

TELEVISION REVIEWS

The Imp of the Ad-verse The rise of the slimy little monster in advertising

Considerable quantities of ink are currently being spilled in academic circles over what, exactly, constitutes or defines the post(-)modern Gothic, and where, if anywhere, to locate the boundaries that demarcate it from other genres, particularly those of fantasy and mainstream culture. While fiction, film, photography and full-length television programmes continue to struggle with and perpetuate the blurring and reconfiguration of these boundaries, the world of advertising seems to have hit upon a rather more successful means of giving shape to the fears and anxieties that can turn our everyday experiences into nightmarish situations.

For several decades now (the 1950s spring most readily to mind), the advertising industry has committed itself to presenting us with images with transform the commonplace and the quotidian into the supernatural. Products come to life and cavort across our television screens; metaphors take on an apparently concrete reality; streets and buildings tremble and take on fantastical forms as multimedia devices are turned on, chocolate bars are consumed or cans of alcohol are opened; and decidedly unremarkable individuals suddenly become improbably attractive to attractive members of the opposite sex. Even if these condensed narratives do not directly represent the fulfilment of our desires (why on earth anybody would want man-hole covers to explode colourfully behind them while eating confectionary is beyond me), they body forth a more complex desire for change and defamiliarisation, for a world in which everything is at once simpler and more exciting, safer but also thrillingly alien.

This is by no means that case, however, with the gradual invasion of our television screens by tiny, slimy, havoc-causing yet weirdly cute monsters which seems to have occurred over the past few years. This, I hasten to add, is not in reference to that brief slew of films from the 1980s, including *Gremlins* (1984) and *Critters* (1986), which centred around such creatures. Nonetheless, these films *did* appear at that time (when in America as much as in Ireland and Britain, sudden prosperity and financial crisis danced merrily around one another to the confusion and consternation of all). Indeed, the term “gremlins” was coined by fighter pilots (and exploited by Roald Dahl in a 1943 novel of the same name) in World War II who couldn’t understand why their equipment repeatedly failed for no apparent reason. This, arguably, should render it unsurprising that these minute yet highly dangerous imps should once again be popping out of the woodwork all around us. This time, though, the phenomenon has eschewed the grand narratives of the big screen in favour of the rapid flickering of small-screen advertising.

Of course, diminutive demon-like things have graced our ad breaks for several years now. The internet is almost literally howling with bloggers and message-board posters shuddering electronically at the memory of Digger, the toenail demon from a 2003 advert for Lamisil, an anti-fungal treatment. Lifting up and crawling in under the big toenail of his unsuspecting host, Digger cheerfully informs us of how much he enjoys inhabiting and infecting what quickly becomes a vast, discoloured landscape of flesh, literally hopping with equally gleeful clones of our personal guide to this underworld of germs. Somewhat similarly, two years later, the Domestos people gave us their noir-ish “millions of germs will die” series of ads, featuring monstrous CGI representations of Salmonella, *E.Coli* and so on, who rasped mournfully at the camera about how difficult life had become since the advent of a new toilet cleaner. These were

monsters in the sense that Frankenstein's creation is – articulate, tortured and lonely. Arguably, this characterisation, along with the tag-line, encourages us, rather uncomfortably, simultaneously to empathise with these doomed grotesqueries. Nevertheless, this cannot be disentangled from the pleasure and relief generated by our foreknowledge of their certain and unpleasant demise beneath a pyroclastic flow of pungent bleach.

Increasingly, however, these microscopic demons have ceased to speak directly to a fictional camera – and hence to the audience – and have become instead closer to the gremlins and critters of twenty years ago. The Sunsilk “wash out your hair demons” campaign from 2006 features a range of scaly little imps doing unspeakable things to the follicles of harassed-looking young ladies. A personal favourite – and the one that has generated the greatest amount of online comment – simply shows one of these Golem-like terrors licking a girl's hair in a particularly repulsive manner as she squirms in her cinema seat, evidently aware that her greasy locks are more than evident, but that the demon responsible for it is invisible to everyone but her. And it is here that the particular brand of paranoia and isolation that characterises these ads comes into play. An invisible enemy that we cannot help but be convinced exist but that no-one else can see is perhaps the most pernicious of all, and it is here that it becomes clear that such advertisements have entered the realm of the Gothic – one already familiar from such offerings as James Fitz O'Brien's “What Was It?”, Ambrose Bierce's “The Damned Thing” and Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves*.

Many earlier ads featuring demonic or supernatural entities of one kind or another, especially those for various forms of bathroom cleaner, display a markedly more triumphalist attitude that aligns them with the school of sword-and-sorcery quest fantasy rather than with the more insidious fears of horror. There was, for example, the long-running Domestos advertisement series, dominated by the “Big Bad Dom” theme tune, in which the bottle of bleach was itself the hero of the brief narrative, strutting around the bathroom and battling germs merely by asserting its manly presence. This, along with a 1990 ad in which a bottle of Listerine boxes against a shadowy opponent (representing gingivitis in a manner that is decidedly not abject or yucky), conflates product and user in a manner which implies power, control and easily identifiable enemies. This is suggested even more explicitly in the genre of advertisement which takes its inspiration from *Star Wars*, *The Lord of the Rings* and *300*, such as the current Rennie Dual Action commercial, and those from a few years ago for Aptamil baby formula, Danone Actimel, Gaviscon and Guinness. In these ads, once again, a simple us-against-them scenario bolsters the ego of the viewer or user, by constructing a universe where things are frightening and dangerous, but can nonetheless be managed in a straightforward yet heroic manner.

Quite the opposite is true of the other strand of demon-related advertising, where the enemies are considerably smaller and yet somehow more frightening, and which seems to have gained ground over the huge flaming monster kind mentioned above. Continuing the trend established by the Sunsilk series, an Irish Specsavers advert features a hairy little critter that that little boy protagonist identifies to his disbelieving mother as one of “the Specklies” – elusive but persistent creatures determined to destroy perfectly good pairs of glasses, bending them out of shape and snapping their arms. This image of inexplicable persecution moves out of the realm of childhood and into the adult world with a controversial British Telecom advert from 2008 starring Peter Jones, a former *Dragon's Den* contestant and some very expensive and faithfully recreated Gremlins (yes, with a capital “G” – these seem to have been lifted almost directly from Joe Dante's film), which many viewers saw as too frightening to be shown on television. Creeping into the reality-TV star's office, the scaly little devils have a rare ol' time chewing, overturning and smashing up just about everything they can find whenever Jones isn't looking, and hiding when he is, leaving him utterly confused as to why his computer has just eaten all his work and the printer

is being uncooperative. Much the same thing is going on in an Eircom ad in which a woman's little boy is transformed into a gremlin-like creature, hell bent on pulling out all of the wires behind her computer.

With these lavish, special-effects driven productions, the sense of powerlessness and incomprehension inspired by "the Specklies," along with the feeling that no sane person would believe that this could happen so quickly without anyone else being in the office, comes to invade, not merely the world of childhood terrors, but of the ordinary office worker and housewife. We do not need overactive imaginations to feel like this, we are being told – all of us do, and something like this will happen to all of us at some point or another, no matter what our age. Indeed, they imply that we are in fact correct when we feel that tiny things in the world are out to get us, and that, as individuals, there is little or nothing that we can do to prevent or remedy it. Somewhat more optimistic are the various toilet-cleaner adverts – in particular the newest Domestos series in which entire, carefully realised and highly detailed "germ armies" living in limescale and classrooms full of infant germs are destroyed in one fell swoop. Nonetheless, we are left in no doubt that all of this is occurring in the realm of our bathrooms rather than some imagined space beyond time – indeed, the Toilet Duck "Freshdisks" advert pictures tiny germ-demons emerging from a loo-block immediately inside an otherwise normal toilet.

What is particularly interesting about all of these adverts is the way in which they differ from those in which the product itself is an animated figure. In particular, the Lemsip ad series in which the packets grow limbs in order to help out those in need of soothing relief and the Gaviscon and Actimel ads with their tiny mobilised men fighting off germs and heartburn, suggest, not a supernatural universe in which commodities are disturbingly alive, but rather one in which those commodities themselves are active on our behalf, not merely inert objects waiting to be put to use by us, but already acting for us independent of any effort we might put into it.

It would be tempting to suggest that there have been more ads of this kind since the advent of the economic crisis, and it would be equally tempting to dismiss this thesis on the grounds that such ads, particular in those promoting Domestos, have been around for many years. At the same time, it is the emphasis on the viewers' vulnerability that does appear to be new – and, potentially, as much a symptom of our post-9/11 world as it is of the economic crisis. Even the Lemsip ad images a young man so much in need of paracetamol that he happily yields himself up to the ministrations of a tiny animated cardboard box. Unlike Listerine's boxing bottle or the people in the Orbit Complete commercials who mime fighting plaque, the man in the Lemsip ad does not so much struggle against his problems as rely on an external agency to solve them for him. Moreover, the protagonist for a recent Benilyn Mucus Relief ad is actively attacked by his problems, in a manner that explicitly echoes nineteenth-century ideas about incubi and succubi. Prone in his bed, a stocky imp, charmingly representing the mucus that, at this time of year, we all a little too familiar with, pounces upon his chest and refuses to be thrown off, no matter how vigorously the hero fights back. Nicely side-stepping the traditional connotations of illicit sexual pleasure that tend to be attached to such preternatural encounters, this focuses merely on how monstrous and unnatural the situation is.

This, like the Eircom ad, is to a certain extent a heroic battle, in which the man struggles around his bedroom to rid himself of the indomitable demon. In both cases, nevertheless, the reassurance function of both adverts comes in the form of outside help – help that is very much needed and without which the demons would inevitably win. While we are initially presented with a situation in which the individual seems to be all alone in the world, with nothing to allow him or her to fight off the threat, succour

speedily arrives in the shape of the product or service – the call-centre worker and the medicine respectively – who succeeds in banishing the threat. Once again, however, there is no sense of conflation between user and product – instead, the product acts as a *deus ex machina*, swooping in as the only way that this problem can be resolved. So, we are first and foremost presented with a world in which personal, very real and yet somehow mildly unbelievable threats isolate the individual in a world of danger, chaos and violence. Rapidly, however, this is replaced by the restoration of order, effected entirely by the commodity in question. Salvation is possible, they seem to imply, but only through consumption – the very thing that, in the financially troubled universe that they depict, is most difficult and elusive.

Unlike the heroic, demon-fighting adverts, those I have been discussing infest the everyday world with monsters, those we can barely see but whose insistent, unnerving presence is undeniably felt. Where the animated *E.Coli* monster from the 2005 Domestos ad both engaged our empathy and distanced himself from us with the Depression-era poverty and criminality he so evidently embodies, now, in a time of global recession and anxiety about the future, neither of these subject positions is either desirable or even possible for audiences. We can no longer feel that there is an unbridgeable gap between us and those who are literally in the gutter, but neither do we want entirely to admit it or simply capitulate whatever power the previous years of giddy spending have accorded us. The tiny imps and demons of current adverts therefore serve the dual purpose of graphically imaging our sense of being victimised by a world we cannot control, while implying that continuing to act as consumers, even in these less than affluent times, can help us to re-establish that control quickly and easily. All-pervasive as our problems may appear, such commercials suggest that they are nonetheless tiny, beneath us, and simply waiting for us to eliminate them – providing we have purchased the correct tool for doing so.

In this way, I would argue, the lingering sense that these adverts convey that these demons will always be with us, that life will constitute a series of endless, only semi-satisfactory skirmishes, at once successfully captures the spirit of these troubled times, but also tries to make us buy our way through them. Living as we now do in a world where governments make decisions that profoundly affect our everyday lives, and yet which, to them, and perhaps even to others, appear to be nothing more than minute alterations in percentages and tax brackets, the imp is the perfect image for the current economic climate. We cannot march onto on to a flaming battlefield and challenge them to mortal combat – the clear-cut rules and morally unequivocal nature of such encounters have been denied to us. Indeed, rather like the original Gremlins and the CGI *E.Coli* demon from the Domestos commercial, it is far from evident if these forces which seek to undermine our hitherto comfortable existence are in fact our enemies, or if we ought to treat them with understanding, even empathy. Our demons will always be with us, we are being told – indeed, are now inextricably bound up with who we are. There is, therefore, little for us to do but to eat, clean and be miserable.

DARA DOWNEY

Wuthering Heights
(ITV, August 2009)

For a novel that has spawned numerous adaptations – cinematic, televisual and musical – *Wuthering Heights* has proven “stubbornly unadaptable” over the years, as Peter Bowker notes in his screenwriter’s note on the webpage for ITV’s recent reinterpretation of Emily Brontë’s text.* The novel’s sprawling time frame takes in not only the doomed love of Heathcliff and Cathy but also the exploits of the generation that follows them, making it particularly difficult to condense for the big screen. Moreover, it is a twice-told tale, narrated by Nelly Dean but relayed to the reader by the hapless Mr Lockwood, a device that previous adaptations have often struggled to negotiate. Peter Kosminsky’s 1992 adaptation starring Ralph Fiennes as Heathcliff and Juliette Binoche as a rather Gallic Cathy, for example, opted for the clunky introduction of the character of Brontë herself (played by Sinead O’Connor) as the author of the tale; while William Wyler’s 1939 version with Laurence Olivier and Merle Oberon omitted the whole story of the second generation of Lintons, Heathcliffs and Earnshaws entirely. Wyler’s classic still remains the best version of *Wuthering Heights* (apart, maybe, from Kate Bush’s) and is a fine film in its own right, but it is still not quite what Brontë wrote, and there has to date never been a screen adaptation that has adequately captured the novel in its entirety. For some time now, it has been subject to anodyne adaptation in musicals by Cliff Richard and appropriation by the *Twilight* brigade as ‘Bella and Edward’s favourite book’ (as the cover of a hastily rebranded recent new edition puts it).

With the *Twilight* tie-in, *Wuthering Heights* is in vogue once more, with yet another cinematic adaptation – with Ed Westwick and Gemma Arterton – scheduled for release next year, and most recently ITV’s adaptation, boasting a script by the in-demand Peter Bowker (who also gave us Pre-Raphaelite romp *Desperate Romantics* this year) and starring the acclaimed and up-and-coming Tom Hardy (who’s just won a British Independent Film Award for his turn in Nicolas Winding Refn’s *Bronson*). Here was a *Wuthering Heights* that set out to capture more of the spirit of Brontë’s text than has been managed in previous adaptations, by eliminating the role of Lockwood but maintaining the complex chronology that ranges back and forth over the course of thirty years or so. The first episode opens in the Yorkshire moors, as a camera speedily tracks along a wild and desolate landscape, before lifting its gaze once it arrives at its destination – Wuthering Heights – and continuing on its track into the house and up some stairs, finally coming to a halt in a room in which Heathcliff (Hardy) lies on a bed being tortured by the memory and ghost of Cathy (Charlotte Riley). By the time her decomposing hand has smashed its way through a window, it’s become apparent that Bowker and director Coky Giedroyc are determined to emphasise the darker aspects of the fabled romance of Brontë’s original, and make this even more apparent a few minutes later when Heathcliff pays a visit to Cathy’s grave, exhuming what he still sees as her pristine corpse (but which the viewer sees is actually a skeleton) to share one more embrace eighteen years after her death. Quite grisly stuff for a Sunday night on ITV, really, and in between these obsessive and maniacal acts, Heathcliff is in full-on scheming misanthrope mode, taunting his sickly son Linton (Tom Payne), imprisoning young Catherine Linton (Rebecca Night) and Nelly Dean (Sarah Lancashire), and forcing the former to marry his son so as to disinherit the lot of them and complete some carefully laid plans of vengeance.

The reasons why he seeks vengeance are then played out in flashback over the course of two extended episodes (amounting to a little under three hours of television). We witness Heathcliff’s childhood as the adopted son of the Earnshaw family; his mistreatment at the hands of true son and heir to the Heights,

Hindley (Burn Gorman); his burgeoning and increasingly passionate relationship with Cathy; her apparent betrayal of him by marrying the more genteel Edgar Linton (Andrew Lincoln); and his subsequent disappearance and return as a man of wealth intent on destroying the lives of all around him, which he spends most of the rest of the running time trying to do. Yet in the end, although most of his old enemies are gone, the growing affection between young Catherine and Hareton Earnshaw (Andrew Hawley) makes it apparent to Heathcliff that his scheming may have been in vain, and he puts an end to it by shooting himself so he and Cathy can apparently live out the afterlife together. In fact, the final shot shows the other inhabitants packing up and leaving the Heights for friendlier climes while the ghosts of both Heathcliff and Cathy look on. This ending indicates that the show hasn't entirely made up its mind just what to do with its supernatural trappings, though. Up to this point, Cathy's ghostly presence had only been registered through Heathcliff's eyes (in particular, he seems to see her face looking back at him whenever he pauses and sees anybody looking out a window), and had seemed to function as a manifestation of his increasingly unstable mental state. In the final scene, though, the audience sees these ghostly figures for themselves without Heathcliff as a filtering presence, in an apparent vindication and reassertion of this supernatural realm.

ITV's *Wuthering Heights* promised a lot, with Bowker's professed ambition to get back to the heart of Brontë's original, and certainly it makes a decent stab at bringing to the fore neglected elements of the story and trying to make Heathcliff less the romantic figure he's often presumed to be and a more complicated, conniving and conflicted character all round. Yet in the end it falls short. Hardy should have made for a great Heathcliff – he certainly has the pedigree and the acting chops – but his Heathcliff sounds distractingly like Steve Coogan's "Paul Calf" character throughout, which takes away from the severity of his persona as tortured lover/scheming miserabilist, while Charlotte Riley seems hindered with a slightly underwritten Cathy who lacks the complexity of Heathcliff. And for all the attention to the second generation of Heathcliffs, Lintons and Earnshaws, a running time of under three hours on the small screen just can't do justice to the intricacies of Brontë's novel. In the end, then, this will have to take its place in an ever-expanding list of disappointing interpretations of *Wuthering Heights*, and Bowker's description of the novel as "stubbornly unadaptable" seems an unfortunate self-fulfilling prophecy.

* available at <http://www.itv.com/drama/perioddrama/wutheringheights/abouttheshow/default.html>

JENNY McDONNELL

Psychoville
(BBC Two, June/July 2009)

The poison pen letter as a dramatic device has a long and illustrious genre history. From Henry George Cluzot's classic 1943 film *Le Corbeau* (*The Raven*) in which the inhabitants of a small French town are sent letters accusing them of wrongdoing, to Shirley Jackson's story "The Possibility of Evil" (in which a self righteous and seemingly respectable spinster torments her neighbours with nasty missives) via the likes of *I Know What You Did Last Summer*, the notion that the postman may unexpectedly deliver something even more unpleasant than last month's credit card bill is one that has frequently been exploited by authors and filmmakers eager to explore the unpredictable repercussions of the anonymous, spite-filled epistle. Like a hand grenade tossed in to a sedate drawing room, the poison pen letter suddenly and violently tears conventional mores and responses asunder. We all have something to hide, after all (some rather more than others, of course) and the notion that somebody, somewhere, knows that which is most secret (and most damaging) to us is enough to make even the most sedate personality lose its equilibrium. And when the individual being targeted is fairly unstable to begin with, well, trouble is all but assured.

That's certainly true of the protagonists of Reece Shearsmith's and Steve Pemberton's new comedy thriller *Psychoville*, each of whom, during the first episode, receives a note with consists of a single devastating sentence: "I know what you did". As one half of the critically acclaimed quartet of writers and performers known as *The League of Gentlemen*, best known for the morbidly witty and at times, genuinely grotesque television series of the same name (which was as indebted to *The Wicker Man* as it was to *Monty Python*), any collaboration between the duo was bound to have a considerable weight of expectation attached to it. This is all the more true given that the big screen version of their most famous project failed to recreate the genuinely disturbing and yet simultaneously hilarious impact of the television series. Royston Vasey was a place in which cannibalistic butchers, mysterious nosebleed epidemics, curiously insular shopkeepers not averse to sacrificing the odd policeman ("We'll have no trouble here! This is a local shop, for local people!") and terrifying circus performers existed alongside human grotesques of a more mundane, but no less humorous variety, such as lascivious landlords, ill-advisedly monikered children's theatre troupes ("Legz Akimbo") and civil servants who have grown a little too attached to their pens. Though saturated with sly and not so sly references and allusions to (particularly the British) horror tradition, *The League of Gentlemen* was a truly original and creative addition to the genre in it's own right, the laughter it inspired almost always tinged with disquiet. It was grotesque in the truest sense of the word, depicting as it did a place in which the boundaries between humour and horror, right and wrong, and the humdrum and the bizarre were not so much trampled over as erased all together.

However, whereas *The League of Gentlemen* was set in a specific, albeit fictional geographical location *Psychoville*, ultimately, is more about a certain state of mind. One of the joys of *League* was the narrative arc which permeated each of the three seasons: there was always the sense that the writers knew exactly where everything was going, which gave proceedings a momentum and an impact that would have otherwise been lacking. The conventions of the poison pen narrative are even more straightforward, leaving the audience (and the protagonists) with two pressing questions: who has been writing these letters, and why? These questions propel *Psychoville*'s seven episodes, for the series is essentially an Agatha Christie style mystery spiced up with *Giallo*-style murders carried out by a black gloved

perpetrator (and even concludes as all of the seemingly disconnected characters gather together on the same room to try and figure out who their tormenter is). What the strong overall narrative thrust does is provide a framework for Shearsmith and Pemberton to do what they do best: create a gallery of deeply disturbed characters, wind them up, and let them go.

So it is then, that *Pyschoville*'s protagonists constitute a striking assemblage of misfits and eccentrics whose psychological hang-ups and idiosyncrasies run the gamut from "somewhat odd" to "extremely dangerous". There's embittered children's entertainer Mr Jelly (Shearsmith, once more donning Papa Lazarou-style clown make-up), whose ability to make balloon animals has been severely undermined by the fact that one of his hands has been replaced by a hook. Oscar Lomax (Pemberton) is a miserly millionaire who literally gave up his eyes so that he could add to his beanie babies collection, the completion of which gives his strand of the story a kind of *Citizen Kane* "rosebud" style resonance. Joy Aston (played with evident relish by Dawn French) is a deeply disturbed midwife convinced that the demonstration doll used to teach new mother's how to bathe their newborns is her child: as a result, the increasingly uncanny antics of little "Freddy" supply many of the series most unnerving moments (and Joy's behaviour, ultimately as poignant as it is disturbing, can't help but bring to mind that of the heroine of the horror film *Grace*, reviewed in our current film section). Panto dwarf Robert is madly in love with the vacuous, self-absorbed actress who plays Snow White: what's more, the fact that he (apparently) has telekinetic abilities means that the bullying he received from his fellow cast members soon results on *Carrie*-style outbursts of psychic rage. The final member of the quintet is socially retarded, skin-shedding serial killer David Sowerbutts (Pemberton again), whose relationship with his doting mother Maureen (Shearsmith) makes them the most unnerving mother-son duo since Norman and Mrs Bates.

As the series progresses, the connections between this seemingly disparate collection of individuals slowly becomes apparent. This means however that the first couple of episodes, whilst at times very funny indeed, do have a rather disconnected, sprawling feel, close to that of a sketch show, as the story skips from one comedy grotesque to another. But by episode three, in which we discover that all of the characters have spent time in the same asylum, and the notes begin to become more revealing ("You Killed Her"), the central mystery begins to take on a power of its own, and the seemingly disconnected escapades of the central characters gradually converge.

It must be said that there are some immensely effective moments here. Joy's relationship with little Freddy (which is observed all the while by her seemingly loving and long suffering husband George), initially played for laughs, becomes increasingly disquieting as the series progresses, and the doll takes on a life of his own. Mr Jelly, the burnt out, resentful clown whose life has been ruined by his amputation and by the fact that the surgeon responsible for the medical mishap has now adopted the persona of "Mr Jolly" and stolen all of his business provides some of the most humorous interludes, many of which feature him traumatising small children who find his repertoire of prosthetics alarming rather than entertaining.

It is courtesy of this character that one of the funniest scenes in the entire series arises. On the run for murder, and having *39 Steps*-style become handcuffed to an old lady who has just fallen into a diabetic coma, the embattled clown (still in full makeup) ends up hiding in a public toilet. When a little boy comes in to use the facilities, he offers the child money to go and buy some chocolate for his prostrate companion, but, having a hook on one hand and an unconscious pensioner handcuffed to the other, cannot reach the his pocket. Cue the entrance of a toilet attendant who walks in as the clown loudly exhorts the

child to put his hand down his trousers and reach the coins inside, all whilst still cuffed to the old woman. Seldom has the phrase “This isn’t what it looks like...” been used so effectively.

Somewhat less successful are those story strands involving Robert the Psychic dwarf (although the bitchiness of his panto colleagues does supply some good one liners, and the payoff to his story is ultimately quite surprising) and Lomax’s quest to find his final beanie baby, which evolves into a battle of wits between himself, his new helper “Tea Leaf”, and the crone-like, eye-patch wearing Crabtree twins, who spend their lives accumulating tat on e-bay. This strand does however have a surprisingly poignant (and ironic) conclusion.

The best episode of the entire series is the fantastic two-hander between David and Maureen Sowerbutts, shot all in one take (and one set) in a deliciously inventive homage to Hitchcock’s *Rope*. Superb even on a technical level (as it needed to be), the episode also works very well on a narrative plane, revealing as it does something very important indeed about the death of David’s father (which he thinks of as his first murder), and the motivations of his increasingly ruthless mother. Amidst the slapstick scenes in which mother and son try to prevent the body of their newest victim from being discovered by the police detective (fellow *League of Gentleman* star Mark Gattis) who has called in for a chat, there is, unexpectedly, a very funny dance routine to the tune of Black Lace’s “Superman”. Later in the series, David’s hapless attempts to hand himself in to the police result in another gem of a scene. Despite announcing that he has “done five murders”, David is told by the bureaucrat at the front desk that because one of his crimes falls outside of the local catchment area, he’ll have to go see the Citizen’s Advice Bureau instead. As he leaves, David is further fobbed off with a Crime Stoppers leaflet (“Although it might be too late for that” as the man at the front desk notes).

Given the plot stands which begin to merge in the final episode, one comes to it expecting something very special indeed, but in fact it is here that the series really lets itself down. *** Spoiler begins*** The motivations of the blackmailer/author turn out to be the stuff of many a Slasher film, albeit with a strong hint of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* thrown in for good measure when it transpires that the protagonists all suffered under the regime of a Nurse Ratched-style chief matron during their time in the asylum. But while there is some satisfaction in seeing the central mystery resolved (to a point), the final ten minutes of the series are a real disappointment, ending as they do with the trite *deus-ex-machina* of a massive explosion which seems to have killed off most of the main characters. *** Spoiler ends*** One gets the sense that the series was originally meant to end entirely at the end of this episode, but that having suddenly been granted a second season, Shearsmith and Pemberton found themselves having to drag the plot out beyond its original parameters. If this is indeed the case, it shows. Nevertheless, like its illustrious predecessor, *Psychoville* fuses horror and comedy in a manner that has seldom been bettered on the small screen, even if it has yet to realise its full potential. If you didn’t catch the series during the summer, I strongly recommend purchasing the DVD. But do yourself a favour, and leave e-bay to the one-eyed crazies.

BERNICE M. MURPHY

Dexter
Season 4
(Showtime, 2009)

In what can only be described as a compelling television show which combines black humour and vigilante anti-heroism, *Dexter*, now concluding its fourth season in the US, has become the most highly rated original television show for its US cable broadcaster Showtime. Anti-hero Dexter Morgan (Michael C. Hall) projects the image of a happy, cheerful blood spatter analyst for the Miami Police Department, but has secret penchant for carrying out murders of his own, a predilection now significantly complicated by the fact that he has seemingly subscribed to the American dream of suburbia with his unsuspecting wife Rita (Julie Benz) and their three children. Since its first season in 2006, reviewed in our third issue, *Dexter* has taken a further significant departure from Jeff Lindsay's source novels, largely by teasing out the complexities of Dexter's personal life and relationships and the ways in which they collide with the murderous activities of his blood thirsty alter ego (which he fondly names his 'dark passenger').

By the conclusion of its fourth season, the overall style and plotting of the show bears much in common to the first season's plotting, dealing as it does with themes of familial doom, violence and personal tragedy. The fourth season in particular is structured as a returning rondo, where, like the Ice Truck Killer arc of the first season, Dexter once again falls under a temporary sway of admiration for a new serial killer, in this instance the so-called Trinity killer (portrayed by John Lithgow in a fantastic return to onscreen villainy). The interplay between Trinity and Dexter makes for compulsive viewing, and largely compensates for the temporary digressions of season two and, in particular, season three. With a fifth season contractually confirmed (according to Showtime), it seems that Dexter Morgan will continue to attract people as damaged as himself; be it as love interests, new best friends, rivals and "worthy" victims.

Seasons two and three of the series largely dealt with the trauma Dexter has experienced as a result of having to murder his long-lost brother Brian (the Ice Truck Killer), and of steadily losing faith in his adoptive father, Harry Morgan (James Remar), whose unorthodox moral code has concealed Dexter's murderous tendencies from detection. However, in Season 2 Dexter's increasingly fragile mental state causes his mask of normality to temporarily slip, with both the introduction of Lila Tournay (Jaime Murray) who insists on uncovering Dexter's true self, and under the continued pressure exerted by the obsessive Miami PD Sergeant Doakes (Erik King) who believes Dexter is a killer, further complicating his life. Much like the focus of season one, in which the Ice Truck Killer murders terrify Miami, Season Two reflects this focus back onto Dexter himself. His nautical dumping ground for dismembered body parts is found, culminating in the involvement of the FBI, led by serial killer expert Special Agent Frank Lundy (the excellent Keith Carradine) who is determined to catch the "Bay Harbour Butcher". While season two is largely focused on Dexter's increasingly compromised ability to remain undetected, the introduction of flaky (indeed, ultimately psychotic) new love interest Lila ultimately detracts from the show's focus, an indulgence that is thankfully rectified by the season's conclusion.

Season three begins with the announcement that Dexter will become a father, adding an interesting twist to proceedings as he wonders whether his own murderous tendencies may be inherited by his son Harrison (the name is of course a homage to that of Dexter's adoptive father Harry) and introducing, as antagonist, the suave but dangerous District Attorney, Miguel Prado (a sorely miscast Jimmy Smits),

whose interest in Dexter culminates in the awakening of Prado's own murderous impulses. Divergences aside, both seasons two and three add considerable impact to the overall development of Dexter as a painfully conflicted character, a trend that is fully realised in the fourth season.

This return to first season form is evident even in early episodes of the fourth season. Dexter, now a married father barely coping with living the suburban dream, becomes embroiled in the Trinity killer case – a case which he soon comes to believe will teach him how to maintain the balance between suburban existence, family life, and the needs of his bloodthirsty 'dark passenger'. Much credit is due to the menacing performance by Lithgow in sustaining the tension onscreen – while we only become fragmentally aware of his motivations, what becomes chillingly apparent is the perceived normalcy of his external life – something which reminds us that Dexter's own facade of normality is equally illusory. The sharp editing and inter-splicing of narratives keeps the momentum of this season razor sharp, even as it careens towards its devastating conclusion.

Much like the conclusion of the first season, the final three episodes vividly return to the core theme of family, raising the troubling question of what we actually know about its' members and dark secrets. Debra Morgan (Dexter's foul-mouthed yet lovable sister, played by Jennifer Carpenter) uncovers the extra-marital affairs of her once-idolised father Harry, and discovers the devastating connection between Dexter and the Ice Truck Killer (who was also her Fiancé). While Carpenter's role is fleshed out somewhat in season three, her increasing onscreen maturation furthers the emotional arc of the fourth season in particular, and provides Carpenter with ample opportunity to illustrate her capabilities as an actress.

Overall, this season marks a superb return to form for *Dexter* after a temporary lull in terms of genuinely challenging nemeses for our superficially charming anti-hero. Whereas foes from previous seasons genuinely lacked menace, Lithgow's return as a truly terrifying suburbanite with deeply disturbing family issues revives the thrilling and grisly origins of Dexter's own past, and raises questions about the future of his own family. The genuinely shocking conclusion is both a brave and unexpected twist, not only creating in the viewer a ferocious appetite for the next season, but also ensuring that series will continue to thrive. Gore-laden, twisted, and immensely entertaining, *Dexter* is compulsive viewing for an age still fascinated by serial killers.

SORCHA NÍ FHLAINN

Between the Dust and the Devil
An Interview with Richard Stanley

James Rose

Cult filmmaker Richard Stanley's acclaimed sci-fi horror debut Hardware (1990) has recently been released as a special edition DVD by Optimum Home Entertainment: set in a post apocalyptic future, a nomadic Zone Tripper (Carl McCoy) finds the remains of a cyborg. Selling it for scrap, it comes into the hands of Mo Baxter (Dylan McDermott) who purchases it as a gift for his sculptress girlfriend, Jill (Stacey Travis). Unbeknown to them is that the cyborg – a prototype named Mark 13 – is a combat droid that is capable of reconstructing itself through the appropriation of any metal object and has one sole purpose, to kill. Inadvertently activating the cyborg, Mark 13 rebuilds itself and begins its violent assault upon Mo and Jill.

Prior to this cinematic debut, Stanley had directed a number of music videos for Fields of the Nephilim, a band fronted by McCoy that emerged with a strong following in the mid Eighties trend of Goth music. In these short 'films' Stanley's preoccupations with the image of The Man with No Name, strong women and weak men, myths, magic and rituals as well as the symbolic potential of barren, seemingly post-nuclear landscapes began to manifest themselves. These traits would find their place in Hardware and, in more explicit terms, in his second feature Dust Devil (1990). James Rose talks to Richard Stanley about these recurrent elements, exploring his early works alongside his two feature films and his more recent forays into documentary filmmaking.

Rose: How did the production of *Hardware* come about?

Stanley: Like most things in life it came about more or less accidentally. I'd been rattling about the lower depths of the biz for a couple of years and womped up the first *Hardware* draft in a fit of frustration after getting one thank you but no thank you letter too many. The script came together inside of a week during which time I remember playing Iron Maiden's *Flash of the Blade* so many times and at such heroic volume my then girlfriend upped and walked on me. I gave a copy of the draft to my friend, the late Barney Jeffrey (son of Peter Jeffrey who played Inspector Trout in *The Abominable Dr. Phibes*) who passed it on to his aspiring producer buddy Paul Trijbits who in turn handed it [to] his mate Trix (Trix Worrell the principal writer on the hit TV sitcom *Desmonds*) who apparently read part of it out loud in a nightclub to young Palace Films impresario Steve Woolley who happened to be on the lookout for low budget product akin to Sam Raimi's *The Evil Dead* the film that had launched Palace's video arm back in the mid-eighties. Steve asked to see a copy and a few days later approached Paul Trijbits to try and option the material. This presented the young producer with certain problems. In order to sell the underlying rights he had to own them first which meant finding me. By now over a year had elapsed since penning the initial draft and despairing of making a go of being a writer director hyphenate I had not only given up on the film industry but western civilization in toto, dropping out to join a fundamentalist Afghan guerilla party under General Younis Khalis and throwing in my lot with the people of Kafiristan in their struggle against the Russians. Trix eventually managed to track me down to a Saudi Arabian Red Crescent hospital in Frontier Province then filling up with survivors from the siege of Jallalabad. At first I flatly didn't believe him and treated his claims with derision but after a few twists and turns relating to the fact that I had lost my passport and accordingly my identity during the most recent battle I came round to

his point of view, allowing myself to be repatriated to Britain where I picked up the reigns and went straight into preproduction.

Rose: Prior to making *Hardware* you worked with Fields of the Nephilim on their promotional videos. Was this a valuable experience in terms of developing your filmmaking practice?

Stanley: The Nephilim promos certainly helped me make the transition to the professional arena and crystallized what was to become the 'look' of the film. Running into Carl McCoy and his gang at that stage in our mutual careers was one of those 'meeting of minds' things that almost never happens in so-called 'real' life. We were too young to realize how fortuitous it was at the time. We assumed everyone was just as obsessed as we were with Italian horror movies, 'spaghetti' westerns, radiation poisoning, shamanism and other esoterica and got on with it.

Rose: Is there a connection between the Preacher Man character personified by Carl McCoy in the Nephilim promos and the Zone Tripper character, also played by McCoy, who first obtains Mark 13's skull in *Hardware*?

Stanley: They're both the same guy. No question. The archetypal Man with No Name reconfigured as false prophet or prairie AntiChrist, the devil in Durango originals, an avatar of Nyarlathotep the Crawling Chaos in Cuban heels. He's probably related to the Biblical Asmodeus, the daemonic teacher of all occult knowledge who was cast out into the wasteland by King Solomon or some such. A traveling man. One who moves. We certainly didn't invent him. We simply tried to redefine him. You can find traces of the dude in Charles Laughton's *Night of the Hunter*, Stephen King's *The Stand* and Ray Bradbury's *Something Wicked this Way Comes* and songs from *Riders on the Storm* through Bob Dylan's *Man in the Long Black Coat* and Nick Cave's *Red Right Hand* which itself seems to have been at least partly inspired by *Dust Devil*. I used to dream of him often back then, always with a storm following not far behind, nor was I the only one to have those sort of dreams but at the very least I think you can safely say we did our bit to help introduce long black coats to the nascent Goth scene.

Rose: Your films and documentaries tend to feature strong women – Jill in *Hardware*, Wendy in *Dust Devil*, Edelle in *The White Darkness*. There is also the female cowboy who reveals herself near the close of *The Preacher Man* promo. Why is this character prevalent in your work?

Stanley: My parents separated when I was four years old and I was raised by my mother and two older sisters. Accordingly women tend to dominate my life and work whereas guys tend to come off as schmucks and ne'er do wells. On a wider level you could say its representative of my undying faith in the restorative power of the Goddess over patriarchal order and the sort of repressive dogma espoused by the Holy Roman Church and the other monotheisms. The Goddess rules.

Rose: Can you tell us a little about your intentions for Jill's role in *Hardware*.

Stanley: Jill descends from a long line of embattled heroines, a combination of the 'last girl' of the slasher era and the lead character from a Super 8 movie I started shooting when I was fifteen. I saw her as a sort of 'everywoman' - hence her name which is drawn from *Jill's America* – the main theme on Morricone's *Once Upon A Time In The West* album – outsider artist, lover, big sister, 21st century cyber warrior and

post technological cave girl all rolled into one. She was initially intended not only as the heroine of *Hardware* but as a continuing character in her own right.

Rose: Is there a specific reason why Jill is isolated in her room? She has seemingly barricaded herself inside her apartment with her only contact with the outside world through the television set and high-level security equipment.

Stanley: Considering the state of the world in *Hardware* it's hardly surprising Jill's turned into a bit of a techno hermit. The fact that she is more or less permanently stoned is another sign of her disengagement from society. None of the characters in *Hardware* ever question the status quo or seek to rebel against their circumstances, preferring to hide behind their sunglasses or spend most of their time off-world like Jill's neighbour Shades. In expressing her anxieties through her art Jill has customized her apartment to the point that it has actually become more nightmarish than the outside world. She's so unplugged that she initially mistakes the Mark 13 drone soldier for a TV show and reaches for her remote control to try and change channels when it attacks her. The events that follow provide the necessary catharsis that enables her to break out of her cocoon and take control of her destiny. This is signposted in the scene where the blazing 'droid plunges through her picture window, leaving a gaping hole in the wall and Jill is struck not by the violence of the act but by the beauty of the skyline revealed beyond. I hope to be able to return to her story some day but in the meantime if you want to know what happened next the unproduced sequel screenplay is available for free download from the unofficial fan site *Between Death and the Devil*.(1)

Rose: In respect of the above questions, the men in your films are often positioned as strong but ultimately unable to save the women from the narrative's threat – Mo is unable to save Jill, so she has to be resourceful and overcome Mark 13 by herself. Is there any particular reason for this?

Stanley: With all due respect to Jill and Mo the narrative threat in *Hardware* – the aforementioned Mark 13 cyborg – is defeated accidentally. Jill simply grabs hold of the shower faucet to try and get back on her feet. She has no idea what will happen next. This reflects not so much on gender politics as on my view that most things in life tend to happen by accident rather than design. On a symbolic level you might say the technological golem is laid low by wood and water, by the chaotic forces of good ol' Mother Nature.

Rose: Mark 13 is an interesting creation. Was it intended to be read in religious terms? I am referring here to its name as a biblical reference and its ability to resurrect itself. These qualities are potentially compounded in the robot's pentagram circuitry and its BAAL code.

Stanley: Absolutely. The parallel between Mark 13's serial number and the relevant Biblical chapter and verse was more or less a happy 'coincidence' at the time but the apocalyptic analogies run deep. Bear in mind that the film is not only set on Christmas Eve but that Mo and Jill just happen to be a childless couple with procreation issues – a subtext given greater emphasis in the deleted scenes included on the current DVD release. Other sequences draw parallels with the Tibetan Destroyer God and the multi-armed Goddess Kali of Hindu mythology, another avatar of Chaos – an idea we tossed around earlier.

Rose: Why was it decided to paint Mark 13's skull with a Stars and Stripes?

Stanley: Again this came about more or less by accident. In the script Jill painted night on one side of its face and day on the other. When it came to doing the final paintjob on the 'droid itself the stylized rays of

the sun met the night sky to become the stars and bars. The crescent moon on the one side and the rising sun on the other recall militant Islam and Imperial Japan. I guess it's subconsciously getting at the same thing as the killer cowboy in *Dust Devil* – that the United States of America is probably going to end up killing us all. Not only that but they're gonna con us into not only going along with it but actively enjoying the experience. The development of drone soldiers was, I suppose, always inevitable and with the Pentagon's Joint Robotics Masterplan currently intending to replace up to a quarter of America's ground forces with fully 'battlefield responsive' war 'droids' by 2020 the issue remains as much of a clear and present danger as it did in the early nineties. It would seem to me that the day of the 'droid is at hand and believe me, I ain't smilin' about it!

Rose: Am I right in saying that the documentary *Voice of the Moon* was made between *Hardware* and *Dust Devil*? How did this opportunity come about?

Stanley: Actually the footage was shot before *Hardware* but I didn't have the time or money to post produce *Voice of the Moon* until the feature was done and dusted. As ever the circumstances of its shooting came about by chance. Few people are aware of the fact that Islam only arrived in the Hindu Kush in 1910 when the indigenous pagan 'kafirs' were either converted by Abdur Rahman or put to the sword. Accordingly I was very interested in the mountainous heartland of Kafiristan where without written language or electrification news travels slowly and the myths, codes and customs of the past still prevail. I thought I might be happy in a world like that and being a keen reader of Robert E. Howard and suchlike wanted to try it on for myself. The chance came at the end of a particularly thankless music video shoot. I have a 'first on and last off' policy as director and accordingly stayed to help pack up the vans. One of the drivers was bitching about the gears on the truck being as stiff as the shift on a BTR 60 which I knew to be a lightweight aluminum troop transporter deployed in the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. I enquired as to how my companion came to have driven one and swiftly learned he was a former jihadi, washed up in London and trying to work his way back to the war where he felt he belonged. I offered to pony up for his ticket, provided he took me along for the ride.

Rose: What were your experiences during the making of *Moon*?

Stanley: We crossed into Afghanistan with a UN flour convoy and having ingratiated ourselves to a branch of Hezbi Islami under the command of General Younis 'Redbeard' Khalis returned with his guerillas on a second tour during which time I succeeded in penetrating some of those blank spots on the map that had first caught my eye back in London. Little white spaces accessible only by horse or donkey that were simply labeled 'relief data incomplete'. What I saw and experienced there can't be readily reduced to words or ably encapsulated within the scope of this interview. It was a world at once pre-technological and post-apocalyptic, a medieval feudal society where magic was commonplace and you could still buy boiled sweets, hashish, tracer rounds, chick peas, gasoline and plastic explosives under one roof at your local store. The outside world, the so-called 'real' world, exists only in stubborn shades of grey but at that altitude the colours really do seem brighter and the sunlight, unfiltered by the haze of smog that permeates the west, falls more sharply on the ochre walls and Saracen towers. The tastes, the grapes cooled in snowmelt, the green tea flavoured with cardamoms, seem more vivid even at a distance, the odours more pungent but at the end of the day how can I ever really tell you about the grumble and thunder of tanks, the contrail of a rocket or the smell of women? It's twenty years later and I'm still trying to figure out how it felt to turn and see the provincial capital burning behind me or the light going out of a man's eyes as I rummaged about in his guts trying to hold him together. Experiences like that are so

stupidly far off the scale it's like undergoing some sort of hysterical pregnancy. Your soul gets stretched so far out of shape that when the rest of the world shrinks back to normal you find you're left with the psychic equivalent of stretch marks. 'Survivor guilt'. 'Post-traumatic stress disorder'. Call it what you may. I know I was happy back then. What else can I say? That my heart and soul belong in the dark ages? I got more involved than I had initially intended and saw action in Kuz Kunar and later during the onset of the civil war that would eventually bring the Taliban to power but at least we helped defeat the Russians – which seemed like a big deal at the time, what with all that fuss and bother about the Cold War. When the Berlin Wall came down a few months later it felt good to know we had somehow been a part of it. One of my compadres from the siege of Jallalabad, Abu Zarqawi who later became the self-proclaimed 'head of al Qaida' in Iraq once told a journalist that he often wished he could have died in that battle because his soul would have “made it to heaven faster”. The funny thing is I think I know what he means.

Rose: Do you consider your documentaries and genre films to be separate or both as part of a unified whole?

Stanley: Trying to separate fact from fiction is like trying to separate dream from reality or light from shadow. It simply can't be done. The one is the flip side of the other, the shadow side. All three documentaries (*Voice of the Moon*, *The White Darkness* and *The Secret Glory*) incorporate mythological and folkloric material as well as the occasional outright lie whereas both dramatic features contain grains of truth. I took care to include images of real death in both *Hardware* and *Dust Devil* as a deliberate counterpoint to the 'splatstick' gore effects which tend to be played for laughs. On the whole the documentaries you could say, the three principal documentaries serve as rough sketches for epic feature films that could never be made, at least never sanely commissioned or distributed.

Rose: In relation to the above question, I am suggesting this because you have said in interview that there is no Good and Evil only Spirit and Matter. Is this a critical standpoint that informs all of your genre and documentary work? I am thinking here, in particular, of *Dust Devil* and *The White Darkness*, and I am curious to know if this opposition is evident in *Hardware*.

Stanley: Like I said, I've always been a medievalist at heart. It's no secret that I feel considerable empathy for the 'Cathars' – the so-called 'heretics' who were largely exterminated by [the] Roman Church in the 13th century. Life back then was pretty nasty, brutish and short so it figures that folk needed to find some way of explaining it to themselves. Infinite goodness is incapable of creating evil hence as there is evil in the world it follows that this world cannot be the creation of some all wise all loving Christian God, at least not as he, she or it intended it. The creator of this paradigm either doesn't exist or is insane and does not necessarily love us nor mean the best for us. Although this force apparently has the power to torture our physical bodies, kill us or burn us to ashes, it has no power over our immortal souls, which according [to] the 'Cathars' were created by the true, good God and are eternal. Described in these terms life can be seen as a constant friction between our spiritual needs and the base, animal desires of the bodies we inhabit. As the man so succinctly puts it in *Dust Devil* - “there is no good or evil, only spirit and matter, only movement towards the light or away from it”.

The Mark 13 cyborg in *Hardware* is in fact on a very weird spiritual journey all of its own. Being a 'borg' to begin with it follows that its wetware (living, artificially cultured brain tissue) imbues it with something perilously close to a soul, a tiny splinter of fallen light that blindly seeks redemption, imprisoned, as it is in its steel carapace, in the dense vibration of heavy metal. Fulfilling its primary function gives the drone

soldier a primitive sense of fulfillment, a li'l endorphin rush deep within its biomechanical matrix but like a child or a clinical psychopath it has no conception of conventional morality. It simply follows its programming which compels it to hunt down and exterminate as many human-shaped heat blips as it can. Nonetheless, in its murderous way our cyber-pilgrim constantly seeks the light and hence it too can be redeemed. As Goethe puts it: "He who strives constantly upwards – him can we save!" In the end the drone finds inadvertent deliverance when it fatally mistakes the shower head for God – a seemingly infinite source of radiant energy – the nebulous image that tops and tails the film.

Rose: The desert, as a mythic and arcane space, features heavily in your work – why is this?

Stanley: It would seem what magic remains in our world tends to linger in those places where humans fear to tread, spaces that exist outside of our definition of 'consensus' reality. On the one hand the open desert provides a convenient metaphor for the inner moral and spiritual wasteland my characters tend to find themselves adrift in while at the same time it offers an ideal empty stage, a blank canvas that demands action or completion of a sort. On a practical level wastelands are a helluva lot cheaper and easier to work with than trying to pony up for a soundstage at Pinewood or work around the traffic in central London. I prefer to stay at as great a distance from the backers, agents and accompanying industry politics as humanly possible. I've never been particularly wild about human beings and, as Lawrence of Arabia puts it, the desert's 'clean'.

Rose: There also seems to be a great interest in cultural myths and magic in your work?

Stanley: That comes, no doubt, from being born and raised in Mother Africa. My own mother, Penny Miller, was an artist, an anthropologist and something of a proto-feminist although I was too young to recognize a political dimension to her work at the time. Her magnum opus was a colossal tome entitled *Myths and Legends of Southern Africa* which, though long since out of print is still recognized as something of a classic in its field. Accordingly I did most of my growing up surrounded by storytellers, traditional healers and sangomas – what western folk refer to as 'witch doctors'. As a child it never occurred to me that there was any other way of explaining the world and as a young adult it came as something of a shock to realize how little currency magic and mythology had for my peers. Accordingly I found myself drawn towards the genre from an early age and the sort of faerytale imagery and frozen archetypes all too readily dismissed as 'cliches' by the wider critical community. If there's one theme I return to again and again it's the notion that mythology remains an active process in our present rather than being safely confined to the distant, immutable past. The myths of the future are being forged today, as we speak, and like it or not, we are all a part of that process.

Rose: Westerns clearly have a big influence on you. What do you take from them as a filmmaker?

Stanley: Westerns are amongst the most purely mythic of genres with their seemingly schematic plotlines serving as an active interrogation of exactly the sort of 'frozen archetypes' we discussed earlier. Besides they're good fun to watch – at least they used to be. A lot comes down, of course, to the sort of material I was exposed to as a child. Television didn't exist on the sub-continent in those days so my initial exposure to the medium came in the form of double bills at the Drive In or Saturday matinees at the local fleapit where 'spaghettis' were standard fare. They not only gave me a handle on the language of cinema and a way of dealing with the rugged, essentially inhuman landscapes that surrounded me but went a long way towards helping me form a nascent sense of ethics. I certainly didn't grow up according to the moral code

handed down to me from my teachers or the corrupt apartheid era government but tried instead to live up to the example set by characters like Cheyenne in *Once Upon a Time in the West* or Mr. Judd in Sam Peckinpah's masterpiece *Ride the High Country* which remains one of my favourite films of all time. Most of my classmates matured into staid right wingers but Westerns, 70's horror comics and a penchant for smoking dope in the stalls made me into a long-haired, camera-toting liberal. In short they made me into what I am today...

Rose: Am I right in saying that *Dust Devil* started as a student film? How, if at all, did this screenplay/film differ from the released version?

Stanley: *Dust Devil* was conceived as the simplest story I could possibly put together under the circumstances, revolving around a man, a woman and a Volkswagen astray amidst the overwhelming vastness of the African landscape which of course came free of charge to us locals – sort of the equivalent of shooting a film in your own backyard. The first draft was vaguely inspired by a string of unexplained murders that were ongoing at the time and drew heavily on the sort of Western iconography I mentioned earlier. It was initially intended as a low budget feature and my cohorts and I succeeded in committing a good 45 minutes or so to Super 16mm before shooting broke down due to lack of funds and myself and the cameraman's forced conscription into the South African Defense Force and the then current Angolan Bush War. The saga of Wendy and the Walking Dude remained much the same, albeit somewhat streamlined by the modest budget – boy meets girl, boy kills girl and relates the whole story in flashback to an old man he meets between trains on a deserted railway siding – essentially the first take on Zake Moka'e's Ben Mukurob character – conceived initially as an ageing linesman rather than the more conventional world-weary cop that he became in subsequent drafts. Ben hears the dude out before killing him with a fire axe, revealing himself in the process to be just as murderous as his unwitting prey. To some extent it's a stronger story than the one that eventually made it to the screen, albeit not a particularly 'commercial' one.

Rose: Your commentary on the Subversive Cinema DVD release of *Dust Devil* suggests a number of biographical elements in your films – are there any instances of this in *Hardware*?

Stanley: The first draft was penned in a squat in South London and reflects the kind of late eighties, post-punk industrial culture I was imbued in at the time. [The character of] Shades is an amalgam of myself and one of my friends, Anton Beebe (grandson of *Flash Gordon* director Ford Beebe) who first essayed the role on Super 8. Of course the fact that my first girlfriend was a scrap metal sculptress who had a penchant for setting her own work on fire might have had something to do with it and having a couple of wars under my belt by then didn't exactly hurt. Good for the work, they say. More than anything else *Hardware* relates to our fears of the future and a world we were terrified we'd end up living in unless folk got off their asses and did something about it. Sadly the future seems just as dark now as it did then, only more so! Some things never really seem to change...

Rose: Your experiences on *The Island of Doctor Moreau* are well-documented. What was your intention and vision for this film as it seems that this may well be one of the lost great films of the genre.

Stanley: You could say that the good doctor is one of the great, lost heroes of the genre, a seminal figure on a par with Dr. Frankenstein and the grand-daddy of every mad scientist working alone on an isolated tropical island from Boris and Bela to *Jurassic Park* and beyond but sadly, like Dr. Fu Manchu or Dr.

Mabuse, Moreau's controversial and ground-breaking work has been allowed to slide into relative obscurity in recent years, largely as a result of the novel's failure to make an effective transition to the screen. The AIP version with Michael York and Burt Lancaster was one of the first flicks I can recall that made me so angry even as a child that I wanted my money back and probably planted the seed in my mind that I could make a better fist of it than Don fuckin' Taylor. Sadly events were to prove me wrong and the final cut turned in by New Line proved to be even more of a travesty than what had gone before, a total waste of time, talent and opportunity. Although my name is prominently flagged on the opening credits not one line or beat of my original screenplay survives to inform the miasma that follows. That initial, discarded shooting script has been widely posted over the internet in samizdat form, allowing the casual reader to appraise the damage for themselves.(2)

The screenplay was co-authored with Michael Herr (*Apocalypse Now* and *Full Metal Jacket*) and Walon Green (*The Wild Bunch*) and was one of the finest pieces of material to have ever passed through my hands. Given the chance I'd frankly still like to take a shot at it, although replacing Mr. Brando and Nelson de la Rosa, who are sadly no longer with us, wouldn't exactly be a pushover. Needless to say my initial conception hewed closely to the Wells' original, updating the events to the near future and the aftermath of a limited nuclear exchange while retaining the novel's dramatic structure and more importantly remaining faithful to its overall tone and subtext. The principal difference between men and animals boils down to digits, opposable thumbs and in the case of the major primates – the simple matter of a larynx – a trifling difference when it comes to the miracles of biomechanics and the infinite plasticity of the living form. One of the cardinal errors in all three previous adaptations was to portray Moreau's 'beast folk' as lumbering monsters rather than humanized animals imbued with all the conflicting emotions, humour and pathos that implies. I mean imagine what would happen if your dog or your cat could not only address you in Queen's English but hold its own in conversation? It would open up a Pandora's box of possibilities. Now take on board the fact that given the current state of genetic engineering, such wonders and horrors are only a few years away. Already we have Day-Glo cats and mice and dogs cloned back from the grave. Moreau's island and all the challenges it presents to our cosy definition of 'humanity' is not so far away as we might wish to think.

Rose: You recently co-wrote *The Abandoned* with Nacho Cerdà and Karim Hussain. This is a high quality piece of writing and filmmaking – how did this project come about?

Stanley: *Los Abandonados* started life as an original screenplay by Karim entitled 'The Bleeding Compass'. I like to think I might have been a vague influence on its inception having turned Karim on to the work of Andrei Tarkovsky to begin with but I guess that's another story. The first draft was set in French Quebec but when Nacho picked up the project he decided to move the action to Russia. He produced a second Spanish language draft entitled 'Blood Line' which was set up to shoot in Bulgaria starring a Czech leading man, Karel Rodin, and a British actress, Anastasia Hille, playing the ostensible American lead. Then it began to rain, the bridge washed away making it impossible to film the ending as written and budgetary and scheduling issues lead to a slew of other scenes going astray. So they dialed me in. I flew into Sophia approximately three weeks into production with a brief to try and make sense of what they had and essentially reshape the beast as we went along. It was grueling work including over a month of ADR back in Barcelona but from what you say the mission seems to have been a qualified success. My most effective contribution probably concerns the character of the off-screen daughter and the framing device that along with the new title effectively *gives* the whole film a new reason d'etre. My favourite memory was helping to train up those razorback hogs to attack human beings. The hogs were

kept in a barn out in the woods and had been starved for a while to make 'em mean. We used to drive up there in the late afternoon in a convoy of four-wheeled-drive jeeps and feed 'em dummies stuffed with meat. All those burly east block crew guys standing about in their mirror shades made me feel like I'd strayed into an out-take from *Hannibal*. Funnily enough Nacho just called this afternoon. Apparently he's got another film on the go. Something to do with Nazis versus vampires. He asked if I felt like helping out and being a happy go lucky sort of guy I said I might. It wasn't so bad that I wouldn't go through it all again just for the hell of it.

Rose: Speaking of Nazis, how is *The Secret Glory* coming along?

Stanley: It's still coming, I'm afraid. It's been a journey to Hell and beyond with seemingly no end in sight, encapsulating some of the strangest events of my life. In point of fact much of what I have seen and experienced these last few years has been so fundamentally far-fetched that I've been forced to go to great lengths in amassing the necessary hard evidence to prove, to myself as much as to anyone else, that any of it actually happened. The initial feature-length documentary charting the life and work of the German Jewish Grail historian Otto Rahn and his Faustian pact with the SS mushroomed along the way into a broader examination of the so-called European esoteric tradition, the Fourth Reich, the EU and the revival of the 'Cathar' faith. The existing cut is still very much a 'work in progress' with the feature length version included on Subversive Cinema's *Dust Devil* boxkit suffering from patchy audio that at times wanders wildly out of synch as a result of a rinkydink PAL/NTSC transfer. I have plans to make an updated cut available over the net, either by mail order or direct download, within the next month or two via a new site devoted to the ongoing enigma and its unsettling implications for the broader public. Just getting the basic information out there should turn a few heads and shake things up a little. *Terra Umbra – Empire of Shadows* will be on-line by Hallow'een so keep your eyes wide open and remember you heard about it here first! I wish I could tell you more right now but, as the man says: "To know is to die..."

Rose: Finally, do you have any feature projects in development?

Stanley: As a matter of fact I'm up to my eyeballs, burnin' the midnight oil on a li'l sci-fi action eco-thriller named *Vacation*. The plot concerns an average American couple, a former exotic dancer turned failing singer-songwriter and her East Coast stockbroker boyfriend, who are on [a] cut rate package holiday in north Africa catching a li'l late season sun when an unexpected solar cataclysm annihilates Western Europe and the United States. Cut off from their credit cards and any hope of returning home Carly and Bryce are forced to redefine their relationship in order to survive in a radical, post-technological Muslim culture that holds them responsible, wrongly or otherwise, for the world's pain. I like to think of it as a very black xenophobic comedy about sun, surf, casual sex and the reckless abuse of alcohol and automatic firearms, a lively, fun-filled romantic holocaust for two set against the wider backdrop of the downfall of the west and the incipient extinction of the human species. The project looks set to go before the cameras this autumn on a series of typically inhospitable locations in southern Morocco so keep your fingers and toes crossed. With luck and the grace of God, inshallah, it should be playing your local multiplex next summer, presuming you still have a local multiplex by then and there are still enough folk left alive to watch the damn thing. Considering the current state of the world I'm lucky to be working let alone to have my work in distribution but then chaos has always been kind to me.

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1. <http://www.everythingisundercontrol.org/nagtloper/write/hw2script.php>
2. <http://www.everythingisundercontrol.org/nagtloper/write/moreauscript.php>