphasised when the arresting detective tries tactfully to ask her not to order him into action in front of the constables. Yet this is all counter-balanced by the item she brings to the séance – a photograph of a soldier. When asked by the
exposed medium if the man in the picture is indeed dead she doesn’t answer him directly but instead states that “This grotesque charade won’t bring him back.” Her response intimates an acceptance of her loss but, as the narrative progresses, it becomes blatantly apparent that she has not come to terms with it. Whether this loss motivates Cathcart into debunking séances is left ambiguous but perhaps, instead, motivates her to find a truth, as opposed to a deception, in Spiritualism.

As a rational character, Cathcart also occupies the role of the sceptic. In Volk’s work, where the sceptic meets the believer, conflict inevitably arises and becomes one in which the beliefs of both medium and sceptic are called into question. This is evidenced in Volk’s Ghostwatch (Dir. Lesley Manning, 1992) where Michael Parkinson (playing himself) repeatedly questions parapsychologist Dr Lin Pascoe (Gillian Bevan) and, in a much more blatant manner, in the acclaimed ITV serial Afterlife (2005 – 2006) where sceptical psychiatrist Dr Robert Bridge (Andrew Lincoln) conducts research into the medium Alison Mundy (Lesley Sharp). Of the two, as Volk has commented in interview, The Awakening connects explicitly to Afterlife through Cathcart’s narrative trajectory: she begins the film as a sceptic, a debunker of that which others believe or perceive to be manifestations of the spirit world and ends as a believer. In this transition she begins as Afterlife’s Robert Bridge and ends it as that programme’s Alison Mundy. While this may seem a superficial connection, the transition lies at the centre of both the television programme and the film for in that movement greater shifts take place: for Bridge it is the acceptance of his child’s death and a steady coming to terms with the grief and guilt he feels over this death; for Alison it is the coming to terms with the suicide of her mother; for Cathcart the shift allows her to work through the grief over her lost fiancé, to confront her repressed past and finally understand what happened to her as a child. In this understanding the ghost that haunts Rookwood becomes not just a spectacle of fear, but a clear echo of Cathcart’s past, a figure that comes not to haunt her or punish her but to release her from her grief. With such readings, The Awakening is a quiet meditation on loss and mourning but ultimately becomes about its repression, with Volk commenting that “the subject of the film isn’t ghosts but repressed memory, which, like ghosts, may or may not be true.”

With such qualities, The Awakening capably functions as much as a character study of Cathcart’s ‘awakening’ to her past and to the loss of her fiancé as much as it does a classic Gothic ghost story. Such is the extent of this that Cathcart’s character – or more accurately her sustained repression – extends into and is mirrored by the straight-laced world the film depicts. Its characters are clean and immaculately dressed with shirts and blouses buttoned tightly to the neck; the boys at the school suppress their humour while their teachers suppress their sexual desires, while all of them carefully speak in controlled and measured tones. Such repression extends into the film itself as the narrative plays out in the subdued tones of late winter, bare trees and paths thick with brittle leaves, the bright sunlight serving only to make things plainer, crisper, and straighter than they should be.

Combining a high level of writing, acting and direction, The Awakening is a well-executed ghost story: replete with unexpected shocks, a visually disturbing ghost and a surprising narrative twist, the film can be taken as a frightening piece of horror entertainment or as a more focussed and refined exploration of grief, guilt and repression. Either way, The Awakening provides both with precision and eloquence.

James Rose
Contagion

(Dir. Steven Soderbergh) USA 2011
HomeWarner Brothers

Contagion is one of those films that may have worked better as a 600-page novel, though that would of course have meant missing the opportunity to watch Hollywood stars do their best to die horribly. The 2011 film, directed by Steven Soderbergh, tracks the outbreak of a previously unknown virus, mainly from the perspective of officials in the United States and China. Researchers scramble to subdue the tiny foe, while governments attempt to contain the population’s panic. Average citizens everywhere run for cover. Such an outline should reveal Contagion as a slavishly procedural by-the-numbers flick, and indeed there are few surprises waiting for us here. Nevertheless, Soderbergh’s film is notable as a neat package of contemporary preconceptions about authority and expertise. The medical drama safely squared away, we can reflect on all the other things Contagion is talking about.

It’s true that every generation has its pet vision of apocalypse, yet there are some perennial favourites that are never exhausted but rotate in and out of fashion. The worldwide pandemic is one such scenario. The BBC has recently dusted off both Survivors (2008-2010) and The Day of the Triffids (2009); the Will Smith version of I Am Legend from 2007 follows the same broad strokes as Contagion, including the depiction of the masses as fundamentally dangerous, infectious zombie raiders. Contemporary fiction about epidemics and eco-catastrophes speak to a general anxiety that things perhaps aren’t going quite the way they should be, in the same way post-war “pod people” narratives were both the expression of anti-communism and a reaction to it. In each case, the formula — a mad dash to expose the root cause of a banjaxed society that would otherwise be running smoothly — remains unchanged. (In addition, Contagion tiptoes in the footsteps of the grandiose disaster flicks of the 1970s and 1990s — 1974’s Earthquake, 1998’s Deep Impact — offering up a star-studded buffet of potential victims.)

The signifié of the film’s metaphorical ‘contagion’ is open to many interpretations, but we must consider here that a world in which the prevailing ideology has played out to its end treats change as viral, sickening, and catastrophic. Some malady is spreading; it must be contained until the danger is past; only experts can put the world back together. This is where the pandemic scenario finds contemporary expression: ‘contagion’ is now a well-established term of international finance. ‘Stop the rot’ is another pet phrase of the economic crisis, while the language of austerity here and in America suggests a treatment of bracing tonics and a visit to the sweat lodge.

Contagion’s most notable theme is the full-force reaction of authorities when they are challenged from below. Included in the film’s carousel of subplots is the story of internet prophet of doom Alan Krumwiede (Jude Law), styled after the likes of broadcaster and conspiracy theorist Alex Jones. Krumwiede, rejected by the Old Media, draws familiarly zany connections (detention camps, etc) between the virus’s spread and various government plots. After he bests a public health director (Laurence Fishburne, looking dyspeptic) on a cable news programme, Krumwiede’s popularity skyrocketed. There follows an obscure meeting with a pharmaceutical executive, after which Krumwiede begins flogging a homeopathic supplement as a miracle cure. Legal investigations fail to dislodge him from the popular consciousness; when Krumwiede threatens to recommend to his web followers that they abstain from the virus’s vaccine, the response from the Feds is immediate arrest.
The lesson: trust only official sources of information. All others are cranks, or in the pay of dark forces. If it is at all accurate to read *Contagion* as an apologia for technocrats, who avow that they do indeed have your best interests at heart, then Jude Law’s storyline is by far the most sinister. Considering the film’s context in a long-term financial illness that frequently elicits doctor-patient terminology, we have here the deliberate conflations of economics and hard science. Any idea that falls outside a narrow range of legitimacy is not only irresponsible but potentially lethal to the body politic. It is thus quite serviceable for the film to connect insurgent social thought with real-life peddlers of unscientific anti-vaccine gobbledygook. This is the purpose of Soderbergh’s much-vaunted efforts at maintaining scientific accuracy in the film: the agency officials and highly skilled advisors, around whom the story pivots, come desperately close to articulating the grim pronouncement, “There is no alternative”.

This coterie of scientists and policy directors all sweat and gasp and wring their hands as martial law is declared, for they genuinely consider their power as the instrument of public good (the exception being a goofy moment when some military types immediately pin the epidemic as a terror attack). And so, by means of contrast, the film’s central horror rests on scenes of dutiful Americans turned looters, of youths dressed like WTO protesters invading houses, of genial Midwesterners rioting for food. The expert epidemiologist who is too generous to the rabble, throwing facemasks over poor diseased nobodies, gets infected and dies. The high-level crisis managers who shield themselves with insider knowledge are publicly embarrassed yet live to tell the tale. The Average Joes most likely to endure (Matt Damon, coasting through in Safe Mode) are those who comply, comply, comply. And since, as David Skal has pointed out, bad sex is always lurking somewhere in the depiction of the monstrous, Gwyneth Paltrow’s extramarital affair initiates the outbreak in America, while her teenage daughter is repeatedly threatened with infection (cooties?) when engaging in some apocalypse-inspired heavy petting.

Though each character in *Contagion* must at some point make a moral choice, and the scope of their decisions is plausible, they inevitably skew in favour of authority. Jude Law and the unscrupulous businessmen survive, but they inherit a desolated San Francisco (Law strolls through the same plaza that’s in the memorable climax of the 1978 *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* remake, another anxious study of infection, officialdom and bad behaviour). Meanwhile, the randy teenager daughter, successfully corralled, dances a prom dance with her vaccinated boyfriend in the safety of her quarantined home.

The film is most successful, however, at tapping into a very old distaste for the commonfolk. *Contagion* had already completed filming by the time protests against Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker’s union-busting legislation in early 2011 reached their highest pitch, yet repeated scornful mentions of a group of Minnesotan nurses who strike during the epidemic, as well as the food riot mentioned above, stand as oblique gestures to this reawakening of liberal society in the Midwest — threatening gestures, actually. They constitute another portrait of the masses as a potential menace by the expert enclave. The only time when we feel safe is when we are cocooned in the multiple layers of the citadels of power, or in expensive car interiors, or in dimly-lit task force rooms, or in ultra-sanitary super-scientific viral research labs.

Interestingly, the film simply assumes that a disease that has the power to kill a quarter of humankind will not disrupt its economic machinery. Four or five months after it appears, the virus is defeated (spoiler alert), and things return to normal almost instantly. Even during the worst of the crisis, as mass graves are dug in the shadows of the financial districts, workers schlub into their jobs with their hand trucks and their “Ask me about…” retail aprons. The media talking heads gab away, teenagers text on their iPhones, and the world moves on, because, as it transpires, nobody really important has been lost. The existing structures remain and recapitulate their power. In a “Shock Doctrine” twist that would’ve sat comfortably
within Naomi Klein’s reportage, the vaccinated in *Contagion* are made to wear special plastic bracelets, scanned by armed guards in order to gain entry to shopping malls or public areas — that’d *really* set off the New World Order crowd.

Then again, the technocrats are never able to uncover the exact origin of the virus, which causes them no small amount of discomfiture. We, the audience, find out, at least: the last few minutes of the film are dedicated to a painstaking yet wordless exposition of how exactly the virus entered the human population. On its own, the sequence suggests that no crisis can be managed to the hilt, that as long as ‘our immune systems are a work in progress’, as one character puts it, we will continue to stumble from crisis to crisis forever. Careful, however: though the ending presents itself as a repudiation of expert culture (the overweening desire to know and thus to control), in revealing the very accident of fate that the scientists cannot discern, the film unavoidably falls into a common trap: the assertion that total information awareness is just a matter of effort. This thinking has been with us for some time, and *Contagion* makes no effort to escape the trap. It thus remains utterly conventional. Its only merit is in its refusal to elevate the expert class into heroes. There are no hunky doctors bolting to the hospital, vaccine in hand; there are no implausibly fashionable lab technicians dodging explosions or killer virus clouds. Even the military, always a wild card, is superbly behaved (in this, *Contagion* is many times superior to 1995’s shlockfest *Outbreak*). *Contagion* is cognisant that experts are allergic to sunlight; their greatest relish is the unseen nature of their power. Yet, finally, the film is also a cipher for the problem facing the real-life world, with its real-life class of technocrats: they know exactly what is killing the patient, but they have no idea how to fix it.

*Miles Link*
Paranormal Activity 3
(Dir. Ariel Schulman and Henry Joost) USA 2011
Blumhouse Productions

In the spirit of full disclosure, I’m a late convert to the Paranormal Activity franchise. Perhaps this was due to having watched it during daylight hours, but on the whole Paranormal Activity (Dir. Oren Peli, 2007) just didn’t seem to offer anything new to the horror genre or the paranormal horror subgenre. My attitude shifted somewhat with Paranormal Activity 2 (Dir. Tod Williams, 2010), which did some interesting things in terms of narrative (being both a prequel and a sequel), particularly in how it went further in connecting the events transpiring to similar occurrences in the childhood of sisters Katie and Kristi (a back-story only hinted at in the first film). The third film, as an origin story for Katie and Kristi, effectively makes use of its period setting and heightens the series’ emphasis on extensive surveillance in revealing uncanny elements within the supposedly safe and familiar family home, at the same time making strange the family unit itself.

Paranormal Activity 3 opens with a pregnant Kristi (Sprague Grayden) and her husband Daniel (Brian Boland) contentedly preparing for the birth of their son, unaware of the events that will befall them in Paranormal Activity 2. They are visited by Kristi’s older sister Katie (Katie Featherston), who has yet to encounter her own ordeal depicted in the first film and who asks to store some boxes in Kristi and Daniel’s basement. One of the boxes contains several videocassettes, home movies from their childhood. We then see the footage contained on the missing tapes (it isn’t clear who is watching them), beginning with Katie’s birthday party in the September of 1988. Katie (Chloe Csengery) and the younger Kristi (Jessica Tyler Brown) are children living with their presumably divorced mother, Julie (Lauren Bittner), and her boyfriend Dennis (Christopher Nicholas Smith), a wedding videographer (explaining why the family happens to have so much video equipment on hand). They seem happy enough, although Julie’s mother Lois (Hallie Foote) disapproves of Dennis’ lack of financial resources along with Julie’s decision not to have any more children. Shortly after Katie’s birthday, strange events begin to occur in the house and a curious Dennis installs video cameras throughout, trying to capture any possible evidence. At the same time, Kristi reports having an imaginary friend, the invisible Toby, whom she quietly fears. After “Toby” frightens away a babysitter and a family friend (Dustin Ingram) who tried to help Dennis in researching the phenomena and its possible connection to witchcraft, the family finds themselves increasingly isolated, with a skeptical Julie angry at Dennis and Toby stepping up his attacks on the girls.

In the film’s last reel or so, however, the formula changes somewhat: unconvinced of the validity of claims made by Dennis and her frightened daughters, Julie changes her tune after the entity, with considerable flourish, finally manifests for her benefit (in a kitchen scene that manages to top the infamous “kitchen scene” in Paranormal Activity 2). Fleeing their home, Julie and Dennis take the girls and seek refuge at her mother’s house, where they are greeted with apple pie and what they hope to be sanctuary. Unfortunately for all of them, grandmother’s house proves a fool’s haven and the setting for the film’s obligatory shock ending, a cliffhanger that actually manages to surprise the audience and explain (somewhat) the events of the first two films.

Paranormal Activity 3 is easily superior to its predecessors. Paranormal Activity remained aesthetically limited by its low-budget and Paranormal Activity 2 suffered from too many sequences of static, grainy footage obtained from closed-circuit security cameras; together, the two bear out the criticism offered by a friend of mine that these are movies in which one spends ninety minutes “waiting for a door to open”. By
contrast, the third film is more cinematic and transcends the found-footage aspect that was supposedly so novel in earlier films in the series, a credit to directors Ariel Schulman and Henry Joost, responsible for the acclaimed documentary *Catfish* (2010). Scenes involving a video camera affixed to an oscillating base from a modified fan should become repetitious but instead build tension by relentlessly limiting and fixing our gaze upon the downstairs rooms (there’s also a nice bit involving a babysitter and a bedsheet that shows up where it shouldn’t). Succeeding in its accuracy as a period piece, *Paranormal Activity 3* is also the scariest of the three films, thanks to a series of jump scares as well as a few especially effective sequences, including the “Bloody Mary” scene and the previously mentioned kitchen scene that occurs near the end of the film.

If *Paranormal Activity 3* can be faulted for anything, it would be its abrupt ending (although this is apparently all the better to set up *Paranormal Activity 4*). The inevitability of a sequel may also explain a number of questions left unanswered at the end of the film, which enumerated here would nullify the twist of which this reviewer speaks so highly. Finally, despite its merits, *Paranormal Activity 3* deviates wildly from its trailer, which features a number of scenes not present in the film as released theatrically (including Julie being attacked by Toby, the family’s house on fire, and another attack by Toby, this time on a priest who visits the house), a form of false advertising that may rub some viewers the wrong way (some of these missing scenes have been reinstated in a Director’s Cut now available on Blu-Ray).

As it is, however, *Paranormal Activity 3* succeeds through its suggestion that the very places and people we consider the most safe may in fact harbour the most danger. It is the twist in this film’s final act that marks this as the series entry most critical of family, materialism, and greed; in other words, we finally get some inkling of just how the members of this family are able to afford those grand homes.

*Drew Beard*
Stephen Volk Interview

James Rose

Working in film, television and literature, writer Stephen Volk came to prominence with his now notorious Screen One drama Ghostwatch (Lesley Manning, BBC): broadcast on Halloween 1992, the programme took the format of a live broadcast that was investigating alleged paranormal events at a suburban house in London. With host Michael Parkinson, Mike Smith manning the phone lines, and Sarah Greene and Craig Charles at the house, the drama effectively reconstructed the visual language of reportage television to the extent that many viewers believed the spectral events they saw on-screen and ‘live’ were in fact real. The subsequent public outcry at the ‘hoax’ was unprecedented, with the BBC allegedly receiving over 30,000 phone calls in complaint, media coverage in the tabloids and protracted discussions on talk shows Bite Back and Points of View, all leading to Ghostwatch being unofficially banned by the BBC. Despite this, to mark the programme’s tenth anniversary, the BFI released the programme, uncut, on DVD in 2002.

Prior to Ghostwatch, Volk wrote a number of screenplays including Gothic (Dir. Ken Russell, 1986), The Kiss (Dir. Pen Densham, 1988) and The Guardian (Dir. William Friedkin, 1990) and would subsequently go on to write the acclaimed ITV serial Afterlife (2005 – 2006), in which clairvoyant Alison Mundy (Lesley Sharp) becomes professionally involved with sceptical psychiatrist Robert Bridge (Andrew Lincoln) as part of his research into the possible psychiatric explanations for the paranormal. As their relationship develops Alison helps Robert’s deceased son pass through limbo, allowing Robert to come to terms with his grief while, in turn, Robert enables Alison to come to terms with her mother’s suicide.

His most recent work, The Awakening (Dir. Nick Murphy, 2011), revisits some of the themes present in Afterlife: as a ghost story set in the aftermath of the First World War, the film explores the nation’s loss and subsequent grief through the characters of sceptic Florence Cathcart (Rebecca Hall) and teacher Robert Mallory (Dominic West).

James Rose talks to Stephen Volk about ghosts, grief, the influence of the Gothic upon his work, his understanding of this ambiguous genre and the recurrent elements that unify his writing into a coherent and ever evolving body of work.

Please note this interview contains spoilers.

**Rose:** Ghosts dominate your work, Ghostwatch, Afterlife and The Awakening all being obvious examples. What is the appeal of ghosts for you?

**Volk:** The ghost is a device, essentially. One that enables you to discuss the theme of its fundamental nature, i.e death. For me, a ghost is a prism through which to explore certain ideas in a more vivid way, I think, than, say, a social realist drama ever could.

I think also the beauty of ghosts is that they are a very easy way for the audience to get the idea that the uncanny or unreal has entered the realm of the normal. No further explanation is needed. A more complex supernatural phenomenon (vampires, zombies, aliens) needs a setting up of rules and so on: whereas I think the person in the street has an inbuilt knowledge of what a so-called “ghost” is and how that is expected to work. Which you can conform to or confound, as you wish.

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Rose: Do the ghosts that manifest themselves within your work function on a metaphorical level? Do they represent something other than an image of the deceased?

Volk: My approach is very much that the character who sees the ghost is the important thing, not so much the ghost itself. The ghost is there, symbolically, often, to represent or “amp-up” a fatal flaw in the character who sees it, or (in the case of Robert Bridge in Afterlife) to make tangible, or at least bring into focus, an unhealed psychological wound. This is a bit different from the traditional, folkloric idea of a ghost being there to bring a secret crime to justice (as in The Ring), but of course both can occur in the same story, and there are plenty of secrets and crimes in Afterlife too.

Rose: Grief also seems to be a dominant motif in your work, particularly in Afterlife and The Awakening. It seems to be either a process to be embraced and explored by a character or as a feeling to be refused, denied, perhaps even repressed, by them.

Volk: Yes. Grief is one of the ideas I mean that can be explored in a more vivid way in a ghost story than in, say, EastEnders. I suppose I’m obsessed by death and my attempt to get my head round what I think about death is to tell stories about grief. To play them out in my head and see where I am after I’ve gone on that journey or process.

It wasn’t until I’d written... not written but actually sat down and watched the final episode of Afterlife, where Robert the psychologist dies, that I realised this was all about the death of my cousin, Geoff, who died of alcohol-related illness at the pitifully young age of 35 – strangely similar to the age of Andrew Lincoln in the show, though I wrote the part for an older man. What I realised was that Alison, the woman trying to bargain with death, trying to put off the day of saying goodbye, the woman who’d do anything to get that good man back to the land of the living, was me. Often you’re not aware of these very direct references to your life until much later: but this hit me like a hammer blow, it was so obvious.

I’m always thinking about the deaths I’ve been a part of because in death I think it comes into high relief what we thought of the person in life. The values are very strongly drawn. You become rather cold-hearted as a writer in your pursuit of some kind of truth. You end up for instance being commissioned, as I was, to write a Hellboy story based on Mike Mignola’s comic-book hero and somehow writing a painfully accurate description of your own father’s death. I felt awful about doing it, but as a writer you can’t question the impulse, you have to go with it, and it’s all about achieving the emotional effect, in the end. You use the toolbox and the ammunition you have and sometimes that is the raw meat of your own personal experience: if you aren’t doing that, you’re doing something wrong. If you’re not delving deep inside yourself, your work may be exquisitely crafted, but it will have no real depth and no hope of touching other people, which is what it’s all about in the end.

Rose: What about denial?

Volk: As for denial, well yes. I always loved the Dana Andrews character in Night of the Demon, smart and confident, yet stubborn and closed-minded. By putting a character in a position of denial at the outset you create the largest possible character arc for them to travel. If somebody believes in ghosts, then sees one, there is no arc at all: it isn’t about them as a person and it doesn’t interest me. Denial works for me because it’s exactly what I would be like if I saw something eerie or strange. I wouldn’t accept it immediately. I’d do anything to reject it and try to think, no, the world is normal. I’d cling to that like
wreckage. I believe that is what’s psychologically true. For me, anyway. So that’s the kind of character I like, instead of, say, a bunch of witless teenagers. I don’t see any emotional or intellectual value in that.

**Rose:** How does repression make itself manifest in *The Awakening*?

**Volk:** Repression is at the very heart of *The Awakening*. It’s actually the key word. It’s why I set it originally in Victorian times, which was for me the absolute world of “repression”, from the careful language, buttoned-up clothes, unmentioned sexual drives. And the subject of the movie finally isn’t ghosts but repressed memory, which, like ghosts, may or may not be true. I liked the idea of one contentious idea, ghosts, being accompanied in a story by another contentious idea, the Freudian idea of repression. Freud may be a quack and ghosts may not exist – which makes it doubly delightful to try and make the story convincing. Nevertheless the arc of the story is hiding something from yourself and then the realisation of discovering it. And what are ghosts anyway if not a version of memory? Memory for a purpose?

**Rose:** Women often appear to be emotionally strong and independent in your work: Sarah Greene cares for and protects the Early children in *Ghostwatch* and then fearlessly enters the Glory Hole to rescue one of them; Alison in *Afterlife*, although tormented by what only she can see, actively and, at times, aggressively, defends herself against Robert's scepticism; Florence Catheart in *The Awakening* is a confident and curious woman, one who seeks the truth, no matter what the cost.

**Volk:** I’m glad you think that. It’s not like I write a man’s part then flip it like they did in *Alien* with Ripley – I genuinely want to depict women as strong and not screaming and flappy-handed bimbos. I literally couldn’t write a female character like that. The females are always much stronger emotionally than the men: which is what I find in life, to be honest! I don’t particularly get thrilled about writing heroic male characters. I couldn’t write a James Bond. He’d have to be uncertain, wracked, troubled. I like women that are quite male and men who are quite female, in my stories. In a way Robert in *Afterlife* is quite feminine. He’s internal, a thinker – he’s not action man and you can’t imagine him going to the pub. In fact Lesley Sharp once bemoaned that he wasn’t more of a “man” but sorry, he just isn’t! He’s more like me, buries himself in books (denial again). Actually, I often say I’m like both the characters in *Afterlife*: the rational psychologist who analyses and writes books for a living, and the crazy psychic Alison who wakes up with night terrors because she sees spirits!

But of course also the thing with any kind of horror is that you only set up a strong, likeable character to put them through hell (as Sam Raimi once told me!) – which makes it sound a sadistic process. Of course it’s not. At all. I really baulk at the notion I’m in the business of being unpleasant or setting out to merely shock. The idea that horror culture comes from some kind of malevolent ill-will and an impulse to nastiness is just a creation of people who don’t understand or enjoy it, and the squeamish trying to make their feelings sound rational.

**Rose:** In contrast to the strong women you have men who are tormented by their pasts: Robert states in the first series of *Afterlife* that he tried to be a good father and that he only ‘took his eye off the ball for just one second’, an act which cost him his child’s life whereas the other Robert, in *The Awakening*, repeatedly self-harms as a means by which to cope with the guilt of surviving the trenches of the First World War.

**Volk:** Funnily enough, I didn’t call the character “Robert” in *The Awakening* – that was changed by the director, which amused me no end! And also he added the self-harming, which I liked very much... the
idea of the wound, again, of course. Odysseus’s wound that helps his wife identify him, or the whole Fisher King thing. I like wounded men because, again, they have a journey to go on. But Dominic West was much tougher as a character than I wrote him. My original “Mr Gillett” was bookish and more teacherly and I think they took him in the right direction, to be honest. But yes – “tormented by their pasts”: if it’s to be a ghost story there has to be a degree of torment from the past, and the torment is what gets resolved. Or not.

**Rose:** There seems to be a significant gravitation towards the conflict/tension between the believer or psychic/medium and the sceptic in your work: Dr Lin Pascoe and Michael Parkinson in *Ghostwatch*; Alison and Robert in *Afterlife* and Robert and Florence Catheart in *The Awakening*. What attracts to you to this opposition?

**Volk:** As well as the subject of grief, ghosts enable you to explore the issue of rationalism v instinct, science v emotion, sanity v madness and so on, which, you are perfectly right, are areas I enjoy. Because I believe, other than the fundamentalists amongst us, we human beings are all more or less split in two. I certainly find myself vacillating between sensible logical thinking and problem solving, and giving in to wild imagination, ungrounded feelings, dubious beliefs, often ones born of fear but that doesn’t mean they are easy to shrug off in the dead of night. Far from it.

So in *Afterlife* I had the “debate” in dramatic terms embodied in two people, in Alison’s spats with Robert (and of course on a more fundamental, deeper level throughout the series). In *The Awakening*, the conflict was embodied in the two sides of Florence: Alison and Robert combined in one person, in a way. She began as the debunker and scientist and the film was the process of her transformation into a believer and accepting her past (non-denial). In a less pronounced arc, Robert (Mallory, that is, in *The Awakening*), moves from believing in ghosts to accepting his own personal ghosts.

The root of it is, I suppose, I love sceptics as characters. I love the books of Michael Shermer and James Randi. And I think in this day and age when you have politicians from the religious right in America spouting patent idiocy and factual untruths, you have to listen to the true sceptics who talk about Why People Believe Stupid Things. You only have to listen to good old Richard Dawkins to know the wonderful rhetoric you can put in the mouths of a sceptic character but of course as soon as you hear that glib certainly in a drama, you know the person is riding for a fall! Haha! That’s the delicious thing! Some critics said of *The Awakening*, as soon as they met Florence they knew she was going to end up seeing the ghost, as if that was meant to be some great surprise and it was a failure on my part. Ridiculous! That was entirely the dramatic promise! The game was, yes it’s going to happen, but how? And, more importantly – what then?

**Rose:** Do you believe in ghosts?

**Volk:** People find it surprising but I am actually a fairly ardent sceptic myself. I don’t believe in ghosts, at all. I don’t believe in God either, as it happens. I am a member of the Society for Psychological Research. I read the scientific papers, I attend lectures, keep up on the latest theories in parapsychology (like ultrasound) and I’ve even done an investigation or two. They are mostly things that are fairly easy to root out if you’re got half a brain, but the fascinating thing for me is people believe in ghosts. Whether they are real or not doesn’t interest me, to be honest. I happen to believe there’s “No Such Thing” but I don’t feel it inhibits my telling a good ghost story (Oliver Onions didn’t believe in ghosts either – and neither do many of my horror writer friends). The psychology is everything.

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Rose: Series 1 of Afterlife ends dramatically and, perhaps, ambiguously, with Alison the medium giving up her life so that sceptic Robert will finally believe her and to also allow his son, Josh, to pass on. Why did you choose to sacrifice Alison’s life for the change in Robert’s belief?

Volk: First of all, simply as a TV viewer I absolutely hate it when a series is thoughtlessly cancelled by a network or broadcaster before it has reached its proper conclusion or closure. The journey with Robert and Alison in Afterlife was so much like therapy it had to have “closure” of some kind! It comes from me being so hugely disappointed when a magnificent series like HBO’s Deadwood is nipped in the bud without a fitting climax and the equally-great Carnivale (also HBO) is similarly sent packing with several strands dangling. Anyway... Even if ITV confirmed a Series 2 and we had to continue Afterlife, I wanted an acceptable ending in Series 1 that I could hand-on-heart live with: Just In Case.

But to answer your precise question – partly I liked that Alison gives her life to reunite Robert with Josh. It just seemed immensely heroic and fitting that “nothing in her life became her like the leaving it” sort of thing. But the journey of the series isn’t Alison’s. She doesn’t really change that much. The real journey is Robert’s. And just when you think Robert is resolved because of Josh, no, oh shit, something’s gone wrong, there’s a price to pay... almost like in a fairytale. And I had this image of him cradling her and weeping. And that was it. I wanted the feeling he loved Alison and now he’d lost her and she’d done this amazing thing for him, and he could never tell her. He was too late. Huge, hugely tragic and daring for an ITV show. But it seemed about right, to me.

In fact, it always seemed right... Because before I even wrote the very first episode I had a dream and the dream was, this giant black guy in a mask carrying Alison unconscious from a house and laying her on the road under a railway bridge and trying to revive her by mouth-to-mouth. I had that image in my mind very clearly all the way through writing the series, and I knew in some purely instinctive way, that’s how it had to end. I just had to spool backwards in my mind and figure out how they got to that point!

Rose: It is revealed in Series 2 that Alison has survived her experience of allowing Josh to pass on. As that series unfolds, it becomes clear that Robert, the psychiatrist, has become a believer and seeks to support Alison and use her ‘gift’ to help others. Does Robert’s shift demonstrate a possibility – for you – that science can accommodate that which is, mostly, unexplained?

Volk: No, actually. Other than the obvious fact that Science doesn’t know everything especially in the realm of the human brain. Not at all. I have to say this categorically, because it’s a very important thing to understand. What happens with Robert in Series 2 of Afterlife is nothing to do with my personal opinion. It really isn’t. I’m a sceptic. I’m a rationalist. I don’t believe in ghosts. I don’t think that rational people have to give in to their emotional and believing side to be “whole” – any of that. I actually think on any real level or real life that is bullshit. BUT, and it’s a HUGE “but”.... You cannot inflict your personal opinion on a story if the story doesn’t want to accommodate it. You end up with preaching. Delivering a polemic, and cutting off the audience’s pleasure of extracting meaning for themselves. Yes, I have strong views on the subject, but I realised in the process that I couldn’t construct Afterlife on that personal conviction of mine that rationalism is valid. I simply couldn’t do it. There was something about the series as it evolved that made the line of the story inevitable. And the production team all felt this too. That Robert HAD to be on the edge of acceptance when he died. It became inevitable. Because drama has to be based on emotion, and, yes, I could have concocted a perfect “rationalist” drama where we never see Alison’s ghosts and she ends up diagnosed as schizophrenic and locked away. The End. But that wouldn’t be very satisfactory as a drama series about ghosts!
Rose: Is this the same with *The Awakening*?

Volk: *The Awakening* is open to the same accusation, of course. Rational scientist becomes touchy-feely rounded person. But in fact the actual journey Florence undergoes is from shutting out the true facts and coming to terms with them – even at the cost of a lot of pain.

As a writer, you have to follow the flow of a story as if it is water. It might run into cracks you don’t want delve into, but the story knows where to go better than you do. Always. That isn’t to say, I hasten to add, that I haven’t written from a sceptical point of view about the so-called supernatural. I wrote a play called *Answering Spirits* about the rise of Spiritualism in America and it’s told from an entirely sceptical viewpoint: that the Fox Sisters story is fundamentally one of deception.

The history of psychical research is rife with deception and hoaxing, and that’s another subject (apropos of *Ghostwatch*) of which I’m very fond. Deception and ultimately self-deception. Florence begins unmasking a deception but ultimately it’s her own self-deception she unmasks.

Rose: With ghosts comes the Gothic. As a genre, it is one in which your work readily fits into but, as a term, the ‘Gothic’ is increasingly difficult to define. What, for you, is the Gothic?

Volk: I define it as the flipside of the Romantic movement, the low and dubious side of higher poetic aspirations, as described in *The Romantic Agony* by Mario Praz. Gothic originally meant a kind of faux-medievalism, of course, but now it is mixed up with 19th Century novels and even German Expressionist films, so much so that I think it’s now a ragbag of tropes. I think of it as being buildings with implied sentience, impious religious figures, dark noblemen, wispy ladies, blood and thunder, extreme weather conditions, physical and mental torture, entrapment, heightened emotions, family secrets... The unspeakable and unfettered and unleashed... Everything unsaid in polite society, basically. The dark side.

Rose: Are the recurrent themes that appear within your work a product of the genre in which you predominately work or are they issues that you wish to examine through the Gothic?

Volk: Hmm. That’s a bit of a chicken and egg question! I think as a writer you gravitate to the genre that offers you the opportunity to explore the ideas and themes that appeal to you, and you find that by the experience of reading and watching films and deciding which types of books and movies are the most thrilling. In my case it was Hammer, predominantly, and the Corman Poe adaptations. I remember thinking as I watched the images of the 19th century hero scurrying up the worn staircase of the *House of Usher* or Peter Cushing defending himself against Dracula with the crossed candlesticks that this was a realm in which I felt at home. They got to me because the themes chimed with me on a primal level, on a level I barely understood, and still barely understand. (Belief? Death? Sexuality? The frisson of being scared, safely?) So that world of horror and the imagination became my territory.

I think the recurrent themes for a horror writer are generally to do with anxiety, and the images and tropes of anxiety change with the times. (Shadows and empty houses never go out of fashion, mind you, and it always amazes me how the Gothic has now completely seeped into our mainstream culture. A musical called Sweeney Todd, a new Gothic Batman trilogy, gloomier and more brooding than ever...) People sometimes ask me what scares me and my wife usually jumps in and says, “Everything. Everything scares him!” Which is maybe the core of the Gothic sensibility. *Neurosis*!

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Rose: Is there a key Gothic text – novel, film or television programme – that has had a significant influence upon you? How does this influence manifest itself?

Volk: There are many, many films and TV shows, too many to mention. But I have to single out Frankenstein by Mary Shelley. Of course the genesis of it was the inspiration for Gothic, but nevertheless I adore that book like no other and I am always writing versions of it (presently a TV show about artificial life, and I’ve also got a story called “Celebrity Frankenstein” coming out in March in Exotic Gothic 4, edited by Danel Olsen, from PS Publishing). I haven’t read Frankenstein hundreds or even dozens of times, but I do collect versions of it, be it with new illustrations or annotations or comic book retellings. The mythic nature of its narrative in so many forms and the grandeur with which it has invaded our popular culture I just find (overworked word, but) – awesome. The recent National Theatre production directed by Danny Boyle reminded me again how volatile a substance it is, how replete with striking ideas, how rich in shades of meaning and interpretation.

Rose: Your first screenplay to be made was Gothic, directed by the infamous Ken Russell. I can imagine a certain amount of changes took place between your scripted version and Russell’s final cut. What was your original vision for that fateful night at Lake Geneva?

Volk: Ken didn’t make too many changes in the script, actually. He more invented stuff on the (cloven) hoof. He brought in the dwarf and shot the Fuseli “Nightmare” dream sequence, which is possibly one of the most memorable scenes in the film, and one I never actually wrote. The general thing he did was depict the hallucinations more – even the infamous “breasts with eyes”. I think originally I just had Shelley reporting what he’d seen (which was taken from his diary, by the way). I wrote an objective film rather than a subjective one, but Ken just wanted to throw the camera inside their heads and show everything.

My central conceit was a prologue and epilogue with Mary Shelley on her death bed recounting the story of what happened at the Villa Diodati, thereby bracketing the events shown with an unreliable narrator, but Ken didn’t like that. I think he wanted the film to be Ken Russell’s fantasy, not Mary Shelley’s. So he instructed me to write a prologue about the poets Byron and Shelley being like “the rock stars of their era” with fans pursuing them across Europe. Not untrue, but so much of a cliché, and a Ken Russell cliché, I didn’t think it was worth saying.

Rose: The supernatural events that take place throughout your work all have a quality of the uncanny. I am thinking here, for example, of the household objects repeatedly lining themselves up in Alison’s kitchen in Afterlife; the doubling/doppelganger in Daniel One & Two; the supernatural occurrences in Ghostwatch. David Punter and Glennis Byron, in their book The Gothic, suggested that the uncanny is the ‘modus operandi’ of the Gothic. Is the uncanny the mode of operation of your work?

Volk: Well, often it is. In Afterlife specifically we were looking for those weird but naturalistic spins on a scene like the kitchen doors in The Sixth Sense rather than great full-blown CGI moments. Not because of lack of budget, but we thought that seemed the way to make the TV series work, to make it unsettling in a way that wasn’t so easy to brush off your sleeve. In fact, I got the production team and other writers used to my term “domestic uncanny” to describe our stories in the series, and I was rather pleased that that description stuck.

I think of the uncanny as being different and more subtle and less extreme than the Gothic, though. Someone has killed a pigeon at work and comes home and puts down their briefcase and on the table is an
egg. That’s uncanny, but not Gothic. If a huge bird attacks him, with big flapping wings, that’s Gothic. Large and bombastic and threatening and unsubtle, in a way. The uncanny can merely threaten by suggesting the out-of-the-ordinary, can threaten by unease. And because I think of it as coming via Freud, I think of the uncanny being the stuff of surrealism – in the sense implied in the word itself.

However I don’t always look for the uncanny as a raison d’etre in the way that, for instance, writers like Nicholas Royle, Mark Morris, Joel Lane or Gary McMahon will craft a story purely for an uncanny moment. I think more that the uncanny is one of the things in my box of tricks and if it’s appropriate for the story or the scene, I will relish it.

**Rose:** The literary device of False Documentation proliferates Gothic literature: from the very start there was Horace Walpole’s ‘translation’ of a found manuscript for *The Castle of Otranto*, Robert Walton’s letters at the start of Shelley’s *Frankenstein* and the sustained epistolary format of Stoker’s *Dracula*. Why did you choose to present *Ghostwatch* as a False Documentation, as a fictional live broadcast from a haunted house?

**Volk:** Because of how it came about, I suppose. It started as a proposal for a straight drama series, episode six of which was a live OB from a haunted house. The BBC said no. The producer said, what about a 90-minute single for Screen One? I instantly thought that it would be impossible to shoe-horn six hours of story into one single, so I said “Why don’t we just do Episode Six and the rest can be back-story? And we pretend it’s live.” And she went “Oh my God!” So that’s what we tried to do.

In relation to False Documentation, in particular I was thinking of Poe’s habit of trying to pass off stories as non-fiction in periodicals that published both side by side: he saw the opportunity in such publications to confabulate and delight the reader and I thought very much we could do the same for TV, where fiction and reality run alongside each other too. One of the inspirations behind *Ghostwatch* was the fact that in the early nineties the television language was changing. Dramas like *NYPD Blue* were using the hand-held camera techniques of documentary, whilst the new breed of “reality TV” shows like *Rescue 999* were using dramatised inserts using actors. There was beginning to be a worrying confusion between the rules of the two forms, drama and documentary, so we wondered: “What if we confused the two completely?”

But I had two intentions in writing *Ghostwatch* from the outset. One was to create a damn good TV ghost story like the wonderful M.R. James *Ghost Stories for Christmas* or Nigel Kneale’s fantastic BBC play *The Stone Tape* which had been a massive influence on my wanting to be a TV writer in the first place. The second, which came hand in hand with the concept, inevitably, was the opportunity to deliver by sleight of hand a satire of television. Because it was saying: what would television do if it had the wherewithal to investigate the deepest philosophical question Mankind has ever asked: “Is there an afterlife?” It would do it in an unbelievably cynical and superficial manner. And, like the hubris I was talking about regarding the character of Florence in *The Awakening*, you know the more Parkinson and the other presenters are laughing up their sleeves at the proceedings, something is going to jump out and bite them on their bum.

**Rose:** *Ghostwatch* goes to great lengths in its imitation of a live broadcast, including an onscreen telephone number for viewers to contact the programme during transmission. Was this phone line active? What happened if a viewer rang the number during the programme?
Volk: It was manned by people from the Society for Psychical Research. I think one of them might have been Maurice Grosse, who was involved in the investigation of the Enfield poltergeist case. The first thing they told any caller was that what they were watching isn’t true and isn’t live.

Rose: At the start of *Ghostwatch*, Michael Parkinson says “No creaking gates, no Gothic towers, no shuttered windows. Yet for the past ten months this house has been the focus of an astonishing barrage of supernatural activity.” Despite Parkinson’s description, is the Early family home, for you, a Gothic space?

Volk: Most definitely. A ghost story is by definition modern Gothic. It’s no different really than the Villa Diodati in *Gothic* where your “deepest darkest fears are conjured into life”. That was the irony of the *Ghostwatch* intro. Parky is telling you what it isn’t, but in fact that is what it is. On a subliminal level, he’s telling the audience exactly what they’re attracted to and what they’re tuning in for. The whole point of *Ghostwatch* is that the audience really is a participant, or they’re given the illusion that they’re participating. One of the sisters says to camera at one point: “This is what you wanted isn’t it?” And it is. It’s the voyeurism of reality TV writ large. The wish fulfilment. People are watching the show because they want to see a ghost, but when they see it they don’t like it, it’s nasty. In that way *Ghostwatch* conforms to exactly what Freud said about revenants – the deep wish turned into a deeper dread. There’s also a rule-breaking in play because all along, for all the laddish quippery of Craig Charles, the audience intuits on some level “this dabbling with these forces shouldn’t be allowed, and no good will come of it”.

Rose: In relation to *Ghostwatch*, I am particularly interested in the Early family. Can you say a little about how they were conceived by you. Why, for example, did you make them a single parent family?

Volk: My influences were primarily *The Exorcist* and the Fox Sisters of Spiritualism fame, characters I was writing about and researching for a play at the time. I liked the idea of an absent father because it makes the family fragile and Pipes, the imaginary father, the replacement father (again the wish turned to dread), the Bad Father (who is also a Bad Mother) all the more potent. Having some experience of broken families I wanted to flesh out the sisters and it seemed strong to me if on some level they blamed their mother for ruining everything (as children in separations invariably blame the parent that stays, not the one who leaves). So it was largely a question of making them vulnerable.

Also the absent father raised some sort of question that, strangely, on re-watching *Ghostwatch*, hangs over the whole proceedings like a dark cloud in a really obvious way, and that is paedophilia. Way back I did want a subtextual implication that the father may have “done something”, hence the sisters’ disturbed psychology, but it never found its way into the script – maybe the “ghost” of it is there, though, somehow.

Very importantly, though, the thing about *Ghostwatch* as a piece of drama is the idea of “family”. The broken, terrified family appeal to another family to help them, essentially. The television people represent their “new family”. The TV people literally move in. Sarah Greene is a new mother. Parkinson is their new father. On a larger level, I wanted to play with the idea that we *all* think we know Parky and Sarah (and Mrs Sarah Greene: Mike Smith) and we *all* feel to a certain degree that they’re part of our family. So I was cashing in on that for dramatic effect too.

Rose: *Ghostwatch* is replete with significantly disturbing scenes – the appearances of Pipes, Susan’s scratched face, the screeching of the cats and, in particular, the short sequence in which a local resident describes the incident where a black labrador is found gutted in the playground at the end of the street, the foetus of its pups strewn about the play equipment. This is a very disturbing image and one that really alters the tone of the program.

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Volk: That idea is very extreme, granted. But it’s only *said*, not *shown*. It’s only words after all. Any image is in the mind’s eye of the viewer, which is perhaps ironic given the nature of the programme. I actually thought than anyone who knows horror films would chortle at that point, but of course the TV viewing public does not consist only of horror devotees, it also consists of grannies choking on their dentures. But the thing is, the *implied* horror had to ramp us at certain points because for forty-five minutes (I insisted) nothing could possibly “go wrong”. We had to maintain the illusion that this really was live, whilst setting up and foreshadowing information that would pay off in the second forty-five minutes, building to the climax where all hell breaks loose.

Rose: Was it your intention that the audience would think that Pipes had committed this horrific act?

Volk: No. Just that there were bad, nasty people on the estate. Probably kids, possibly a gang. Who knows? I wanted it as unrelated as possible. That the general evil of the location was somehow related to the haunting. That a central bad place was affecting the wider population.

Rose: I have read that you wanted to have a high-pitched sound, that only animals could hear, broadcast at pertinent times during the episode.

Volk: Yes, like a dog whistle. So that all the dogs at home would go mad and then we’d say “We’re getting reports that pets are going crazy” – and they were! I thought for a long time that the idea had been overruled editorially, but I found out quite recently that the director looked into it on a technical level and it wasn’t something they could achieve for technical reasons. So, a bit frightening that it was actually thought through that far! I would have loved to have done it, of course – but can you imagine the uproar?

Rose: Where were you on the evening of the broadcast of *Ghostwatch*? Did you watch the programme ‘live’ along with the unsuspecting audience?

Volk: A lot of us were in a pub somewhere with Sarah and Mike and most of the crew and, yes, we watched it go out live. About an hour into the show the producer arrived from BBC TV Centre saying the telephone lines were jammed, there were so many callers ringing in to complain. And we all were like “Oo, er” but secretly really pleased.

Rose: Given *Ghostwatch* was part of the *Screen One* drama series, the programme began with the *Screen One* logo and the *Radio Times* ran a cast list, clearly indicating that the programme was a fictional drama. Were you surprised at the public's reaction to the programme?

Volk: The fact is, not everybody reads the introductory credits and not everybody reads what’s in *Radio Times*, and even if they do, they forget. The most salient, and weird, reaction was that of a friend of mine. I told her the week before that I had a drama going out, and the week after transmission spoke to her and she said, “I believed it was real.” Taken aback, I said, “What do you mean, you believed it was real? I told you the week before that I’d written it!” And she said, “Yes, but when I saw Michael Parkinson, I thought you must’ve got it wrong.”

Of course we wanted a public reaction. Who doesn’t? But in all honesty I thought most people might watch for about ten minutes and *might* be taken in, then “get it” and hopefully stay with it because they understood we were giving them a different kind of drama with a twist. That’s what I hoped. I wasn’t
ready (none of us were) for the level of vitriol of certain members of the public who felt they’d been made a fool of. That they’d been taken for a ride and made to feel like mugs.

Rose: How do you feel about the media furore twenty years later?

Volk: At the time the reaction seemed 100% negative. There was only one review, I think, that discussed Ghostwatch as a piece of drama. Only one review that asked, hang on, why did these people write and produce this piece of drama? The tabloids were all “Heads must roll at the BBC” or “Parkinson drops a ghoulie” type of thing: nothing serious, just random outrage. The BBC closed ranks and stuck their heads in the sand. They certainly didn’t defend the programme makers. They looked for scapegoats, couldn’t find any, so tried to pretend nothing had happened, and that the programme had never existed.

Well, the great thing now, twenty years later, is that a lot of fans have come out of the woodwork to say not only that it existed but it was one of their formative television-watching experiences. That’s just fantastic. Many of them come up to me after Ghostwatch screenings to say, laughing, that they were traumatized for life by Pipes or that as at 13-year-old kid they couldn’t pass the door under the stairs for six weeks afterwards! I even get meetings with young TV producers now and the first thing they do is tell me about watching Ghostwatch and how effective it was and how vividly they remember it. It’s incredibly refreshing and rewarding to hear because at the time all we ever heard was the “shouldn’t-be-allowed” brigade who metaphorically waved their fists on Biteback with Sue Lawley or complained on Points of View. It all changed really after the BFI brought out Ghostwatch on DVD in 2002, and people could watch it properly and also listen to the commentary by myself, director Lesley Manning and producer Ruth Baumgarten. Which was our first chance to explain why we’d done it, because it was the first time we were asked!

But back to 1992... None of us remotely estimated the anger, that much is true. And the anger was a lot to do with the implicit trust the audience invests or invested in the BBC as an institution. Which of course made the BBC the ideal place to make it! The ultimate authority figure, undermined. The last safety net, removed...

Rose: Is the idea of trust the dominant theme of Ghostwatch?

Volk: Absolutely! That was what was so exciting, to me. Because the idea of trust works for both my intentions, the ghost story and the satire. On the “ghost story” level it was: can you trust your eyes? Your sanity? Your belief system? On the “satire of TV” level we were saying: can you trust what a broadcaster is showing you? Can you trust the news? Can you trust what the next expert on your screen is saying? What any authority figure is spouting? That was the essential thing, and what is essential about it as a piece of drama (which entirely separates it from dire so-called imitations in the realm of “paranormal entertainment” like Most Haunted) is that drama at its very best challenges your preconceptions. It asks questions. And Ghostwatch more than anything asked: can we trust what we see?

The Awakening is released on DVD and Blu-Ray through StudioCanal on March 26th 2012.

James Rose would like to thank Stephen Volk for taking the time to answer these questions. Thanks also to Edith Chappey at StudioCanal for her help and support with this interview.
MULTI-MEDIA REVIEWS

Crossed
Writer: Garth Ennis,
Artist: Jacen Burrows
Publisher: Avatar Press

Zombies are everywhere, especially in this edition of the Journal (see below for a review of the Walking Dead video game). Garth Ennis is well known as the creator of series such as the extraordinary Preacher and has also worked for DC, Marvel and 2000AD. In Crossed, Ennis finally gives us his take on the Zombie.

Or in this case, rather, “The Crossed”. Actually, forget I mentioned zombies at all. These aren’t zombies. I mean, sure, they travel in large packs, violently attack other humans and turn others into ‘Crossed’ through direct fluid transfer (more on that later. Blagh, by the way). But still, these aren’t zombies, they’re Crossed.

The graphic novel is told mostly in flashback, with a group of survivors travelling across a ravaged USA trying to reach Canada, their reasoning being that there’s less people in Canada and therefore less people who have become Crossed.

The Crossed get their name from a cross shaped rash that spreads across their face, with those effected becoming incredibly violent and acting without inhibitions. In the comic book this involves various unpleasant acts including raping corpses (there’s a lot of this), killing other Crossed and hunting down the uninfected to try and turn them (in one incident this is done by firing bullets at them that have been covered in fluids from the Crossed. I’m not going to say here exactly what the fluid is but suffice to say it’s not something you want in a bullet wound, infectious or not).

As to be expected from Ennis the writing is tight and well paced, with internal and external tension running through the story, driving it on. The artwork by Jacen Burrows is excellent, and his style lends itself well to the mature content of the story.

The Crossed act like a mix between the victims of the Rage virus in 28 Days Later, the infected townsmen in Romero’s The Crazies and the Haters from David Moody’s series of the same name. So they are not zombies in the traditional, Romero-esque sense, just humans transformed into near human monsters that display remarkably similar behaviour to the undead.

You may be sensing some sarcasm at this point. I really don’t know what you mean.

The story follows most, if not all, of the tropes found in zombie stories. A rag tag group of survivors, a desperate attempt to get to a possible safe zone and the disparate personalities of the group resulting in falling-outs and conflict. It even has a cute kid.

And this is where the disappointment comes in. Garth Ennis is one of the most prolific writers and creators of comic books out there and in Crossed I expected him to add something new and interesting to the genre. Unfortunately, he effectively regurgitates every single hackneyed idea that has been done on the zombie story to date. There is simply nothing new in this story. Indeed, other that the extreme

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violence used in the title it has little to differentiate it from any other zombie/zombie like comic, novel, film or video game.

To be clear here: I have nothing per se against a bit of sex and violence in my entertainment, but Ennis seems to rely on it far too much in Crossed, with the lack of originality inherent in the concept made up for with the depiction of violent sexual assaults on what seems like every other page. Crossed reads like it was written for the kind of reader who thoroughly enjoyed the more gruesome bits of Eli Roth’s Hostel 2, in which young women are horribly tortured and murdered every five minutes or so.

Essentially then, what Ennis has done here is written the graphic novel equivalent of something you would expect to see on the Horror Channel at 4 in the morning. Crossed is all about sex and violence and little more. It lacks the subtlety of Dawn of the Dead, or the domestic horror of Haters and in general, reads like something the Daily Mail would love to rant about. The real surprise for me in reading this title was that Ennis had written it. With the likes of Preacher, Hellblazer and some of the all time classic 2000AD stories (Emerald Isle anyone?) under his belt Ennis is much better than a title like this, which appeals purely to the lowest common denominator.

When I first saw that Ennis had written a zombie story I was excited at the prospect, hoping for the same approach to writing that made Preacher a game changer in the comic world. Instead, I came away disappointed and worst of all wary of reading anymore work by him.

I’ll continue to read Ennis, but for now I think I’ll go read Judgement Day again and try to remember the good old days.

Eoin Murphy
Adorno argues that art which gives pleasure is meaningless – instead, we need art forms that are commensurate with the anxieties and terrors of modern life. While he might find many problems with Amnesia, he could certainly not fault it for being pleasurable. It’s a rearbative nightmare that suspends players in relentless fear, making the entire experience deeply uncomfortable.

While other survival horror series have drifted more and more in action-horror directions, Amnesia runs counter to this trend. At no point do players have access to the numerous shotguns and flame-throwers that seem to litter every other zombie infested town or haunted castle – in fact, you have no access to any weapons whatsoever.

As the title would suggest, our protagonist, Daniel, wakes with no memory of who he is or why he has found himself in a seemingly deserted Prussian castle. He finds a note from his past self, instructing him to descend to the basement of the castle and kill the person who waits there. As you explore, it becomes apparent that Daniel is not alone in the castle, but is being pursued by some monster against which he has no defence. From the notes and diary entries you find scattered throughout, you realise that what’s stalking you is a curse from an ancient artefact recovered from an archaeological dig. Daniel’s memory is constantly inundated with more information, as increasingly ill-omened objects provoke flashbacks that distressingly impede players’ control.

Instead of weapons, players find tinderboxes to light candles and an oil lantern for exploring the shadows. When encountered with the enemy your only option is to flee and hide. Safe as staying in the light may feel, monsters can see you all too well so players must take cover in darkened rooms or closets. However, lingering for too long in the dark or looking directly at the monsters lowers Daniel’s sanity meter, causing your vision to blur and distort, the walls to pulsate, and your body to slacken, rendering him temporarily immobile. Control is taken from players on many levels. Though you are often made aware of your powerless against dark forces that hunt you, the prison of your own mind is an even more constant threat.

Play is split between anxiously creeping and running in terror, while you desperately try to remember the route to relative safety, extinguishing candles on your way. Once hidden, Daniel’s waning sanity makes it difficult to discern between noises that come from the monster and those that are the product of his deteriorating mental state.

True to its Lovecraftian influences, the unknown is a perpetual threat, as actual contact with the monsters is rare. Though their appearances are infrequent, the decrepit castle and malfunctioning machinery maintain an atmosphere of constant menace. The feeling of helplessness induces relentless terror, making every movement cautious, and flight the instant reaction to any encounter.

Although Amnesia has a relatively low-tech feel that heightens the disconnection with movements and sensory perceptions, the aesthetic generates a finely tuned anxiety. You’re forced to play relatively slowly as glimmers and shapes are sometimes not easily distinguishable from actual dangers. There is no map and, as players descend further into the chasms of the castle, increasing levels of concentration are required to navigate the oppressive underground mazes of dark grisly caverns and dimly lit sewers.

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Silence retreats when danger is near or simply when you’ve spent too long in the dark and your sanity is low, replaced with an impressive layering of truly unnerving sounds – human and otherwise. These are punctuated with unpleasantly meaty sounds if you are harmed, drawing players’ attention to the visceral in preparation for the fairly unexpected gore towards the climax of the game. Though there are many moments of appalling realisation, a standout instance is when players must use a hand drill to bore into a corpse’s head, wedging in a copper cylinder to collect their blood.

There are no real moments of respite. Even in rooms that we immediately sense are “safe”, the atmosphere and music are melancholy and the colours muted, emphasising Amnesia’s cinematic quality.

The game is fixed within the gothic tradition – we uncover Daniel’s tortured past, replete with Orientalist Victorian obsessions with ancient cultures, mystic ritual, and frontier science. Daniel follows trails of fresh blood through rooms haunted by forgotten grandeur and into cellars that house decaying steam punk-esque machinery. There develops a real sense that the environment harbours some malicious intent. The castle is not simply disintegrating: it is diseased. As you progress, weirdly organic crimson viscera grows and pulsates from the walls and floor. Players cannot ignore the encroaching gore – whenever you get too close it splatters unpleasantly.

The central story is well expressed through Daniel’s past narratives, lessened only slightly by the over-acted storytelling voice. The calibre of the writing, though, is unusually high for survival horror, especially when considering that the most spoken about survival horror dialogue is industry joke Resident Evil.

Amnesia’s first-person perspective gives the action immediate and personal feeling. The lack of an on-screen avatar forces a deep immersion; there is no other body to act as a mental barrier between you and the danger. Horror is given more room in which to work when it feels as if you are involved to such depth, however, in this case, deep immersion indicates weakness more than power.

Amnesia is not really about “survival”. You are impelled to continue, travelling towards ominous understanding instead of any kind of happy ending. This is another element that adds to Amnesia’s gothic power, the sense of fate and haunting dictating our actions.

Continuing to play when the feeling of unease is so great is a fantastic expression of the death drive. It doesn’t make sense to continue to self-inflict such intense discomfort. You’ll want to stop playing. Your pulse will race, your palms will sweat, you’ll jump, you’ll scream. You’ll keep playing.

Zoë Jellicoe

Amnesia: The Dark Descent
Graphics: 7
Gameplay: 10
Sound: 10
Replay Value: 9
Overall Score: 9

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The Walking Dead: A New Day
Developer & Publisher: Telltale Games
(Reviewed on the Xbox 360 – Downloadable content)

The Walking Dead is a prime example of the power of a good story. Starting off in Robert Kirkman’s comic books of the same name, then evolving into to an award winning TV show and now transformed into the inevitable video game, The Walking Dead has successfully permeated multiple media platforms, and remains notable for its sustained focus on character over action (although action plays a significant role).

Despite the success of The Walking Dead in other formats, though a question always hangs over any video game tie-in- “will it actually be any good?”. They seem to be cursed, with most being terrible (Superman Returns and ET the Extra Terrestrial are deemed two of the worst games ever made, ET being so bad apparently there’s thousands of copies of the game buried somewhere in the Arizona desert) and only a few ever being anything other than just ok. So can The Walking Dead: A New Day even be considered a decent tie-in, let alone a good one?

You play the game as Lee (a new character, although familiar figures from the comic book and TV show do turn up), who is on his way to jail as the zombie outbreak begins. Caught up in a car accident as the patrol car he’s being transported in runs over a wandering member of the legion of the undead, Lee must first escape the initial zombie attack and then help a young girl (Clementine) survive the plague.

Lee and Clementine soon find themselves falling in with the usual rag-tag group of survivors, with egos, secrets and zombies all adding to the tension.

A New Day is the first in a number of ‘chapters’ to be released in the series, each adding another instalment to the story of Lee and Clementine. They are available for download via Xbox Live for a reasonable 400 Microsoft Points (around £3.40/€5.00).

Unlike most other current zombie games, A New Day does not rely on blood and gore to get by (in contrast to the the likes of Dead Island, Dead Rising and the excellent but practically plotless Left for Dead). Rather, story is king here, and large strands of plot and character development interspersed with action sequences. Indeed, this first chapter of the game series is highly reminiscent of Kirkman’s comics in that the walking dead, whilst an integral part of the story, are not in themselves the main focus. Isn’t that often the way in traditional (i.e. Romero influenced) zombie stories though? They’re often, as here, more about how people behave in times of extremity than the Living Dead themselves (who are really just a metaphor for any kind of terrible disaster or catastrophe you can think of – a supernatural natural disaster, in fact).

The game itself is played as an advanced point and click adventure (including slightly obscure puzzles), with new areas loaded as the character moves around and objects highlighted by a targeting reticule and interacted with by different on screen prompts. This is relatively effective although it can be somewhat awkward when you’re being attacked by a zombie and you’re trying to stick a screwdriver in its ear. This could, however, be a deliberate choice on the behalf of the developers as it raises the tension significantly.
Tension is your constant companion in this game. Even the initial ride in a cop car helps raise the ante, with Lee and the Police Officer chatting about why he’s on his way to jail, occasionally interrupted by warnings over the radio of something bad happening and cop cars zipping down the other side of the highway.

This tension is the source of staying power for the game and is further added to by the choices you must make during gameplay. These come relatively often and vary from relatively minor dilemmas (you must decide what questions to ask someone) to choosing who lives and who dies.

Like a number of other games out there, player dialogue is determined by a dialogue tree with comments controlled via the D pad. The choices you make here can have a direct effect on how individuals react to you. For example throughout the game you can choose to tell people you were on your way to jail when the outbreak began or not. If they figure out you’re lying however this can have repercussions for later on, when trust becomes vitally important for your survival. Cleverly, the game doesn’t give you much time to respond to questions during these moments. A time bar rapidly drops, giving you just enough time to read the four speech options and respond. As a result you can find yourself giving instinctive answers rather than thought out responses where you’ve had time to consider the possible impact on the game (as in games that use a similar mechanic such as the Mass Effect series). This again adds to the tension as you don’t know what effect your panicked response will have (such as whether or not it will lead to a child having his head bashed in...).

Like its more basic point and click predecessors (such as the classic Lucas Arts game Escape From Monkey Island), A New Day progresses through problem solving – finding items lying around and using them to solve puzzles, although these riddles are more practical in nature than in similar games. Some of the puzzles can be a tad obscure, but hints and clues are generated through conversation with NPCs (Non Playable Characters) and it feels quite rewarding to have to figure them out, especially as they rely on real world logic.

The graphics themselves are designed to reflect the art of the comic book and do a decent enough job (It’s a good looking game for downloaded content, which can be graphically limited), although character movement in the game is stiff and further highlights the fact that this isn’t your standard “Let’s blast zombies” game. There is however some rather obvious repetition of NPC’s especially with the undead (I’m pretty sure I saw the same one in two different towns, and zombies don’t move that fast...)

There are also some problems with sound as well: snatches of dialogue are missing and voices seem to fade a touch here and there. This, of course, may be a result of sudden poor hearing on my part, but as my spouse also had the same difficulty I’m going to assume it’s the games fault...

Ultimately, A New Day is a good introduction to the game world of The Walking Dead. As noted, a few problems are apparent, but all of this can be put aside when you find yourself caught up in the story. For a mere 400 Microsoft points on Xbox Live Arcade and with around 2-3 hours of gameplay, this is one worth checking out, especially if you’re a fan of the series or comic book.
Eoin Murphy

The Walking Dead: A New Day
Graphics: 8
Gameplay: 8
Sound: 7
Replay Value: 8
Overall Score: 8
TELEVISION REVIEWS

Witchcraft 101:  
The Secret Circle  
(CW/ Sky Living, Sept 2011 – May 2012)

Vampires, it goes without saying, are “In”. So are zombies. We have, in fact, seen so many of these undead consumers of human flesh and blood in recent years, on both the small and big screens, that a certain degree of fatigue is setting in. Recent efforts to broaden the range of monsters on TV are therefore to be lauded. On this side of the Atlantic, Sky Living has done some sterling work in this regard, struggling to relieve the gloom of this rain-rotted, recession-ridden little isle with a rather more glitzy kind of darkness, in the shape first of glossy teenage werewolves (in Teen Wolf) and now, in a new 22-episode adaptation of L.J. Smith’s The Secret Circle novels, glossy teenage witches.

Like many an oppressed minority, witches have had a less than easy time of it over the years. After centuries of persecution and culturally sanctioned mass-murder, as Bernice Murphy explains at length in her book Suburban Gothic, they have largely been relegated to narratively and socially subordinate positions in fiction, theatre and film. Domesticated to ditsy housewife status in shows like Bewitched and Charmed, or to second-fiddle roles in Buffy the Vampire Slayer, True Blood and indeed Macbeth, witches fare even worse in those texts which seek to exonerate them and counter long-standing prejudice. Some of the finest depictions of witch-related panics, including Arthur Miller’s The Crucible, Michael Reeve’s Witchfinder General and even, arguably, The Blair Witch Project, succeed in convincing us that witches have been wrongfully demonised only by insisting that there is no such thing, and that those accused of witchcraft are simply misunderstood old women (Diana Wynne Jones’ Witch Week being a notable and much-neglected exception). Works such as Fritz Leiber’s Conjure Wife, Eva Ibbotson’s Which Witch?; George A. Romero’s Season of the Witch (aka Jack’s Wife) and, potentially, Shirley Jackson’s unfinished novel Come Along with Me, go some way towards redressing the balance. Focusing as they do on strongly individualised, powerful, dangerous yet sympathetic women, they suggest, to varying degrees, that an engagement with witchcraft makes possible a greater degree of personal and social agency.

All too often, however, the narrative lure of the coven motif reduces the individualism and sense of control that dabbling in magic can confer upon a fictional female character. Classics such as Roman Polanski’s Rosemary’s Baby; Dario Argento’s Suspiria and George Miller’s The Witches of Eastwick, along with more recent offerings, frother films like Griffin Dunne’s Practical Magic and Andrew Fleming’s The Craft, emphasise the collective nature of women’s magic, and bonds of loyalty and singleness of purpose that render it perilous, even impossible, for a member to go her own way. Indeed, the latter three make very clear that independence on the part of any one of the coven is a sure sign of her failure to subordinate her own desires to the needs of the group, a crime for which she is invariably punished severely. To be a good witch, therefore, whether one practices dark or light magic, is to be little more than a cog in a larger machine, the unity of which must be preserved, at whatever cost to the individuals who comprise the whole.

This, at any rate, is the burden of the plot of Kevin Williamson’s televisation of The Secret Circle, which focuses on Cassie Blake (Britt Robertson), who, after moving to the fictional town of Chance Harbour,
Washington, discovers that she is the final member of a mixed-gender coven. It transpires that the group’s magic has been passed down to them by their parents, who formed an identical coven many years before, but who had died in a mysterious fire; Cassie’s efforts to discover the exact cause of which consumes most of the present action of the series. Both endangered and protected by the power they wield as a group, predictably, any efforts on the parts of the teenagers to break from the group leaves the others (and possibly the entire world) in peril. The result of this set up is, somewhat lamentably, an often turgid, always labyrinthine sequence of events, revolving around uncertain paternity, familial and romantic betrayal, divided loyalties and ancient organisations of witches, witch hunters and other magically inclined groupings. The shifting allegiances and alliances between these groups is bewildering enough, but it is frequently even more difficult to figure out why they should all be so hell bent on getting hold of the diminutive, blond Cassie. It seems unprofessionally naïve on the parts of those who wish either to break or exploit the power of the coven that they largely ignoring her far more interesting brunette co- enclave (the central two boys – Adam (Thomas Dekker) and Jake (Chris Zylka) are, somewhat predictably, reduced to little more than obedient but unconvincingly enigmatic sex objects).

Such, however, is the logic of a teen drama, and who are we to argue. Cassie, with her tumbling golden curls, doll-like physique and morally ambiguous powers, which, apparently, far outstrip those of her friends (though this isn’t always entirely evident from the action itself) is evidently intended to call to mind Sarah Michelle Gellar’s turn as Buffy – and indeed, Sky’s pairing of The Secret Circle with the Gellar vehicle Ringer tries valiantly to reinforce this superficial association. Vitally, however, The Secret Circle rather lacks the charm and, even less forgivably, the humour of Joss Whedon’s cult series, possibly because the attempt to adapt a series of novels has been overly ambitious. By trying to squeeze everything in, the show’s creators have ended up with an unwieldy number of characters and hurried plot expositions that overshadow the potentially interesting story of a young girl seeking to come to terms with her own unfamiliar powers. Stand-alone or novelty episodes are effectively absent (though, to be fair, these have been increasingly weeded out of almost every American television programme in recent years, a trend that is to be lamented at every available opportunity), rendering the tangle of plot strands and group dynamics at once claustrophobic and less than easy to navigate.

In its defence, though, The Secret Circle does look very pretty, with a pleasingly tenebrous mise-en-scène and a few impressive set pieces among all the sparsely lit small-town kitsch, including a creepy abandoned ship and the obligatory drug/magic-dealer’s den. The latter is invested with just enough of an edge of voodoo to keep it on the grittier side of iconography of commercial supernatural establishments familiar from many of the films and programmes mentioned above. Most of the actual magic performed by the characters, however, tends to be of an Apollonian rather than a Dionysian nature, generally eschewing the messing around with bits of animals ground up in borrowed pestle-and-mortar sets in favour of Potterish arm waving, crystals, family heirlooms and shabby Books of Shadows, making this for the most part a cerebral rather than a bodily kind of enchantment. And of course, the sub-plot of addiction to artificial magical stimulants – another nod to Buffy, where Willow’s dabbling takes an increasingly serious turn – is confined mainly to Faye (Phoebe Tomkin), the raven-haired, statusque and, it is hinted, sexually forward rebel of the group, who chaffs under the constraints imposed by membership of the coven. Cassie may be consumed more and more by her inherited dark magic as the series progresses, but for her, being possessed by the supernatural is an innate part of her genetic destiny, rather than something she purchases from an unscrupulous and financially motivated external source.

In other words, The Secret Circle is fairly standard magical fare, with the occasional flash of arresting visuals from out of the slick production values, and a few moments of genuine tension and jumpiness, but without the courage to explore the murkier depths of witchcraft in any real detail. Indeed, while it has...
much in common with Stewart Hendler’s recent remake of the film *Sorority Row* and the Warner Brother’s series *Pretty Little Liars*, brought to Ireland and Britain by MTV, these actually offer more closely observed dissections of disintegrating female friendship under the pressure of dangerous situations that undermine the privilege upon which the groups are built.

That said, the news that the CW Network cancelled the show after the first season is still unwelcome. The wearying predictability of such cancellations do little to reduce the sense that it is difficult, even in a decade that seems to have embraced the troubling juxtaposition of monstrosity and identity politics as this one has, to create a television show based on supernatural horror. The first season of many programmes can frequently be a little weak (*Buffy* being a prime example here), as the actors and producers find their feet and as audiences learn to feel greater affection for the characters and concern for what might happen to them. It is only in later seasons that relationships and conceptual arcs mature to the point of engaging our interest and of functioning as genuine social or cultural commentary, and decisions to cut shows off before this has become possible dooms them to being remembered as mediocre performances – if indeed they are remembered at all. *The Secret Circle* is in no way a genre-defining production, nor is it even especially compulsive viewing. It may, however, have had the potential (albeit slight) to revitalise the image of the witch in popular culture, until it was stopped in its tracks. Since we’ll never know, it seems fair to assume that we will continue, therefore, where horror television is concerned, to go around and around in decreasingly memorable circles.

*PAT WOLFE*
Not Fade Away:
The Fades
(BBC3, Sept – Oct 2011)

The job of a reviewer of televisual horror can be a dispiriting one. With the notable exception of the current rash of moodily attractive vampires, horror themes and characters play a distinctly minor role in the schedules, and those rare shows which do succeed in conjuring up effective scares or properly Gothic atmospherics are permitted only the briefest of lifespans on the small screen. In a world where the Saw and Hostel franchises have clocked seven and three films respectively, and where remakes of 'seventies and 'eighties horror films such as Halloween and The Texas Chain Saw Massacre rival in number the multiple sequels to the original films themselves, TV horror is being increasingly side-lined. Some of the most imaginative and promising series of recent times, from Joss Whedon’s Angel to Michele Fazekas and Tara Butters’ Reaper have been cut off in their prime, the victims of top-down decision making that privileges short-term ratings over long-term fan commitment and box-set sales.

It is not therefore surprising, merely depressing and frustrating, that Jack Thorne’s The Fades (a six-part BBC3 series about resentful, malevolent ghosts and the very ordinary humans who can see them and try to stop them from taking over the world) should have been awarded a BAFTA for Best Drama Series, just a month after the announcement that it would not be returning for a second season. The Fades is quite frankly an astonishing achievement, a rare combination of stunning (and often disgusting) visuals, passionate and believable acting, and not merely flashes but a veritable lightning storm of original ideas and narrative risks. Drawing upon but also evolving the genre’s often hackneyed obsession with death – with our fear of dying, but also of what might happen to others after their biological lives have ceased – The Fades works hard to unsettle any comfortable beliefs we might have about the finality of mortality, and about distinctions between the “normal” and the monstrous. Nor is this simply a matter of “blurring boundaries” – a favourite activity of literary critics everywhere these days. Over a very small number of episodes, the show dumps its protagonists into seriously treacherous moral and ethical territory, where they still have to negotiate the mundane, dull and often ridiculous details of daily life.

In terms of the plot, which is by no means easy to summarise, The Fades follows Paul (Iain de Caestecker), a shy, slightly disaffected young man, whose waking hours begin to be disturbed by his horrific dreams about the end of the world, alienating him from his mother and twin sister. To make matters worse, he then starts to see ghosts – the eponymous “Fades” who, he learns, are spirits of the dead who have been refused entry to Heaven, and instead wander the land of living, unperceived by all but a few gifted individuals. One of these individuals (known as “Angelics,” and who are depicted as a sort of underground rebel movement, operating just below the surface and on the margins of everyday English society) is Neil Valentine (Johnny Harris). Neil, who has lost a friend and an eye to the Fades’ depredations, is a growling, bearded cyclops of a man, who effectively stalks Paul, jumping out at him from behind his bedroom door in an effort to educate him about the world his new-found senses reveal to him, while simultaneously frightening the living daylights out of him – and, frequently, us.

Not that the creatures that Neil and his fellow vigilante Angelics fight are any less scary – far from it. Before long, we learn that the Fades have discovered how to regain corporeal form – by eating flesh, of course – and the result is a repulsively slimy, pulsating re-birthing scene in a grimy bathtub that lingers hideously in the mind’s eye long after the series itself is over. When this association with abjection is combined with the brutality with which resurrected Fades treat Paul and his friends in later episodes, it
initially seems easy to relegate them to the realm of Irredeemably Evil Demonic Types, and hence to cheer when Our Heroes vanquish them bravely. The problem is, however, that we all die – and in the violent but also meaninglessly chaotic world depicted by the programme, death is never far away, in the mundane form of a speeding car or the looming spectre of suicide as much as in the cold-eyed shape of a recorporealised ghost. To go into too much more detail as to what happens would be to destroy the startling effect of coming to *The Fades* as a first-time viewer. Suffice it to say, however, that the easy assignation of victim or perpetrator status to any individual or group is not just something that the programme strives to undermine, but is part of the explicit subject matter, as the local police force (led by the father of Paul’s best friend Mac (Daniel Kaluuya)) struggle to find someone to arrest in the wake of multiple disappearances and violent attacks.

With a broad but not unwieldy range of characters, in which the town’s various social strata are amply represented, there is clearly more than enough material here to have continued at least into a second series – as series producer Caroline Skinner insisted on accepting the BAFTA for the show. Indeed, while the troubled Paul (who, it transpires, is a sort of Messiah figure, psychically powerful enough to withstand and even destroy the Fades) is both the focus of the action and a sympathetic, believable adolescent, the supporting cast more than hold their own. In particular, Mac is played by Kaluuya as a sort of witty, genre-savvy Samwise Gamgee, grounding Paul’s flights of visionary fancy and providing an ironic commentary on his friend’s often dangerously distracting romantic liaison with his sister Anna’s (Lily Loveless) quirky friend Jay (Sophie Wu). Indeed, Anna’s transition from impatient bimbo to angry heroine via an extended panic attack is a pleasure to watch, and a development rather than a mere repetition of the conventional Final Girl role.

As I’ve already mentioned, it would do the viewing experience itself a disservice to expand on what actually happens in *The Fades*, and any attempt at plot summary would result in reducing the action to a series of trite-sounding set pieces. To watch it in its entirety is to encounter not merely a thought-provoking but an entertaining and often very funny piece of television, one that builds upon the precedent of tragi-comic supernatural drama established by BBC’s *Being Human*, one of the few success stories of recent small-screen horror. While *Being Human* generally minimises the scares in favour of a kind of demonic comedy of manners, however, *The Fades* reverses the proportions and succeeds, in doing so, in leaving the viewer with an increasingly shaky sense of the stability and transparency of the world we take for granted. Steeped in the iconography of twenty-first century ecological disaster and impending economic collapse, Paul’s visions of an England where the Fades have won is at once eerily spectral and uncomfortably imaginable. And as for a world in which *The Fades* itself has won the BAFTAs but lost the battle against corporate greed – perhaps the less said the better.

*Dara Downey*
Desperate Housewives: Witches Lament
(ABC, 2011)

For some, Halloween is an excuse to watch visceral horror films, to wound pumpkins and don the latest terrifying garb. For others, the 31st October is but a Pagan prelude to the praying, fasting, vigils and religious services of All Saints’ Day (November 1st). It’s a little like Christmas in that we are treated to a variety of holiday specific offerings from television.

The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet: Halloween Party (1952) arguably birthed the first Halloween “special episode” on American television. Hundreds of fright fests followed suit. South Park: Hell on Earth (2006) is a recent offering that featured Satan hosting his very own sweet-sixteen birthday party in LA: his guest list included notorious serial killers such as, Ted Bundy, Jeffrey Dahmer, and John Wayne Gacy.

ABC’s Desperate Housewives (2004-present) has also broadcast three Halloween-inspired episodes. Each episode is numbered sixth in the season and the title of each is taken from the song “I Know Things Now” from Stephen Sondheim’s sinister musical Into the Woods (1986). “Witches Lament” (2011, Dir: Tony Plana) was the latest spooky special that traded in its habitually kooky costume spectaculars for a more chilling instalment in which the women are haunted by the sins of the not so distant past.

So what does the cultural phenomenon that is Desperate Housewives have to do with the horror genre? Well, to begin with, it is worth noting that many of the cast and crew have laboured on their fair share of horror films, perhaps the most memorable being the cold-blooded campness of Roger Bart (who plays evil pharmacist George Williams) in Eli Roth’s Hostel Part II (2007). Gothic-fantastic composer Danny Elfman even scores the show. What’s more, the show’s fictional street, Wisteria Lane (Fairview), shares the same studio setting as horror hits such as Hitchcock’s Psycho (1960), television series The Munsters (1964–66), Dante’s The ‘Burbs (1989) and more recently Zombie’s House of 1000 Corpses (2000).

It’s certainly not all freshly baked muffins, gingham aprons and frozen smiles on Wisteria Lane. Throughout the eight seasons audiences have witnessed a hit and run, wrist slitting, stabbing, gunshot to the head, choking, live burial, poisoning, axe beating, overdose and assisted euthanasia. Deaths have also included: being impaled on a fence post, blown away by a tornado, crushed by a wardrobe, car accidents, electrocutions, being hit by a falling plane, murder by candlestick bludgeoning and death by viral infection. Not to mention asphyxiation at the hands of the Fairview Strangler!

Granted, while the show may have shaky horror credentials, - it’s certainly not a “pure” horror show in the way that shows like American Gothic, or, more recently, The River are – it does without a doubt, lie squarely within the Suburban Gothic sub-genre. This is particularly evident in the first three seasons, which features typically ripe suburban anxieties such as, a family’s involvement in a dubious suicide, a deadly love triangle and a supermarket hostage situation between husband and wife, are the focus of the community. The genius of Desperate Housewives lies in its fluid blending of genres. One can be transported through melodrama, thriller, soap opera and visceral horror within a matter of minutes. For instance, in one of the very first scenes of the series we witness the bloodied body of housewife Mary Alice, who has just committed suicide. This visual is immediately followed by an extreme close up of the local scandalmonger licking tomato ketchup from her fingers. Mary Alice narrates the show from beyond
the grave, observing her former neighbours’ daily struggle with the horrors of domesticity. Disgust, jealousy, desire, revenge and discontentment seethe throughout Wisteria Lane.

As Halloween looms in “Witches Lament”, the housewives have discovered that Ben’s (Charles Mesure) real estate construction is about to commence on the spot that Gabrielle’s (Eva Longoria) rapist stepfather Alejandro (episode director Tony Plana) is illicitly buried. Bree (Marcia Cross), Lynette (Felicity Huffman) and Gabrielle must attempt to resurrect and redispose of the body. Rather than focus upon the typical plot-driven ‘who done it’ scenario, the slow-simmering chiller focuses on the cold-sweat anxieties that accompany the fear and paranoia of being caught. Cover-ups are a recurring theme on the show and a common trope of the Suburban Gothic sub-genre.

The episode opens with a scene that functions entirely unconventionally for Desperate Housewives as we witness the lower halves of the shovel-clad, torch-flailing housewives running through the forest to the sound of laboured breathing. Here Plana sets the scene by indicating to the audience that the episode will employ well-known horror genre tropes throughout. The scene in particular evokes the slasher film, as we are forced to witness the short-breathed panic of the victims as they flee their pursuing captor whilst stumbling through the claustrophobic and challenging terrain of the forest. The backwoods scene is intercut with speed-ramped point of view shots rampaging through the wonderfully gothic, fog-drenched forest. Elfman’s score intensifies the visuals. The scene is highly reminiscent of one in Marcus Nispel’s Friday The 13th remake (2009) in which a couple of torch-carrying victims run through the woods of Camp Crystal Lake in an attempt to escape the hockey mask wearing serial killer, Jason Voorhees. The panic-stricken housewives are suddenly rendered motionless what they have uncovered off-screen. The scene leaves the audience on a cliffhanger until the closing of the episode, when all is revealed.

Further into the episode, religious ex-con Carlos Solis (Ricardo Antonio Chavira) struggles with alcoholism triggered by the overwhelming guilt of killing Alejandro, who had been tormenting his wife Gabrielle. He finds the murder hardest to deal with of everyone involved, which is to be expected, given that he is the killer. Whilst home alone, Carlos opens his door to what he believes to be an innocent trick or treater and is instantly terrified by a smirking Alejandro. While Carlos stands dumbfounded, the visual of Alejandro reverts into a candy-hunting kid dressed as the living dead, thus reaffirming to the viewer Carlos’ guilt-ridden conscience.

As a result of this terrifying encounter, Carlos begins to hit the bottle again. This visual of the Freddy Kruger-esque Alejandro that results, evoking Banquo’s ghost at Macbeth’s table, is one of the most eerie images in the entire series. Elfman’s unsettling orchestral score enhances and reiterates the fright. Mexican born alpha-male Carlos came from a violent home and after becoming a successful businessman married his high-maintenance wife, Gabrielle. Crooked business deals and the relentless demands of his trophy wife usually land Carlos in hot water with the law and constantly conflict with his newfound, prison-gained, Catholic beliefs. The scene featuring the ‘hallucination’ of Alejandro is undoubtedly frightening and also provides subtext regarding the horrors of domesticity. Gabrielle’s own humiliation and dread, caused by the sexual abuse she suffered at the hands of her stepfather Alejandro, as a child, has however had a transformative effect on her husband. As Mary Alice states in the narration of a previous episode, “monsters create other monsters.” Carlos’s primitive attempt to transform shame into pride leads himself and those he holds dear to further anxiety, paranoia and fear. His impossible situation arguably evokes two well-known psychological horror ficks, Peckinpah’s Straw Dogs (1971) and Ruben’s The Stepfather (1987).
Later in the episode, after an unexpected romantic rejection, narcissistic diva Renee (Vanessa Williams), decides to turn up the heat for her first liaison with mysterious new neighbour Ben by swigging a bottle of so-called ‘love potion’. The self-induced ‘roofy’ causes horrendous side effects. In a darkly humorous scene Ben is passionately kissing Renee when suddenly she starts to gag fiercely as her throat becomes tight with the reaction. Her eyes soon gloss over and her face fester into boils and sores.

The gruesome features are not unlike Regan’s (Linda Blair) once she has been possessed by the demon in Friedkin’s The Exorcist (1973). She subsequently faints and Ben has no option but to drag her prone body to his car, much to the horror of the young trick or treaters. The children flee frantically from the grotesque housewife as she shambles nauseously in the driveway. Once again the episode captures perfectly the horrors of domesticity as Renee takes extreme measures in a desperate attempt to save face in the throes of her sexual paranoia.

Finally, we enter the closing of the episode by returning to the sinister woodland from the opening scene. In usual hard-boiled fashion, the housewives agree to dig up the body before the real estate excavation. Thick-skinned champion homemaker Bree taxies Lynette and Gabrielle to the scene. She unsympathetically chirps to her concerned friends, “I have all the supplies in my trunk, along with clean towels, hand sanitizer and breathing masks, in case the stench is overwhelming. A Beacon of conservative values and avid collector of firearms, Bree Van de Kamp, the community’s most confidante, boasts an impressive track record of covering up crimes. Indeed, Bree’s cover-ups are usually of the murderous kind, such as, her part in hiding her son Andrew’s involvement in a fatal hit-and-run, her own role in the suicide of a psychotic ex-lover and her provision of a fake alibi for her bitter rival’s deadly crime of passion.

The women enter the forest debating over the likely state of the rapidly rotting corpse. The friends frantically split on hearing a male voice bark, “Hey! Who’s there?” A plot twist is employed when the housewives are shocked to discover Alejandro’s empty grave, which is implicative of similar themes exploited in Dante’s The ’Burbs (1989), when Ray (Tom Hanks), suspicious of strange noises coming from the house of his eccentric neighbours, climbs into their garden while they are away to search for dead bodies. His day light dig bears no fruit and results in him gazing with disbelief into a number of empty grave-shaped holes in the garden. Bree, Gabrielle and Lynette protect each other and each other’s families to endless lengths, suffering the dire complexities of guilt and the exasperating fear of being caught in the name of love, friendship, faithfulness and reputation. As Mary Alice narrates in a previous episode, “the thing that binds friends together the most is a secret that changes everything.”

Instead of being merely another cheesy Halloween effort, “Witches Lament” delivers stellar performances from the cast and creates an outstanding atmosphere, injecting a dose of scream-queen horror into’ chick-flick’ comedy-drama. The show’s pleasing glimpses of suburban horror give it every right to accompany Dante’s The ’Burbs (1989) and Burton’s Edward Scissorhands (1990) on any film fan’s shelf.

VICTORIA McCOLLUM

The Irish Journal of Gothic and Horror Studies II
Running for thirteen episodes, only eight of which were originally aired on the series' initial U.S. broadcast, *Fear Itself* (2008-2009) stands as an interesting if flawed example of the anthology show format. Though ostensibly it does not rely on the participation of established 'names' to the extent that both seasons of *Masters of Horror* (2005-2009) did, *Fear Itself*, the third anthology series from show runner Mick Garris, nevertheless brings together an eclectic bunch of genre talent including Ronny Yu, Steve Niles, William B. Davis and Eric Roberts, though with only limited success.

It is difficult not to see Garris’ move from cable to network TV (NBC) for *Fear Itself* as at least partially to blame for the show’s numerous failings. While *Masters of Horror’s* positioning on Showtime can be read as a (frequently) successful marriage between the show’s often extreme content and the desired demographic of the cable channel, in comparison, *Fear Itself* flounders with a shorter running time of forty five minutes (more amenable to commercial breaks but not the building of effective shocks) and a reduced opportunity to depict the graphic imagery that some would argue are crucial to the horror genre. Perhaps *Fear Itself’s* biggest problem is that it suffers from a noticeable lack of budget, the result being that the expensive special effects showcases of *Masters of Horror* (such as series two's 'Pelts') are noticeably absent while the scope of the storytelling in *Fear Itself* has had to be scaled back from the more ambitious and longer narratives of the *Masters of Horror* (see “The Screwwfly Solution”). Consequently we get episodes with characters constrained to an old fort (“The Sacrifice”), a haunted house (“Spooked”) and a wedding reception (“In Sickness and In Health”) to name just a few of the closed locales on offer. Indeed, much like the often uneven quality of its spiritual predecessor, individual episodes of *Fear Itself* vary somewhat in quality though the most successful manage to use the apparent limits imposed by the relative financial constraints of the show to their advantage crafting effective horror vignettes that utilise the ‘scaled down’ nature of their narratives to evoke a sense of claustrophobic suspense. Such is the case with episode eight, “Skin and Bones” which manages to present an interesting take on the Wendigo story with genre stalwart Doug Jones (*Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Hellboy*) playing a possessed man who returns to his family home in mysterious circumstances. Jones’ character starts surreptitiously killing his family and it quickly transpires that he has in fact been eating those around him, including his brother who has designs on his wife and is the father of his two children. The episode, which has tonal echoes of the much underrated *Ravenous* (1999), culminates in a standoff in which Jones’ wife offs her husband and saves their kids. While “Skin and Bones” does little that is truly original it does at least manage to create an entertaining forty five minutes of television.

Similarly, Stuart Gordon (*Re-Animator, Castle Freak*), directs the effective fifth episode entitled “Eater” another darkly comedic story of cannibalism, that manages to make the most of its confined prison setting. Helped by the acting of Elisabeth Moss playing a young police officer called 'Boot' Bannerman (Moss being more well known to contemporary audiences as Peggy Olson in *Mad Men*) the episode tells the story of a Cajun serial killer or ‘eater’ who escapes his incarceration and proceeds to consume those he encounters. Gordon creates a clammy sense of dread exacerbated when Bannerman realises that Miller has escaped and is able to assume the appearance of those he proceeds to kill. Ending with a somewhat hokey yet nevertheless entertaining twist, “Eater” (like Skin and Bones”) demonstrates that the format of *Fear Itself* need not be a hindrance when those involved recognise the limitations imposed upon them.

Yet, while the majority of episodes have something to redeem them (such as Marshall Bell’s suitably weird turn as Uncle Bob in “In Sickness and in Health”), by the time we get to the later part of the season
the repeated reliance on siege like scenarios requiring only small casts and very little on location shooting really begins to grate as the ‘bottle’ show structure is repeated. Episode thirteen “The Circle” in particular, shows a dearth of ideas; the episode's loosely defined plot seemingly borrowing from a host of sources including, most noticeably, Remedy Entertainment's 2010 video game Alan Wake (itself indebted to Twin Peaks, the novels of Stephen King and Carpenter's In the Mouth of Madness) in its tale of a Horror writer who is beset by his own creations in an isolated log cabin in the woods. “The Circle’s somewhat po-faced approach to what might have been a rather interesting self-reflexive take on the subject of authorial inspiration exemplifies another problem with the series as a whole, which is that it frequently seems at pains to take itself (overly) seriously. Indeed, while such a straight laced tone is perfectly valid, the anthology format would seem to lend itself to an at least partially comedic approach with several of the more successful examples of the form such as The Twilight Zone (1959-1964) and Tales from the Crypt (1989-1996) showing some (albeit wry) awareness of their own ridiculousness. In fact, while many critics have suggested that Masters of Horror failed to live up to the potential of those involved behind the scenes, the show often tended to work best when it's directors recognised the usefulness of comedy in encouraging an audience to forgive an episode's other (often budgetary related) shortcomings (evident in Stuart Gordon's “The Black Cat” for example).

Despite this tradition, Fear Itself's individual stories frequently lack an overtly comedic touch with even those episodes directed by figures usually associated with a humorous approach to the genre seemingly reigning in this aspect of their work. For example, while episode eight, “New Years Day” is scripted by Steve Niles (most well known for writing the comic book 30 Days of Night) and directed by Darren Lynn Bousman (director of Saw II and Repo! The Genetic Opera among others) Bousman's execution seems to be at pains to avoid the suggestion of anything comedic in a zombified landlady or competing zombie suitors for the love of the central character, Helen, though there is something grotesquely humorous about the episode’s use of “Happily Ever After” as Helen’s love interests approach to tear her limb from limb.

In conclusion, Fear Itself proves too inconsistent to join the ranks of the most critically revered anthology series such as The Twilight Zone (1959 – 1964), existing instead in the wasteland of shows that failed to succeed with what is a notoriously difficult format (see also the recent Stephen King's Nightmares and Dreamscape). Too many of its episodes are hamstrung by a noticeable lack of budget and ambition on the part of those involved, meaning that the viewer is faced with a series that all too quickly begins recycling its own formula. Such a failure does not perhaps bode well for the long gestating Masters of Italian Horror.

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