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Bodies as battlefields: disruptive sexualities in cult cinema

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Bodies as battlefields: disruptive sexualities in cult cinema

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BODIES AS BATTLEFIELDS

Introduction

In October 2021, we both keynoted at the Cine-Excess conference and festival on the theme of Bodies as Battlefields: Disruptive Sexualities in Cult Cinema. Alex's lecture focused on the history of women-directed rape-revenge films, while Alison spoke about the female shapeshifter, exploring the longstanding connections between representations of female sexuality and monstrosity across the history of horror cinema.

When we were approached to edit an issue of the journal together, we both agreed that we wanted to take the 'Bodies as Battlefields' theme further, to both expand, as well as refine and deepen, the kinds of research we explored at the conference. To this end, we secured a wide range of contributors and types of contributions from around the world, that really open up the possibilities for expanding this kind of work.

Consciously seeking to expand the textures of the traditional academic journal format, we chose to feature in this issue a combination of scholarly essays, interviews and roundtables to give voice to a range of different participants from a variety of perspectives.

In this issue, you will find essays by Sharon Y.X.R. Ndoen on Mouly Surya and *Marlina the Murderer in Four Acts* (2017, Indonesia); Roza Barotsi on gender and authorship of Italian *mondo* films, with a focus on the curious case of Gabriella Cangini; Alex Fitch on voyeurism and disruptive sexuality in Alan Moore and Jacen Burrows' *Providence* (2015-2017); Émilie von Garan on the archi-sexual politics of the work of Dario Argento; while Jay McRoy takes a deep dive into Thomas Clay's film *The Great Ecstasy of Robert Carmichael* (2005, Great Britain).

We also are proud to feature a number of interviews, including those by Lydia Wong-Plain with Rosalind Galt and her work on the *pontianak*; Alex Fitch with Alan Moore on H.P. Lovecraft; and a dossier of interviews by Alexandra Heller-Nicholas about rape-revenge movies with filmmakers Peter Strickland, Karen Lam and Sam Ashurst.

This issue also includes two wonderful roundtable discussions: the first on Andrzej Żuławsk's *Possession* (1981, France/West Germany) chaired by Alison Taylor with Daniel Bird and Kat Ellinger; while Ariel Baska chairs the second on the intersection of disability and horror with Cameron Mitchell, Rabia Sitabi and Pea Woodruff.

In bringing together this range of interviews, roundtables and essays, we hope to expand the way we think about – and critically engage with – cult film at the intersection of the body.

Happy reading,

Alexandra Heller-Nicholas and Alison Peirse
April 2023

TROUBLING THE ARCHIVAL TRACE: THE PECULIAR CASE OF THE MONDO DIRECTOR WHO NEVER WAS

Rosa Barotsi

Abstract

Gabriella Cangini appears to have made four films between 1968 and 1973, more than either Liliana Cavani or Lina Wertmuller in the same timeframe. Despite a wealth of archival documents and sources confirming her role as director and screenwriter, there is absolutely no information about Cangini in the literature, with the exception of the odd one-line film dictionary entry amounting to a shrug, and less authoritative sources suggest she may have never been involved in film production at all. Starting with the case of Cangini, this article discusses some of the broader and complex dynamics of exclusion based on gender and citizenship in Italian genre cinema of the 1960s and 70s.

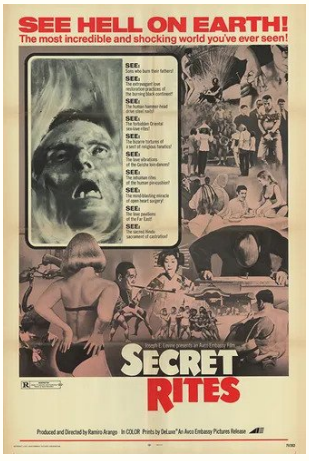
Keywords: mondo, Italian cinema, gender inequality, citizenship, intersectionality

Consider two posters of the same film – an obscure Italian mondo feature from 1970 called Riti segreti that is virtually impossible to find, with the exception of a magenta-tinted 35mm copy held in the Cineteca di Bologna archives.

The first poster features the film's Italian title in huge font, along with images of two women – one dancing in a bikini top, the other naked and bathing. In the bottom left corner of the poster, a series of presumably shocking traditions are listed in all caps, including, for example, 'IL TEMPIO DEI MASTURBATORI' ('the temple of masturbators') and 'GLI UOMINI SENZA SESSO' ('men without a sex'). Right under the film title, listed as director of photography and music composer, is the name Ramiro Arango. Underneath it, we are told that the film was directed by a 'G. Cangini'.

The second poster, featuring the English title Secret Rites, is much busier. Under an all-caps heading proclaiming 'SEE HELL ON EARTH!', we get the same list of rites and rituals adapted for US audiences ('SEE: Sons who burn their fathers!') accompanied by a wealth of collaged stills that evoke the two mainstays of all mondo films: sex and shock. In small print, at the bottom of this

Riti segreti (1970)



Secret Rites (1971)

US poster, we read that the film is 'Directed and Produced by Ramiro Arango'. No other credits appear on this version of the poster, except for that of the film's North American distributor, Joseph E. Levine. This article will focus on unpacking the discrepancy between the two posters, and the figure of 'G.' Cangini, who mysteriously disappears from the latter. What might seem like an odd footnote in the history of this much-reviled Italian strand of horror film, will, I hope, reveal some of the broader and complex dynamics of exclusion based on gender and citizenship in Italian cinema.

Over the past two years, as part of a research project on gender inequality in the Italian film industry, a team of researchers, including myself, have been collecting data on Italian feature films with permission for distribution in the period that goes from the institution of the first organic film law, also known as the Corona Law (1965), all the way up to today.[1] When the historical data had been collected, one of the first things I wanted to do was to verify – or, I hoped, contest – a foundational historiographical narrative regarding women's relationship with the film industry in Italy: that during the 'golden years' of Italian cinema, which roughly include the 1960s and early 70s, there were only two women directors consistently making feature-length films.[2] The data did in fact seem to confirm that, apart from the two household names of Liliana Cavani and Lina Wertmuller, who made their debuts around that time, women directors with a consistent relationship with the national film industry were extremely few and far between in the period 1964 –1975. Most of them appeared to have one, maybe two feature film titles attached to their name throughout their career, as the examples of Anna Gobbi, Elda Tattoli, Perla Peragallo, Dacia Maraini, Maria Virginia Onorato, Elsa de Giorgi and Elfriede Gaeng demonstrate.

There was, however, one name that stood out, appearing four times over the span of five years: Gabriella Cangini, according to the official documentation held at the State Archive, was the director, screenwriter, producer and even music composer of four different projects between 1968 and 1973 – more than either Cavani or Wertmuller in the same timeframe, and a prolific turnaround even by the genre filmmaking standards of the time. What was also surprising was the realisation that all four film titles present in the documentation – Che mondo…. Porca miseria!!! (1968), Riti segreti (1970), Io credo (1973) and Mi sento topo, oca,

scimmia… (1973) – belonged to the mondo genre. A type of shockumentary film just past its peak during those years, mondo had had some major successes at the box office but was also heavily criticised for its exoticising, white patriarchal and misogynistic gaze.[3]

The poster for one of the earliest examples of mondo, Women of the World (Franco Prosperi, Gualtiero Jacopetti, Paolo Cavara, 1963), showcases the type of spectacular, faux–reportage rhetoric adopted in the marketing of these titles: 'UNBELIEVABLE! INCREDIBLE! YET EVERY LIVING SCENE IS REAL!' In line with exploitation film marketing of the time, the poster goes on to list the collection of spectacles represented in the film: 'SEE: The notorious "window girls" of Hamburg! [...] Sex rituals of the primitive women of Borneo and Africa!', and so on. One of the most famous contemporary denunciations of the genre came from New Yorker critic Pauline Kael, who declared mondo filmmakers to be 'the most devious and irresponsible [ones] who have ever lived'.[4] Before finding out about Gabriella Cangini, I had never heard of a woman mondo film director, never mind one working during the original wave of this pseudo-documentary genre that spawned so many horror and slasher spin-offs in later decades. Despite the wealth of archival documents and print sources confirming her role as director and screenwriter, however, there is absolutely no information about Cangini in the literature. With the exception of the odd one-line film dictionary entry amounting to shrug, no mention is ever made of her or her films in the rich literature on the genre, whereas less authoritative sources suggest she may have never been involved in film production at all. In mondo-style rhetoric one might be tempted to ask: Is Gabriella Cangini one of the most DEVIOUS filmmakers that ever lived, or did she NEVER EVEN EXIST??

Mondo shockumentaries exemplify the problematic tension between the epistemic and spectacular functions of the audiovisual: the shock value of mondo largely proceeds from their appeal to a near-scientific approach to 'visuality-as-the-dispenser-of-self-evident-truth'.[5] In this article, instead, no such 'shocking truths' are revealed. Rather, based on the case of Gabriella Cangini, I examine two arenas in which physical evidence can prove untrustworthy: the audiovisual, as exemplified by mondo films, and the archival, in the case of the ambiguous role Gabriella Cangini did, or did not, play in their production.

I use archival data and traces of para-cinematic texts to try to answer some questions: did Cangini make these films, then fall into oblivion (as many other genre directors of the time did)? Was her Cuban husband, the much older Ramiro Arango, the one behind the film production? As I'll show, film reviews from outside of Italy, and dedicated mondo fans, seem to suggest as much, making no mention of Cangini except as the 'young actress' Arango was married to. In this scenario, Cangini's signature on piles of documents was perhaps a way for the non-Italian Arango to get access to film funding and distribution, which at the time (and actually until very recently) was reserved for films whose cast and crew had Italian nationality. But does this exclude the possibility that she was involved in the production too?

The case of Gabriella Cangini serves to reflect on the complex question of women's visibility in the archives, revealing uneasy intersections of exclusion when citizenship is taken into account. As feminist film scholars and historians, we often fight to redress the absenting of women professionals by illuminating names omitted from the records into film historiographical narratives. Yet, as will become clear, Cangini/Arango procure us with an example in which the presence of women's names in the archives might, perhaps, stand in for their material absence. This type of reversal permits Gabriella Cangini's name in the archives, film dictionaries and on online databases, yet unofficial sources slowly make her disappear; she becomes invisible before the researcher's eyes. Recovery from the archive through that most solid of traces, the official document, proves unreliable. It is a powerful reminder that data requires the work of contextualisation, of embodied histories that move beyond the visibility/invisibility axis to disentangle the gendered and racialised structures at the heart of the industry. Such work involves both the recuperation of women and their work, and, as Genevieve Yue calls it, 'patiently observing the scenes of their disappearance'.[6]

The world of *mondo*

Mark Goodall suggests that the impetus to mix ethnographic aesthetics with sensationalist spectacle for the shocked delight of Western audiences goes at least back into the 1930s.[7] Even so, the idea of mixing the cine-reportage feel with elements of shock and curiosity was launched in Italy in 1959 with Alessandro Blasetti's Europa di notte (1959), although it wasn't until 1962, with Gualtiero Jacopetti, Paolo Cavara and Franco Prosperi's Mondo

cane that the genre achieved notoriety and eventually cult status.[8] The genre's formal innovations, such as Jacopetti's shock cut,[9] were used to crudely juxtapose Western and othered traditions in a way that, although superficially suggesting continuity between the two, actually reinforced the worst misogynist, racist and neo-colonial stereotypes of the time. To cite one example from Mondo cane, a smash cut takes us from a shot focusing on the breasts of a blonde, bikini-clad Western woman happily seducing a flock of sailors, to those of a woman in Papua New Guinea apparently breastfeeding a piglet. The smash cut is accompanied by a fast zoom and the music shifts equally abruptly from mocking to jarring – in case you didn't know how you're meant to feel about this transition. The general tenor of mondo, as one critic put it, was to present 'primitive rites and civilised wrongs',[10] that, despite formal claims to the contrary by the filmmakers, were demonstrably staged – although to what extent audiences understood this or cared is a different subject.[11] Seminal figures, such as Third Cinema exponents Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino, described Jacopetti's Africa Addio (1966), nominally about the decolonisation process taking place in many African nations at the time, as a fascist attempt to denigrate the African people's desire for liberation, presenting them as incapable of doing anything but 'wallow in abject anarchy once they escape from white protection'.[12] Despite such explicit condemnations, the genre enjoyed success at the box office and international acclaim. Mondo cane was famously in competition at Cannes, and Riz Ortolani's score was nominated for an Academy Award. Africa Addio won a David di Donatello, but was banned in fourteen countries, and the Italian minister who was meant to hand over the award to Jacopetti refused to do so.[13]

1960s mondo also helped spur a range of horror genres such as the cannibal film, the zombie film, the eco-horror film, and found footage horror film in subsequent decades.[14] As Alexandra Heller-Nicholas suggests in her book on found footage horror films, mondo's legacy can be felt in the more recent blockbuster 'found footage' horror subgenre in the possibility, rather than certainty, of authenticity.[15] We can describe this shift, perhaps, as that from mondo exploitation marketing strategies of the 60s ('this is REAL, can you believe it?!') to the suspension of fictionality, the 'what–ifs', of contemporary found footage horror ('this is what this would look like if it were real'). One of the aesthetic elements that often remains a constant as the marker of real or performed

authenticity is that of 'poor' image quality. The epigraph to Secret Rites is a disclaimer suggesting that the crew often had to secretly film the ritual scenes in 16mm, and that 'the authenticity of the scenes justifies any loss of photographic quality', an excuse that didn't always work with the Italian censorship board, who rejected the application for distribution for Che mondo... porca miseria based on its lack of technical and artistic quality. The relationship between real or faked 'low quality' and cult film fandom remains central, as the use of amateur (or 'amateur') shooting in beloved found footage horror films shows, as well as what Heller-Nicholas calls the mystique and cultural capital gained by mondo-style films the more they lose in film quality due to the 'copies-of-copies-of-copies' circulated amongst fans.[16]

Archival traces

When Cangini/Arango created their production company, the Italian branch of Arango films, in 1966, they were at the peak of the mondo hype. A close look at the available archival and bibliographical sources regarding their work reveals a complex epistemological terrain. Riti segreti's State Archive folder itself reflects the difficulty of disentangling the details of the couple's production activity. The cover reads: 'Riti segreti (formerly L'uomo: top secret).' Within the folder, we find financial plans for at least two different film titles (L'uomo e la bestia and Porca miseria) submitted on the exact same day and featuring the same total budget: 72,489,500 lira, as well as various documents submitted along the same timeline for the following titles: L'uomo e la bestia; Porca Miseria; Che mondo… Porca miseria!!!; Vietnam verità a colori; L'uomo: Top Secret; and Mi sento topo, oca, scimmia…. The financial plans, along with all other official documents, feature the signature of Gabriella Cangini as sole administrator of the production company, whose only other founding member is Ramiro Arango. One of the submitted documents declares that shooting for the film will take place abroad, and asks for special permission to do so (a deroga). This is because Italian law of the time required filming in Italy as part of the attributes taken into account for the assignation of Italian nationality (which producers needed in order to get access to tax breaks and ensure national distribution). The document for the deroga declared that the crew members who would travel abroad were Gabriella Cangini, director, and Ramiro Arango, camera operator. The financial plan declared that the full budget for the production would be covered by Gabriella Cangini, Ramiro

Arango and Arango productions, and would not supersede the tourist currency – no capital would therefore be transferred abroad.

All of this points to the fact that these films were conceived as low-budget productions, possibly meant to result from a trip Cangini and Arango took abroad between 1968–69. The submission of financial plans for multiple film projects might be explained as part of the standard practice of mondo and other genre filmmakers to recycle footage and outtakes into new film projects: according to some accounts, Mondo cane, Mondo cane 2 and La donna nel mondo all derive from footage shot during the same trip around the world, a hypothesis that would match Jacopetti's claim that they had shot millions of metres of film.[17] This hypothesis appears to be confirmed by the two existing film copies of the Cangini/Arango collaborations at the Cineteca di Bologna. Suffering from acetate film base degradation, otherwise called vinegar syndrome, the total of eight reels apparently belong to two separate titles, Riti segreti and L'uomo: Top Secret, but the film is exactly the same. Faithfully reproducing the original mondo recipe, it is a travelogue-style series of vignettes staged as authentic, with a sardonic voiceover and an imposing soundtrack that reserves pathetic irony for the West and tragic wonder for the 'rest'. It includes some mondo thematic mainstays, such as footage of dead bodies, trans people represented as bizarre oddities, violence between man and animal, titillating scenes of naked women, and surgery. With the exception of an extra opening credit, in Japanese, for L'uomo, which suggests the latter version was meant for distribution in Japan – an avid consumer of Italian mondo – the differently titled reels feature identical footage.[18] But who directed the footage?

G. Cangini

On the nulla osta document, which amounts to permission for distribution, for Riti segreti, Gabriella Cangini is presented as the director, screenwriter and composer, while Ramiro Arango is credited as the cinematographer. Her name also appears on most of the (few) online and print sources that mention the film, from the State Archive documentation to Wikipedia articles and Italian film dictionaries such as Roberto Poppi's 2002 edition. The brief paragraph Poppi dedicates to Cangini reads: 'Documentarist about whom there is no information,' and describes her films as modest documentaries along the lines of the much more

professional ones by Gualtiero Jacopetti.[19] As mentioned at the start of this article, the Italian film poster further confirms Cangini as the film director, although it is impossible not to notice the discrepancy in the presentation of names. As opposed to her husband's full first and last name occupying the bottom-right corner under the credit of 'ideazione fotografica e musica originale' (thus in contradiction with the nulla osta documents suggesting Cangini was also in charge of the music), Cangini's own last name, under the credit of director in the bottom-left corner, is preceded only by her first name's initial.

Intentional or not, the masking of the gender of Cangini's name is hard to ignore, as is the prime placement of the cinematographer's name on the poster. The previously mentioned US poster and a 1973 Spanish poster of the film both list Arango as the director, whereas Cangini's name is nowhere to be found. More interestingly still, print newspapers from the US announcing the film's premiere there, such as the Daily News (October 15, 1971), and a scathing review of Riti segreti that came out four days later in the New York Times, never mention Cangini's name in any capacity, presenting the film as directed and produced by Ramiro Arango.[20] The announcement of the New York premiere at the Forum Theatre suggests it must have been staged as quite the event: in line with promotion strategies employed in the marketing of exploitation films of those years: audiences were invited to come meet 'the TALLEST MAN who ever walked the Earth!', and were promised Secret Rites kits or special souvenir photos ('YOU with the Giant!'). As Erin E. Wiegand points out, advertising campaigns for exploitation films often 'went above and beyond to promise spectacles that they often failed to deliver', and this seems to have been the case with Secret Rites.[21] A. H. Weiler, the New York Times critic, remained deeply unimpressed by the film's attempt to emulate the likes of Mondo cane which, we get the sense, he was not particularly fond of either. He expresses his disappointment at the lack of quality of form and content through unlikely phrases such as 'unspectacular vignettes of phallus worshippers'.[22] Weiler's review is in line with what Wiegand describes as the deterioration of the term mondo in US film critical discourse by the late 60s, with reporters using the term 'simply as pejorative shorthand for "exploitation," "camp" and – appropriately – an exhausted film cycle'.[23] Indeed, Weiler presents the film as a 'melange of colour footage produced, directed, photographed or collected by Ramiro

Arango, a Cuban living and working in Rome' and concludes that 'despite a prologue noting that Mr. Arango toured 15 countries over a five–year period to compile these "Secret Rites", the trip, all things considered, wasn't absolutely necessary'.[24]

Irrefutable evidence

Since the Fascist period, filmmakers have had to face stringent regulations regarding the definition of an 'Italian film'. Nationality, as Barbara Corsi describes, has long been the 'ideological mainstay – and taboo' of Italian cinema.[25] Ever since the first description of Italian nationality in a 1927 regulation (as films produced in Italy by creative and technical crew that is majority Italian, and with an Italian script), subsequent regulations have attached firmly to this principle. At least in part as an instrument of protection and support of the national cinema against the ever-menacing presence of Hollywood films, a film that can prove its Italianness largely through the citizenship of the film's cast and crew has always enjoyed the privileges of the state machine, including tax breaks and a guaranteed place on Italian screens. The first organic film law, voted in 1965 (and therefore in effect when Cangini and Arango were making their films), reasserts the use of the instrument of Italian nationality as a tool for the financing of national production: in fact, ever since 1949's Andreotti Law, a film that could prove its Italian nationality was exempt from the so-called 'dubbing tax' imposed on foreign films.

The parameters for recognition of nationality were (and continue to be) very specific, including the nationality of each member of the creative and technical team. As Corsi and others suggest, the Italian nationality prerequisite has functioned for many decades as a hindrance for European collaborations.[26] Less commented upon has been the fact that this regulation excludes – or renders vastly less attractive – film professionals without Italian nationality who lived and worked in Italy, including Italians without access to citizenship. It seems that, although Arango was Cuban, he had Spanish nationality, at least according to the documents submitted by Gabriella Cangini to the Ministry of Culture. A 1968 document including a full crew list, submitted to declare the beginning of shooting (this time under the title Vietnam Verità a colori) shows Arango's name and nationality ('spagnolo') underlined and with an arrow drawn next to it. As the only non-Italian member on this list, one can't help but wonder if that

threat of exclusion from state support was at least part of the reason for Cangini's signature.

As noted in the introduction, the work of recuperation in feminist film history has a complex relationship with the archive. Giuliana Bruno uses official documents to prove that, despite some foundational texts of film historiography that describe Elvira Notari's husband as the director of the myriad silent films produced by the Neapolitan Dora Film company, she was in fact at the helm of the family company, making her, by all accounts, the first woman director in Italy. Notari's signature on nulla osta documents from the censorship board functions here, for Bruno, as irrefutable evidence.[27]

Credits are also epistemologically slippery. As a producer recently told me, you can do whatever you want with credits – it's the contracts that count. Perhaps that's partly what Jolanda Benvenuti, Roberto Rossellini's editor, meant when she refused to think much of her exclusion from the editing credits for Rome Open City (1945), one of the most celebrated films in Italian history. As Dalila Missero describes, her name was substituted for that of her more well-known male colleague, Eraldo da Roma, in what Benvenuti described as an accepted praxis of the time. Yet, Missero points out, the financial statements function as irrefutable proof of her importance, as Benvenuti's pay was higher than da Roma's (64,875 lire over 60,000).[28]

In Italy of the 1960s and 70s, attribution was often a contested space, especially so in a film industry characterised by what is often euphemistically called an artisanal approach to production, and by the widespread practice of adopting Anglo-sounding pseudonyms or even allonyms. When Sergio Leone's A Fistful of Dollars (1964) first came out in Italy, for instance, the choice to adopt the fake US-American name Bob Robertson was dictated by a desire to attract audiences to a film of a genre that was hard to associate with the Italian national context. The worry that an Italian film derivative of a US film genre would be derided did it not convincingly attach onto a fake 'American' identity proved unfounded, and the success of the spaghetti western moved the distributors to turn Bob Robertson back into Sergio Leone for the film's international release.[29] In accounts of genre cinema of those years we are often faced with gaps and contradictions between official documentation, film credits, testimonies and

secondary literature that can remain unresolved, especially when it comes to films that enjoyed limited success at their time of release.

To give another example I came across during my research, the 'Jawsploitation' film Tentacoli, which came out in 1977, at the heels of the box office success of the Spielberg film it hoped to capitalise on, credits the film's direction to the pseudonym O. Hellman. This 'mockbuster' monster film, which substitutes a giant octopus for Jaws' shark, was produced by Ovidio Assonitis, a Greek-Egyptian director and producer who was married to the Italian screenwriter Sonia Molteni. Nulla osta documents and other official production data appear to confirm that O. Hellman was in fact Molteni's nom de plume, a fact reproduced in secondary sources such as film dictionaries. At the same time, other secondary sources, as well as some of the film's posters, and interviews with Assonitis himself, suggest unequivocally that he was the director of Tentacoli as well as O. Hellman's other films. In his dictionary of Italian film directors, Poppi explains that for several years it was assumed Sonia Molteni was behind the pseudonym O. Hellman, but this information has proven unfounded – although no sources are cited in support of this hypothesis.

As Dalila Missero sums it up, private relationships between film professionals were, and arguably still are, 'essential aspects of the artisanal mindset that characterized the Italian film industry'.[30] Within this environment, where familial bonds, patriarchal structures and the ethnonational project were constantly interweaving, she rightly points out that gender, race, as well as class biases have to be reckoned with in our work. Compounding many of the contradictions of intersectional structures of exclusion of the time, the case of Cangini emerges as an example that evokes, at the same time, the familial and class dynamics, misogyny and racialised ideas about citizenship that formed the arena of filmmaking in Italy during those years. Did Cangini participate in the film production, then, like Jolanda Benvenuti, let those who cared more about taking credit do so? Did Arango use gender and class privilege to get around Italian racist regulations, in a way that perhaps someone else in his position might not be able to? These kinds of questions are not reserved for the obscure annals of film history: recently, the Italian David di Donatello film awards announced that they would finally admit into competition films by Italian filmmakers without access to

Italian citizenship. This ends a form of prejudice that had led – to cite just one example – to the exclusion of *Il silenzio*, a short film representing Italy in Cannes in 2012, from consideration for the award because the directors, Farnoosh Samadi and Ali Asgari, did not have Italian citizenship. The decision followed in the footsteps of a small but equally important amendment to the most recent Film Law (2016). One of the main criteria for access to state funding is no longer restricted to Italian or EU nationality, and will now also include fiscal residence in Italy. This small step towards expansion of access to second generation and racialised filmmakers to the national film industry was accompanied by the more publicised series of incentives aiming towards gender equity in the sector. For the first time in Italian history, these incentives were introduced as an attempt to address the enormous and persisting discrepancies in the employment of men and women in the Italian film industry. Although it's too soon to tell, results so far have been minimal on both counts.

As I've tried to show, the claims to authenticity Secret Rites makes as a film text leave one in constant doubt, as do its paratexts, ephemera and even archival documentation regarding the true identity of its creators. Like the suspicion of untrustworthiness that accompanies the viewing of mondo documentaries, the point is not so much to discover whether this is truth or trick, but to open a conversation about the significant role that the intersections of gender, class and citizenship play in the shifting ground of Italian genre filmmaking of the 1960s and 70s.

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Footnotes

[1] For more on this project, see cineaf.eu. I discussed the methodological and ethical challenges of working with data from a feminist perspective in a presentation at the 2021 Forum Annuale delle Studiose di Cinema e Audiovisivi ('I film delle donne in Italia. 1965–2015. Il progetto CineAF: un archivio per il futuro').

[2] For instance, Tovaglieri, A. (2014) *La dirompente illusione: Il cinema italiano e il Sessantotto* 1965–1980. Rubbettino Editore.

[3] Giuliani, G. (2018) Race, Nation and Gender in Modern Italy: *Intersectional Representations in Visual Culture*. Basingstoke: Palgrave, 121–138.

[4] Kael, P. (1965) *I Lost it at the Movies*. Boston, MA: Little Brown, 10.

[5] Giuliani, 13.

[6] Yue, G. (2020) *Girl Head: Feminism and Film Materiality*. New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 131.

[7] Goodall, M. (2006) 'Shockumentary evidence: the perverse politics of the Mondo film'. In: Lim, S. H. & Dennison, S. (eds), *Remapping World Cinema: Identity, Culture and Politics in Film*. London: Wallflower Press, 119.

[8] Giuliani, 123.

[9] Goodall, M. (2018) *Sweet and Savage: The World Through the Mondo Film Lens*. Manchester: Headpress.

[10] In Goodall, 120.

[11] Bondanella, P. (ed.) (2019) *The Italian Cinema Book*. London: Bloomsbury, 175.

[12] Solanas, F. & Getino, O. (1970) 'Towards a Third Cinema', Cinéaste, 4 (3). 1–10.

[13] Giuliani, 435.

[14] Heller-Nicholas, A. (2014) *Found Footage Horror Films: Fear and the Appearance of Reality*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 3–41; Goodall, M. (2013) '*Dolce e Selvaggio*: The Italian mondo documentary film'. In: Bayman, L. & Rigoletto, S. (eds), *Popular Italian Cinema*. Basingstoke: Palgrave, 236–7.

[15] Heller-Nicholas, 7–8.

[16] Heller-Nicholas, 11.

[17] Bondanella, 175; Goodall, Appendix.

[18] I would like to thank Andrea Meneghelli at the Fondazione Cineteca di Bologna film archive for his help.

[19] Poppi, R. (2002) *I registi: dal 1930 ai giorni nostri*. Gremese, 87.

[20] Anon. (1971) 'Secret Rites', *Daily News*, Friday, 15 October, 75; Weiler, A. H. (1971) '*Secret Rites', New York Times*, 19 October, 51.

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[22] Weiler.

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VOYEURISM AND DISTRUPTIVE SEXUALITY IN ALAN MOORE AND JACEN BURROWS' *PROVIDENCE*

Alex Fitch

Abstract

This essay considers how the idea of voyeurism is explored in writer Alan Moore and artist Jacen Burrows' comic book *Providence.* The notion of voyeurism in this particular comic is examined used interdisciplinary approaches, including architecture theory – as the depiction of architecture on the page facilitates acts of voyeurism – and film theory, as the comic uses elements of cinematic framing within panels. The essay looks at how the main character's homosexuality is depicted as a disruptive element to the places that he travels through, leading to, first, a break down in social order, and then ultimately reality itself. As the comic is well researched, bringing in elements of American history and geography, plus many references to H.P. Lovecraft's oeuvre, these aspects of the narrative are also examined, to consider each aspect of the comic that presents a narrative of hidden sexuality, and hidden societies in 1920s America.

Keywords

Homosexuality; Voyeurism; Comics; Architecture; Americana

In *Voyeurism: A Case Study,* Simon Duff (2018) defines the phenomenon as 'a behaviour… that involves observation of someone or something, it is intended to be secret, and… there is some form of sexual element to it'.[1] This relationship between covert observer and a person being observed without their knowledge[2] is an idea that is explored in many texts, and many different media. It is a leitmotif in many thrillers and psychodramas, to the extent that film theorist Chris Dumas suggests there might even be a 'canonical genre that we would have to call "the Hitchcockian voyeurism thriller"'.[3] Certainly, furtive observation for both malign and benign reasons inform some of the director's most famous films, including *Rear Window* (1954) and *Psycho* (1960), and connections between the former film and the topic of this essay will be discussed below.

In the medium of comics and sequential art, voyeurism is also an idea than informs certain narratives, with additional

consequences in engaging with these narratives for the reader. Comics is a medium which can give the reader insight into how people interact with architectural spaces, and while voyeurism can occur in natural surroundings – one might imagine a voyeur hiding behind thick foliage – it is something that certain architectural constructions aid, with many aspects of the built environment favouring voyeuristic activities, such as looking through windows and partially-opened doorways. This being the case, there are many aspects of comics as a storytelling medium that aid this consideration. As a 'static' medium (compared to film or television), comics allow the eye to linger on a single comic panel for as long as the reader desires, and allow the reader to consider how this panel can give information about the activities of characters drawn within its frame. This also gives the reader a voyeuristic gaze, able to scrutinise private activities in otherwise concealed spaces.

Gendered spaces

Beatriz Colomina discusses the gendering of architectural spaces, and 'rooms where sexuality is hidden away' in her essay 'The Split Wall: Domestic Voyeurism'.[4] In a survey of the rooms that one might find in a house, she suggests that certain rooms are coded in terms of their uses by different genders. 'Male' spaces are categorised as ones that are more often used by men, and she lists such rooms as the library and the office as having more of a masculine aura to them. Conversely, bearing in mind the activities of the stereotypical straight male gaze, she notes spaces where women can be freely observed as being more female. This dividing up of spaces also includes notions of privacy and solitude – the library and the office having aspects of these – while a drawing room being more open to all visitors is less private. Colomina then uses words with sexual overtones to describe passage through these spaces, calling them 'intimate', and places that can be 'penetrated'.

The depiction of human interaction in such coded spaces in the comic panel allows the reader to view activities that would otherwise be concealed from other people via the occlusion of their gaze through closed curtains, doors, and non–transparent walls. The latter is a tool available to both the filmmaker and comic artist, as cameras give the illusion of moving through or seeing through walls (which can also be added and removed to film sets as required), while the artist can choose not to draw

aspects of an architectural space on the page, in order to give the reader more of an omniscient gaze. This also makes the reader a voyeur as much as the characters within a comic: the hiding of sexuality, and sexual activities, is achieved often because of certain aspects of architecture – people choose to take advantage of walls and closed doors that occlude any potential onlooker's sight, to engage in activities they wish to keep private – however the comic artist can reduce these impediments to voyeurism by removing walls on the page. The artist can also give the reader a vantage point of just outside a window, or by inviting the reader to 'be' inside the room from the position of an invisible observer. To explore these ideas of covert observation and hidden sexuality in comics, this essay will look at how these notions are depicted in *Providence*, a recent H.P. Lovecraft themed comic, published by Avatar Press in the late 2010s.

Providence

Alan Moore and Jacen Burrows' 12-part comic book series *Providence* (2015–2017) utilises voyeuristic story-telling techniques to allow the reader to enter a world of hidden desires and subcultures of people excluded from everyday society in 1920s America. The narrative follows the cross-country journey of a fictional American journalist called Robert Black, as he investigates sub-cultures and weird phenomena across America in a narrative inspired by the work of writer H.P. Lovecraft. Lovecraft himself briefly appears as a character in the story, perhaps implying that, like the protagonist, he was basing his writing – in terms of the narrative of *Providence* – on events he observed around him, rather than conjuring them from his imagination. On this journey, the protagonist encounters black magic rituals and the existence of humanoid creatures that suggests successful human interbreeding with other species. At the same time, Black is also on a journey of self–discovery, as he slowly accepts his previously unrealised homosexuality. In the script, Moore not only reworks elements of Lovecraft's stories into a cohesive whole – an America where such stories coexist with each other in a 'shared universe' – but also brings to the surface Lovecraft's xenophobia, and the possibility of the original writer's unspoken sexuality. Recent research into the latter include a 2017 article in New Yorker magazine, where Paul La Farge notes 'literary critics have speculated that Lovecraft was secretly gay' and lists various affections and friendships Lovecraft had with young men.[5] Many of Black's encounters with other characters

are framed voyeuristically – the *mise-en-scène* of several panels displays characters as being seen through door frames, windows, and from rooftops – and so suggests the reader is also engaging in an act of surveillance, with their view being obtained through an advantageous position of looking through windows and open doors into rooms where normally hidden activities and conversations are taking place.

This being the case, the comic turns the reader into a voyeur, by allowing them to adopt the position of someone staring, unobstructed, into architectural spaces, occupying a vantage point that would be hard to maintain in real life – i.e. if one was to stand outside a window or open door and stare continuously at the people within, this activity would be noted, and probably discouraged as being inappropriate. It is worth noting that another metatextual adaption of Lovecraft's work, John Carpenter's film *In the Mouth of Madness* (1995), has a scene where the protagonist, an investigator played by Sam Neill, is stared at through a café window by a madman. This agent of chaos, who has been driven mad by reading a Lovecraftian work, then breaks the glass with an axe to try and kill Neill's character. Subsequently, as in Moore's work, the reading of Lovecraft-inspired books causes the world to also go mad. Considering a later scene in the comic shows chaos through a broken window, that *Providence*'s protagonist is equally trying to avoid, it is possible parts of the narrative are in partial reference to Moore's awareness of this film.

Much of the activity being observed in *Providence* has an illicit nature, however fleeting this observation might be. The comic is set in the 1920s, when homosexual activity and miscegenation was illegal in certain locations. Issues connected with the idea of being gay in 1920s America informs much of the narrative, and how the narrative is depicted on the page in many chapters of *Providence* refers to the necessity of concealment for homosexual activity at that time. Various writers looking at homosexuality in this period note favourable developments in gay-friendly spaces, while at the same time, such desire was not only being pathologised and demonised by some parts of society, but also made illegal in many places.[6] While psychologists such as Sigmund Freud were identifying types of sexuality being disruptive to individuals' psyches – which will be explored further below – diverse sexuality was not hidden in parts of urban

America. As anthropologist Chad Heap notes: '[I]n the late 1920s… pleasure seekers increasingly turned their attention to the spectacle of homosexuality emerging in the mainstream amusement districts of New York… and Chicago.'[7] However, he suggests this was a relatively brief phenomenon, as by the second half of the 1930s, the 'slummers' who came to these areas of ill repute 'publicly pursued sexual relations with members of the opposite sex'.[8] For further context regarding 'gay representation' in the early twentieth century, it is worth noting that the Hays Code, which forbade presentation of homosexuality and other kinds of 'illicit' human attraction, was applied to American cinema in 1934 after pressure from the Catholic Church, so a curtailing of gay 'spectacle' in other kinds of entertainment is probably not a surprise as a similar contemporaneous occurrence. This also coincided with the start of prohibition – another example of a popular American activity of which the 'moral majority' disapproved being curtailed – and with 'increased legislation of businesses selling liquor… local authorities often used this power to close establishments with gay or lesbian customers'.[9]

Disruptive sexuality

Robert Black can be considered as a manifestation of disruptive sexuality. As he travels through *Providence*'s 1920s America, he can be seen as 'encouraging' homosexual activity via his very presence. This is manifested though the affection shown towards him by a local policeman shortly after they meet in issue two of the comic (which will be examined in detail below) and his sexual encounter with another male researcher in issue nine. In the comic he is investigating small town America, and so could be seen as bringing 'urban ways' to these more rural locations: his willingness to engage affectionately and sexually with other men might be seen as a disruptive encounter with the locals. This is not to say the men he encounters are unwilling participants, but rather his presence facilitates these encounters – a liberating of their otherwise unrealised sexuality – by his meeting them, and then engaging with physical interactions in spaces that are increasingly hidden from sight. Interestingly when the comic shows Black having sex with another man for the first time in issue nine, the dialogue for this scene is taken almost verbatim from an early chapter in the 1982 semi-autobiographical novel *A Boy's Own Story* by Edmund White, suggesting that these were characters Moore perhaps felt unprepared to fully write himself,

without 'assistance' from a gay author who could lend a more accurate conversation for this encounter.[10]

Jonathan Ned Katz notes that, in 1920, Freud showed interest in how predilections for homosexuality and heterosexuality are connected with restrictions regarding the object of desire (and by implication, these restrictions also irrationally exclude the notion of bisexuality or pansexuality). Regarding Freud's theory, Katz suggests this is one of 'his most subversive and least followed up suggestions… a single brush with homosexual feeling… implicates heterosexuals in the dread abnormal. In contrast, a homosexual's brief brush with heterosexuality has a positive moral connotation.'[11] In *Providence,* Moore subverts this notion: Black represents the presence of a gay man in locations where semi-illicit heterosexual activities take place (often shown as a form of ritual to summon and appease old gods), and his entering these locations is disruptive to his own sexuality when he is possessed by some sort of spirit in issue of six of the narrative, and rapes a member of the opposite sex. This activity, which horrifies the character when he comes to his senses, queers the notion of his sexuality being subversive to the hidden America he encounters, when it is this encounter that briefly 'forces' heterosexuality on to him. Rather than his gay desire being disruptive to places that are supposedly straight, the illicit sexuality that has taken place in these locales – linked with black magic and forbidden knowledge – coerces him into a perverse form of heterosexuality, which is seen as a corrupting influence on his character.

The framing of illicit activity linked to sexuality (ranging from the brief touching of hands, to intercourse) in enclosed architectural spaces – where closed doors would obstruct viewing, or when no-one is looking through a window – can be easily demonstrated by the comic book artist to show how human figures are located in such rooms, and how their positions in these spaces are framed by the architecture, which can conceal or reveal their activities according to any observer's vantage point. The first visual expression of the protagonist's disruptive sexuality in *Providence* (following a chapter containing depictions of heterosexual nudity) can be seen in the second issue of the comic, when he visits Red Hook in Brooklyn following an invitation by local policeman Tom Malone, who suggests he may be able to help Black with his investigations into a missing writer. Malone takes Black on a tour of the area, and right from the start of this peregrination, the

depiction of the pair as they walk the streets suggests (as portrayed by the comic's artist) that the point of view we see of them, is that of an unseen observer, with page three of the issue framing them from various vantage points, which range from just behind their backs to a rooftop above the street. As Lovecraft himself set a story in the same location – 'The Horror at Red Hook' (1927) – a tale concerned with fear of the other, so connecting this place with a sense of being covertly observed seems apt.[12]

Fig. 1 – *Providence* issue 2, pp. 6–7, Moore and Burrows (June 2015)

Pages six and seven (Fig. 1) add a more overt suggestion of looking in and looking out at their activities, with their walk past a graveyard drawn as observed from within its boundaries, with panels three and four on the page showing the point of view of someone if they were crouching near the ground, with the framing of the two characters between the railings taking on an aspect of prison-like bars, separating them and the observer.

Voyeurism in visual storytelling

As noted earlier, Colomina considers certain spaces (the office, the club) where men undertake activities with other members of their gender as 'male', while other spaces – that are perhaps more open to other visitors – are somehow more female, through associations with communality and openness to visitors being associated with femininity. While these generalisations can be debated, the idea of female and male spaces being areas that are entered and observed, can be seen at work in notable examples of voyeuristic visual storytelling.

For example, Alfred Hitchcock's film *Rear Window* is partially set in a coded male space – James Stewart's living room – with Stewart's character L.B. Jefferies stuck there due to a cast on one leg. In this film, he 'enters' the female space of a neighbour who lives in the building opposite by observing her and her neighbours covertly through binoculars. This observation also leads to the presentation of another kind of unwarranted intrusion, as Stewart observes a murder taking place, when the husband of this neighbour enters this space and seemingly kills the occupant. Film critic Michelle Patterson suggests that 'the key *to Rear Window* is the framing of the shots. When Jefferies is looking out of the window, he forces the audience to follow him, forced into voyeurism.' Jefferies seems to take to the role of voyeur quite willingly – the point of view of a would-be amateur detective, with the voyeurism undertaken to 'explore… how ethical it is to peep into someone else's life'.[13]

The act of intense looking, of scrutiny, gives the voyeur some similarities with the detective, and with the comic book reader, who can stare at renderings of characters wanting privacy in environments where they might not want to be watched. Architect turned academic Martin van der Linden quotes photographer Dominique Nabokov in considering the idea of a 'sleuth–voyeur', that when one looks at photographs of architectural interiors, one can scrutinise evidence of the lives of people who occupy such spaces, noting that 'voyeurism… (of) these interiors provide an additional layer to our understanding'.[14]

On screen, *Rear Window* in particular – as an example of voyeurism depicted on film – makes for a cogent comparison with comics, as the image the viewer sees of the scenes where Jefferies is observing his neighbours have a comic-like framing to them. The character's view of the world outside, while mostly unobstructed, is through three vertical windows side by side, which visually have a similarity to three comic book panels, and their arrangement between the audience's eye and the building of Jefferies' fascination means that the left-hand window frames a view of a low attic room with sky above; the middle shows the outside of four other windows that open out on to balconies and have a fire escape between them; the right hand window surrounds a view onto two further windows that allow no obvious egress, and are landscape in shape. So, each of the three sections of view can be seen to frame a distinct part of the urban landscape beyond,

which also can be seen to geographically contain part of the unfolding narrative in the building opposite that Jefferies is fascinated with. Comics often use a similar technique, with frames side by side to show neighbouring parts of a landscape, with the panel borders suggesting short 'beats' in the narrative, inviting a reading of individual panels side by side as an unfolding narrative that the reader is considering as they scan the page from left to right – see below for an example in *Providence,* as Black moves from panel one to two on page 16 of issue 2, in Fig. 2.

Architectural concealment – the panel and the window

In *Mise–en–Scène, Acting, and Space in Comics*, Geraint D'Arcy (2020) observes a concurrence between the comic book panel and the architectural window, noting that 'the graphic world depicts images that we see-into, staged to be seen through this pane'.[15] To see into an interior which has a window, the viewer must peer through this window to see inside; similarly, to observe the narrative content of a comic, a reader must look at the contents of the panel. Not all comic book panels depict architectural interiors, but all panels have a discrete border (visible or implied) allowing for the conceptual similarity between a comic panel and a window. Panels in some comics do not have a drawn solid border, rather the rendering of the art within the panel may just be surrounded by empty space, which delineates the gap between one panel and the next; or a panel may be single page or double page size, spreading to the edge of the paper it is printed on, or screen it is read on.[16] The rendered images within the panel are contained within a frame on a page which may contain several other panels, which has a similarity with a window in a wall. The observer can look at each panel in turn, or look into each window in a wall. In terms of the vantage point of the viewer, both windows and comic panels allow an outside observer to scrutinise what is contained within the frame.

When considering Marcel Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu*, David Spurr (2012) suggests that 'interior spaces provide a refuge for the expression of forbidden desires... brought to light through a process of penetration and exposure'.[17] Via an examination of architectural spaces in this novel, and how they are used as locations for sexual activity and its observation, Spurr notes, 'transgression is made possible by an interior space thought to be concealed, but which is in fact open to view from an adjoining space, the space of the voyeur'.[18] Similar observations can be

applied to Moore's Lovecraft comics, with *Providence* in particular using voyeuristic framing of parts of the narrative, where characters observe others or are observed exploring their sexuality in concealed spaces. However, more so than literature alone – where the writer has to describe in words the acts of observation – comics depict the observed location nakedly with no concealment (unless preferred by the artist) of the activities taking place, again tainting the reader with a voyeuristic point of view, as nothing is hidden from their sight. In film, the movie director and editor make a choice regarding the amount of time that the viewer can *be* a voyeur, dependant on how long the voyeuristic shot lasts on screen. This can be augmented via screens in one's own home – i.e. the viewer can rewind and rewatch certain scenes – but in general the act of voyeurism undertaken by the viewer is relatively fleeting, the illicit moment is seen on screen fleetingly, and is then gone.

In comparison, the comic book reader can linger as longer as they like on a voyeuristic image. Time is frozen for as long as the comic reader wishes to stare at and scrutinise an image. Considering the film viewer in the home again, one *can* pause an image, but film is intended to unfold over time, so this is at odds with the intent of the filmmaker, unless he or she is inviting such unusual scrutiny of their film. The comic book artist, in comparison, is creating images that are designed to be still, and it is the reader that chooses how long they linger on each drawing.

The coding of panel shapes, and possible implications

Colomina notes the exterior of a house is like a man's dinner jacket: '[A] male mask… protected by a seamless façade, the exterior is masculine.'[19] In contrast she names the architectural interior as a scene of reproduction and sexuality, and by inference female. *Providence* also codes exteriors and interiors as gendered spaces. Black spends much of the 12 issues wandering the American landscape, often looking up at the exteriors of buildings. Then, when interiors are shown, such as in the first issue, they are spaces where female sexuality is revealed, either in the present day of the narrative (as we see in the final comics page of the first issue where a female character strips while approaching her male lover), or in sepia toned flashbacks to the protagonist's past.
In issue two, the comic moves from a world containing observable architectural details – interiors, doors, windows, etc. – into one that is more formless, contained within subterranean caves. One might suggest this is a movement from the ordered, rectilinear

world controlled by men, to 'flesh–like' surroundings – considering the texture of the cave walls, and wrinkled bars of the cage – where we discover a female demon is imprisoned (Fig.2).

Fig. 2 – *Providence* issue 2, pp. 14–17, Moore and Burrows (June 2015)

In this sequence, the shape of the panels that the narrative is contained within changes from 'widescreen' (i.e. the dimensions of a cinematic image) to vertical. It is not obvious what this transition in panel shape is meant to signify; however, thinking of these shapes in terms of cinema and its antecedents, it is possible that the art is suggesting a shift backwards from the wide cinematic frame to the slits through which one might see an earlier form of moving image on the side of a zoetrope. The narrative is moving from a historical period – the 1920s – to a realm of early history complete with eldritch monsters, so perhaps the aspect ratio is shifting from narrative contemporary to historical. It also perhaps refers back to the earlier scene where we see Black and Malone framed between vertical bars, suggesting the environs of a prison.

The amount of time portrayed from frame to frame may also have a relationship to early cinema in this sequence. In earlier widescreen panels, such as most of the sequence where Black and Malone are talking, there is 'smooth' movement from panel to panel in terms of how we read the narrative. In the vertical panels, this feels more staccato, with time speeding up and slowing down, making the reader conscious of skipping moments between the frames, like watching a film with a frame-rate lower than 24 frames per second – flickery, with the gaps between frames noticeable to the eye.

The formalised layout of *Providence* is four widescreen panels making up each page, but sometime two are joined together to make a squarer panel, or an image occupies the entire page. Moore used a similar formalist layout in his most famous comic, *Watchmen* (1986–87), where each page was based around a nine–panel grid, and on some pages some of these panels were joined

together, but the repeated layout remains as the basic structure. A look at the four pages where shift occurs between horizonal and vertical also suggests references to incarceration as an intended reading, with page 14 showing Black entering a trap door in the cellar (complete with pentagram at its entrance, suggesting a recent ritual has perhaps awoken the creature that lives below), and pages 15 onwards (Fig. 2) showing his exploration of the cavern beneath, with the shift from horizonal to vertical occurring between pages 14 and 15.

While the vertical panel suits the architecture of the environment Black initially encounters – a narrow staircase ending in a narrow tall entrance to a cave – it also mimics the cage-like structure he encounters on page 17, which may be where the creature he later encounters was kept. This being the case, the vertical panels mimic the view that one would have from between the bars of this cage – the architecture of the page itself reflecting the architectural design of part of the scene rendered in the panels.

Obscured views

In each issue of *Providence*, we see the representation of voyeurism – of characters looking through windows, and being looked at by others from windows above their line of sight and other hidden vantage points (Fig. 3). This covert observation lends everyday activities a sinister aspect, as if Robert's flânerial walking is something that is a danger to himself and others.

Fig. 3 – *Providence* issue 3, pp. 5–6 (detail), Moore and Burrows (July 2015)

Architecture informs the content of the comic – many panels contain window frames, with the view beyond (as in *Rear Window*) interrupted by the frames between the panes of glass, creating panels within panels. The comic is commenting on the act of looking out of windows and the act of being looked at *through* windows. The view through a window is interrupted by the elements that make up the window frame – i.e. the strips of metal or wood that separate each pane of glass – and the reader's

continuous view of the narrative is interrupted by the space between each panel on the page.

When reading comics, the gap between panels is a space to indicate that each panel represents something slightly different – a movement in time or space from panel to panel – and so suggests another kind of continuation. The view through a window shows a mosaic style view of reality, with parts obscured out of necessity to suspend the window glass; the panels laid out on a comic page show a mosaic of storytelling elements where the reader is invited to look from one panel to another, to see a page long section of narrative. The panes of a window add up to make a whole image representing part of a landscape looked out onto, the panels of a comic add up to make part of a story being read.

That which should not be seen

Edgar Allan Poe's *The Man of the Crowd* (1840) is a useful fictional text about architecture, flânerie and the urban environment, which is bookended with reference to an arcane text: 'it was well said of a certain German book that *"er lasst sich nicht lessen"* – it does not permit itself to be read' – with the final reference in the story perhaps referring to the unknowability of cities and people.[20] In *Providence*, it is Black's reading of a forbidden text that leads to an act of possession and revelation, as well as knowledge of what can take place behind closed doors. When Black becomes cursed with this knowledge, subsequent issues depict society itself starting to break down in the locations he travels through. The violence of the protagonist's actions when possessed spreads to everyone around him, because of his reading an arcane text in the previous issue and the act of violence it leads to him undertaking. This is reflected in the architectural penetration he also engages with, showing a character exiting a building through a broken window, rather than a door that is open to him (Fig. 4). By depicting a broken window as a boundary that has become an entrance / exit to a building, it suggests shaking up of societal norms, that expected roles of objects and therefore perhaps people also have changed.

Here the comic comments on parallels one might draw between damage to architectural forms by the people who encounter them (in this case glass shattered by bricks which seem to come from outside the page of the comic itself) and the damage to people themselves by human activities. In this scenario, the world outside

has become a battleground because Black's notions of his own sexuality have been disrupted.

Fig. 4 – *Providence* issue 7, pp. 2–4, Moore and Burrows (Jan 2016)

Voyeur and flâneur

In *Providence,* Black is both a voyeur and flâneur, observing people that have previously been 'unseen', and travelling around different parts of America. He has an intent – to discover the hidden America – so one might also consider his activities a *dérive*, and until the plot starts to increase in intensity, there is a languorous pace to his travels, which seems to suggest the enjoyment of walking and accidental encounters in the landscape. By making this part of the narrative, it allows the writer and artist to depict various aspects of the American (built) landscape, based not only on the writings of H.P. Lovecraft which inspire *Providence*, but also the actual locations in the real America that are mentioned in both Lovecraft's original stories and this homage.

While *Providence* does not have the footnotes that Moore's earlier *From Hell* contains, fans of the writer have investigated his research journey through maps of America. The blog 'Facts in the Case of Alan Moore's *Providence*' lists the corollaries between the comic and actual locations. For example, issue one is set in various parts of Manhattan, itself the location for Lovecraft's story 'Cool Air';[21] issue two is set in Red Hook, Brooklyn, the location of Lovecraft's 'The Horror at Red Hook';[22] issue three in Salem, Massachusetts, inspired by the location of Lovecraft's 'The Shadow over Innsmouth',[23] and so on. While Lovecraft's stories have various amounts of fidelity to real locations, the blog shows that Moore and Burrows have used maps and photographs of the locations to inform the drawings on the page in their comic, giving their story some verisimilitude even while set in a fantastical world of black magic and half human creatures. The

more 'real' the depicted location is, the more unsettling the strange occurrences set against these locations become.

This combination of the real and unreal is fascinating for readers interested in architectural rendering on the page, as panels of the comic show drawings of buildings that have existed or still exist in real life. In turn, when the comic causes architecture itself to take on a preternatural aspect, the use of human interaction with architecture depicted as a metaphor for human activity again increases the sense of *unheimlich*. Anneleen Masschelein notes Freud's use of *unheimlich* to suggest a 'negation of *heimlich* in the sense of "homely, familiar" and at the same time almost coincides... with the second meaning of *heimlich*, "hidden, secretive, furtive"'.[24] This combination of meanings is particularly notable in a pivotal scene in issue ten of *Providence*. At this point, Black is on the cusp of admitting his sexuality to himself, writing a letter to a male acquaintance, and as he is just about to admit this in the correspondence, the comic depicts the world outside his window contracting (Fig. 5), mimicking a visual effect found in cinema, the vertiginous dolly zoom seen in Hitchcock films such as *Vertigo* (1958). This is an example of the impossible physics that can be depicted in comics (or film), and also how the realisation of such impossible physics can be used as metaphor in an uncanny world. On screen, the 'plasticity' of buildings warp and change shape based on an alien influence on the world, or because of changing characters' perceptions.

Fig. 5: *Providence* issue 10, pp. 15–18, Moore and Burrows (July 2016)

After the collision of aspects of reality, Black engages in a sexual act with this intruder into his reality and this activity disrupts the world itself. From this point on the unseen parts of the world – monsters and phantoms only visible to those who have arcane knowledge – become increasingly visible to everyone. While this isn't the most positive depiction of homosexuality one can find in fiction – a reading of this scene can be that when Black finally

embraces his sexuality, it starts the world down the path to apocalypse – it is a fascinating depiction of how disruptive sexuality has a knock-on effect regarding one's own sense of reality itself.

The new 'reality' that the character embraces is something that changes not only his view of the world he inhabits (which was presaged earlier in the comic by others who could already see into other realms), but also changes the world itself. Obviously, this is an exaggeration of lived experience – when people come to terms with their own sexuality, one might consider that their relationship with the world *has* changed – but this is a fantastical portrayal of this notion. The concentrating down of different worlds into the same space also works as a literary / artistic device commenting on the idea from quantum mechanics that all probabilities co–exist[25] until when 'we make a measurement, or observe a quantum entity… the collapse happens.'[26]

At the risk of over-extending this metaphor, as Black's sexuality was previously concealed but also somewhat malleable (as seen in the issue where he is briefly coerced into heterosexuality), the concatenation of spaces in this scene collapses the possibilities of his sexuality into one version of himself, which he has to accept. He can no longer rely on being concealed (and voyeuristically observed), because the disruption to reality itself means there is no longer anywhere for left for him (or the various humanoid creatures that inhabit the fictional landscape) to hide.

Conclusion

Providence offers many scenarios where disruptive sexuality is hidden by architectural locations and then, via science-fictional and fantastical aspects of the narrative, the comic shows the boundaries of places where sexuality can be concealed also breaking down. Like several of Alan Moore's comics, the series ends with a vision of apocalypse which doesn't necessarily mean the end of the world, but certainly a shift in human perception from what the world was to what the world could be after a disruptive event (and so technically the end of 'a' world). Indeed, we can also see similar ideas about a Revelation–style event changing people's concept of the world around them, rather than the world actually being destroyed, in Moore's *Watchmen*, *Promethea* (1999–2005), and a climactic issue (#50) of *Saga of the Swamp Thing* (1986). *Providence*, then, is a comic that comments on concealment,

that sexuality, particularly disruptive sexuality, is often hidden but also viewable by those who have a voyeuristic vantage point, including the reader. However, the narrative suggests that the idea of making such sexuality more open and visible to all, is the most disruptive idea of all.

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DECEPTION OF THE READER'S EYE: A CONVERSATION WITH ALAN MOORE ABOUT HIS LOVECRAFT-THEMED COMIC BOOKS

Alex Fitch

Alan Moore is Britain's most acclaimed comic book writer, providing the scripts for such titles as *V for Vendetta* (1982-1989), *Halo Jones* (1984-1986), *Watchmen* (1986-1987), *Batman: The Killing Joke* (1988), *Miracleman* (1982-1989), *From Hell* (1991-1998), *Lost Girls* (1991-2006) and *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* (1989-2019). His short film series *Show Pieces* (2012) culminated in the feature film *The Show* (2021), both directed by Mitch Jenkins, and show a fantastical underbelly to his hometown of Northampton, which also features as the location of his first short story collection, *Voice of the Fire* (1996), and novel *Jerusalem* (2016). His second short story collection, *Illuminations*, was published by Bloomsbury in October 2022.

Alex Fitch is the presenter of the UK's only monthly broadcast radio show on comics, 'Panel Borders', on Resonance 104.4 FM, the Arts Council Radio Station in London. He has been published on the topics of comics and film by the University Presses of Chicago and Mississippi, Intellect, McFarland, Strange Attractor, Cambridge Scholars, The Conversation, and The Independent. He is an associate lecturer in architecture and visual culture at the University of Brighton, where he is currently pursuing a PhD investigating 'The Depiction of Architecture in Comic Books'.

This interview was recorded on the phone by Alex Fitch with Alan Moore in late 2011 and broadcast on Resonance 104.4 FM (London) on 11th December, 2011. The interview was broadcast as part of a series of four episodes of the radio show 'Panel Borders', which that month was themed around comics containing characters and ideas by H.P. Lovecraft, and also featured interviews with Ed Brubaker, Ian Culbard and co–collaborators Dan Abnett and Andy Lanning.

Fitch and Moore discuss the latter's Lovecraft-themed comics *The Courtyard* (2 issues, Avatar Press, 2003) and its sequel *Neonomicon* (4 issues, Avatar Press, 2010–2011). *The Courtyard* was originally published as a prose story by Moore and was adapted to comics by writer Anthony Johnson and artist Jacen Burrows; the sequel is

written by Moore himself. Moore completed his Lovecraft trilogy with *Providence* (12 issues, Avatar Press, 2015–2017) which for its first 11 issues is a prequel to *The Courtyard*, and then its final issue is a sequel to *Neonomicon.*

In *The Courtyard* and *Neonomicon*, an FBI agent is investigating ritualistic murders committed by cult leader Johnny Carcosa, whose actions presage the return of eldritch gods and a potential, forthcoming apocalypse.

Alex Fitch: Avatar Press has just released the graphic novel collections of *Neonomicon* and *The Courtyard*, but the latter first saw print in a collection called 'The Starry Wisdom' in 1994…

Alan Moore: That's right. Yeah, that was, as I remember, that was Dave Mitchell from Oneiros books, had asked me to come up with something for a collection of new Lovecraft fiction that he was planning. I was feeling a bit ambitious, so I decided to take the title of Lovecraft's poem cycle – *Fungi from Yuggoth* – seriously. I thought, if this is a kind of fungus, then it should be possible to take some element from each of the poems in the cycle and perhaps do something interesting with it. Just isolate some element and then see where that takes you. There are a couple of earlier pieces from the run of stories that I produced that have seen print, but it was an incredibly disparate bunch of prose pieces. I was really trying to push the Lovecraftian envelope.

I can remember a piece about Lovecraft's father going mad in a motel that was only a couple of pages long, but it was my ambition to actually produce a couple of pages, for each one of the poems in the cycle. But, unfortunately, I got to about halfway through the process and found that I was called to do a reading in London, and the only manuscript of many of the pieces was just lost in the back of a taxi.

I couldn't recreate it, fortunately I had done *The Courtyard*, which was probably the longest and most self–contained of all of the pieces. So, when Avatar approached me to ask if they could do an adaptation of it, I said yes, because I mean, yes, I enjoyed the story. There'd been some nice little touches there that I've been quite pleased with. And so, yeah, I told them to go ahead with it. And then a couple of years later, when they asked if I wanted to

do anything for them, I'd always thought of doing a sequel to *The Courtyard* with *The Neonomicon* piece. But yeah, that was pretty much how it happened.

And both *The Courtyard* and *The Neonomicon* are sequels to a short story by Lovecraft called 'The Horror at Red Hook'. Why, out of all of his stories, did you choose that one in particular that you wanted to actually do a specific sequel to, rather than just use Lovecraftian imagery?

Well, because I'd remembered that story as being quite a creepy little Lovecraft story, and it was set outside of his usual comfort zone of New England. This was, I believe, written after he married Sonia [née Green, in 1924] and gone to live in New York which he found a horrifying experience, largely because of his rampant xenophobia. And I can remember 'The Horror of Red Hook' as having even more than usual of the various kinds of epithets that he used to lavish upon anybody who was not a white Anglo–Saxon Protestant.

I mean, apparently during this period, he would occasionally walk in New York and see groups of Jewish people, and would go into the long anti–Semitic rants, until Sonia would quietly point out to him: 'Yes, but Howard I'm Jewish…' at which point he would recover himself and say: 'Ah yes, but of course *you* are the exception to the rule.'

This was, to be fair to Lovecraft… at the end of his life he deeply regretted all of his earlier flirtation with anti–Semitism and racism, and he saw it for what it was. It was a young man with very little experience of the world, who for some reason had decided to pretend he was an eighteenth–century gentleman and had incorporated all of the customary prejudices of that era.

He later realised that's what he'd been doing and that it was completely pointless, and he that regretted it all. But it has to be said that during a large part of Lovecraft's career, those tendencies were pretty much at the forefront of his work. And what I wanted to do with *The Courtyard* was to actually attempt a modern reading Lovecraft that included all of the stuff that he had been either too prudent or too squeamish to include in his stories. 'The Horror at Red Hook' seemed to offer possibilities,

especially because with Robert Suydam – that was the name of one of the main Cthulhu cult protagonists in the story – it seemed to me that I could probably link in with Lovecraft's 'The Shadow Over Innsmouth', which was one of his later works, and one of his better ones.

It seemed I could, perhaps, connect up a couple of the remote parts of Lovecraft's sprawling mythology and maybe get an interesting modern story out of it. So, that was one of the reasons why I chose 'The Horror at Red Hook'. Also, probably because Red Hook is a real location. A lot of the places in Lovecraft's stories are places that he made up as surrogates for places in the New England landscape. I mean, Innsmouth is pretty much definitely Salem. But with Red Hook, he was talking about a real place. It seemed to me that since I wanted to try and do a realistic, modern Lovecraft story – in so much as you can ever do a realistic, modern Lovecraft story – then having a place that was actually set in a real location would probably be an asset.

Well, and also you set it in the near future, which is interesting, with Harlem underneath a dome because of *something* that has happened, which I don't think you ever really explain, but it has that kind of science fictional element to it. Not only is there the Lovecraftian *other*, but there's also this dislocation in culture that there's a group of people who are sealed off from the outside world.

Well, that was… In the original Courtyard story, there are these kind of anti–pollution, anti–radiation domes over a lot of American cities. There are also, I believe, fax booths, because this was done back in the 90s when faxes were terribly modern. But the main reason for doing it like that was because I wanted to, right from the first lines of the story, to differentiate it between a lot of the more retroactive Lovecraft pastiches that had come before, because I've read an awful lot of Lovecraft stories written by various writers. Some of them are really good, but there are some people who seem to think it's sufficient just to pastiche a few of Lovecraft's more obvious stylistic touches, or to refer to places and entities from his mythos.

[What] I wanted to do, was to set it in what was the near future, i.e. the very early twenty-first century – now the near past –

because I wanted to say: 'Okay, this is this is Lovecraft for the modern world. This is not set in an imagined 1920s or 1930s,' because, I know that's a very natural period to set Lovecraft stories because [that's when] when most or all of his stories were written.

I like to think that some of the elements in Lovecraft are a bit more timeless than that, and that if you can realise them for modern sensibilities, then I think that they've still got a great deal of power and that they can still work.

So, yeah, the science fiction touches were basically a way of signalling to the reader that this is kind of new territory. In terms of Lovecraft pastiches, we're going to be trying to do something a little bit different here.

One thing that I thought was very interesting about the sequel *Neonomicon* is, not only is it a sequel to your print version, but it's a sequel to the adaptation done by Anthony Johnson and Jacen Burrows, particularly the final scene where they do this thing, where each panel is replicated in the next panel as a window in the background of the shot. And that sort of playing with time and different dimensions within the comic book panel is something you very much explore in the sequel.

Yeah. Well, I thought that Anthony and Jacen did a very good job of adapting *The Courtyard*, I mean, that kept all of my language there and I thought that the embedded time sequence that you're talking about… I mean, that was something that had been there in the prose, but the way that they managed to recreate that in the artwork, I thought was ingenious.

With *Neonomicon*, I really wanted to take some of the ideas that had been set up in *The Courtyard* and take them as far as they would conceivably go. And that included some of the ideas about language, some of the ideas about time and space and perception, that had been a feature of the original story. Although given that I'd written the original story of the prose place with no idea of having it converted into a comic, it's kind of more that with *Neonomicon*, I was trying to come up with things that were suitable to the comics medium. Things that perhaps you couldn't have done in a prose piece. For example, the scene in the first issue where the

character, Johnny Carcosa, is apparently talking to some of the assembled police SWAT team that are raiding his apartment building, and when they approach him and tried to take off his bandana, it turned out that he's a chalk drawing on a wall.

That is something which probably you could only realise effectively in comics. I mean, yes, I probably could have written that, but it would have had nowhere near the same effect because there wouldn't have been the deception of the reader's eye that comics can utilise. So, I mean, generally when I'm doing things, I do tend to write them with an eye to the actual medium they're being produced in.

So, I think, yeah, with *Neonomicon* it was taking some of the subject matter from *The Courtyard* and then just thinking 'Now, what would be the best way to realise this, to have a 100-page comic story?', and taking it all from there, really.

And it's interesting that with a story called *Neonomicon*, you do a lot of things that are new in terms of telling comics. I mean, there's a YouTube video that dissects the first issue of *Neonomicon*, and I don't know if you've seen it or if, indeed, the guy who made the video actually goes too far in examining the exact shape of panel borders and how they're referencing different ways of perception? But I thought that previous to *Neonomicon*, you'd said that you didn't want to do any more comics other than sequels to *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*, and so I was wondering if it was the prospect of doing something new with the format that brought you onto this other project.

Well, I mean the actual genesis of *Neonomicon*… there was actually a huge gap between writing *Neonomicon*, and *Neonomicon* actually appearing. It was a few years, but originally it was just when I'd severed connection with DC. And both me and Kevin O'Neill were having a pretty sticky time of it around them, and I'd found myself with a large tax bill and with a lot of the money that I'd been expecting to have to pay it hadn't turned up through various kind of oversights and complications.

So, I was quite in need of some funds quite quickly. So, I spoke to William [Christensen, Editor–in–Chief at Avatar Comics] at

Avatar to ask if there'd been any royalties owing or anything like that, and he suggested that maybe if I wanted to write a four–part series, that he'd be able to give me an advance on the money for it, which sounded like a good idea! Since I had always been interested in *The Courtyard*, and I'd always been kind of thinking of maybe doing a sequel. I'd already got a kind of a first scene in my mind which would have been Aldo Sax in the asylum being interrogated by a couple of fellow FBI agents. It wasn't much more than that, but I thought that might be interesting, and I thought it might be interesting to revisit that world and see how it had progressed since I left off with it in *The Courtyard*.

Now, after that point, I am pretty much… *The League of Extraordinary Gentleman* is the comic that I am committed to, and is pretty much the only comic that I'm doing. But, you know, back then in 2006 or whenever it was that I actually wrote *Neonomicon*, 2006 to 2007, it was the possibilities that the story seemed to offer because there were a lot of interesting things that had been touched on in *The Courtyard*. I was quite pleased with that as a story. There seemed to be life in some of those ideas that, you know, that just made it a more attractive proposition than it might otherwise have been.

I guess Lovecraft died young and his entire oeuvre can be collected in sort of four or five books, and it's interesting that while he was still alive, some of his contemporaries were already doing sequels and other stories set in his mythology, which you've done yourself. And in fact, both *Neonomicon* and one of your short stories, 'Recognition' [in Alan Moore's *Yuggoth Cultures and Other Growths #2* (Avatar Press, October 2003)], are actually sequels to everything that Lovecraft did. Why do you think it is so tempting for writers like yourself to do additional work set in the Lovecraft universe? Because he seems to be a writer that inspires others, rather than inspires people to adapt his work?

Well, you'd have to say that there must be something about Lovecraft's writing that attains a kind of creepy universality. I think that it might be that he was a writer who was genuinely about 50, 60, 70 years ahead of his time. I think that Lovecraft was very attuned to the scientific breakthroughs of his day, which were many, and also to the breakthroughs in astronomy and

cosmology. I think what happened with Lovecraft was that as a very sensitive man – a kind of pit canary, almost – he was uniquely attuned to some of the psychological problems that would be afflicting humanity in the decades to come.

I mean, he was living at a time when it was just starting to sink in that we were not living in… Not only was it that the Earth goes around the Sun, but that our sun was one of about 100 billion in our galaxy, which was one of an immense number of galaxies, and we have no special position in the cosmos whatsoever. And in all likelihood, the cosmos was completely unaware of our existence and if it had been aware, would not have cared.

I think that these concepts, which are quite big and alienating, and I think they are concepts that are still to have sunk in for an awful lot of contemporary people, but I think that it was these concepts that Lovecraft was wrestling with: just this sense of cosmic horror, a horror at the insignificance of human existence in the kind of cosmos that science seemed to be presenting him with.

And the only way that he could in any way encompass these abstract cosmic anxieties was to turn them into squirmy entities to terrify his readership with. I think that in a way, he managed that successfully, even with his very personal and very specific approach to language and to short stories. He managed that so successfully that I think that he actually somehow managed to embed these vast, abstract cosmic ideas into a living crawling form, that his readers could engage with, given that people like Jorge Luis Borges and William Burroughs were very, very interested in Lovecraft. I believed that Burroughs was rereading Lovecraft when he died. And you'd have to say that from looking at Burroughs' work, for example, that he was concerned with representing alienating, or invasive, abstract forces of alien and invading entities.

There were a lot of similarities between the two, in that they both used monsters to represent states of mind. And I think that actually, as time has moved on, as we've moved into a new century, I think those states are probably a lot more familiar to us now than they were in Lovecraft's day. I would imagine that's why he probably still has something to say. I mean, there's also that fantastic quote by Lovecraft, which I shall probably almost certainly mangle. But he was saying something to the effect that

he thought 'it was the greatest conceivable mercy that Mankind was not able to correlate its knowledge. But the time, that it could do, that would be coming soon, and it only remains to be seen whether man would embrace this new understanding or would flee from its light into the shadows of a new Dark Age.'

Now, given the response of both our religious fundamentalists and our political fundamentalists, the nationalists and all the rest who seem to feel assaulted by this rapidly changing world that we're in… A lot of the values and certainties upon which they based their lives and understanding of the world are being swept away. And so at least to some people, they are doing exactly what Lovecraft feared that they would.

They are trying to escape into a new Dark Ages, where we can ignore all that has been learned by science and just pull back upon what we were taught in our religious texts. I think that's a very real danger, and I think that Lovecraft was ahead of the curve in predicting it.

I think it's the fact that he was so sensitive to the stuff that was coming up, that makes him still so relevant today and still such a good source of nightmares.

Well, it occurs to me looking at your work over the years, the even before the short stories you wrote for *The Starry Wisdom* and elsewhere, you'd been thinking about Lovecraft because, for example, the monster at the end of Watchmen is very Lovecraftian. And my favourite part of *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen: The Black Dossier* [DC Comics, December 2008] is your mash up between Lovecraft and P.G. Wodehouse.

Well, yeah, I mean, there's been quite a few… I haven't really thought about the connection between Lovecraft and *Watchmen*, but I guess it was a squidgy alien. So, you know, yeah, I guess that there may have been some influence there, but particularly, in *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen,* there's been quite a few references to Lovecraft, I mean, I think in the first volume, in the text story 'Allan and the Sundered Veil', there were quite a few references to gigantic Lovecraftian entities. And then they turned up in the P.G. Wodehouse parody in *The Black Dossier*. Also, I think, Nyarlathotep,

makes an appearance during the 3D giant party in the Blazing World sequence that ends the book.

So, as part of the fictional landscape, it would be kind of strange to be doing a book like *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* that delights in picking amongst the features of the fictional world, it would be kind of strange to overlook Lovecraft. He definitely has to be in there somewhere, you know, and I've been interested in his work since I was about 12.

I'd heard the name and I'd seen a paperback down at one of the book shops in town. It was a Boxing Day – around that time of year – and I was with my parents at a local club, and I was literally bored to tears. I was completely miserable. There was nothing to do. And eventually, just in desperation, I think my mum gave me half a crown and told me to go down to the newsagents down the road and see if I could find myself something to read.

And I brought back a copy of *At the Mountains of Madness*, which had got the most inappropriate cover that I had ever seen on any Lovecraft book. It was a kind of a big, badly constructed waxwork head, wearing an eyepatch! I've really got no idea what that had do with Lovecraft or Cthulhu or anything, but I remember that that particular edition has got 'The Statement of Randolph Carter' [and] I probably read that one first because it was the shortest. I thought I'd have a go at that one before I got on to something like 'The Mountains of Madness', and it's also one of the punchiest of Lovecraft's stories. It's got a killer last line that at least when I was 12 or 13, or whenever it was, it was an ending to a story that completely blew me away, as did the rest of the stories when I got around to reading them. There was obviously a really unusual imagination at work. It was a flavour that I'd never tasted before! I think at the end of that particular volume, there was 'The Dream–Quest of Unknown Kadath', and there was also, I think, his essay about supernatural horror in literature, which pretty much shaped my reading tastes – just that essay – for the next 20 or 30 years!

I went on to discover that people like Arthur Machen, William Howard Hodgson, and all the rest of the writers that I was introduced to by that essay. So, yeah. Lovecraft has always been there, but I'd never really had the opportunity before to actually write a purely Lovecraftian story. So that was why I gave it my

best shot with *Neonomicon*, and which I'm very pleased with. I wasn't sure for a while because, like I said, there was a huge gap between actually writing the work and publishing it. During that time, you can be beset by a lot of doubts. And obviously with the work like *Neonomicon*, which is quite intense and quite extreme, I did think, 'Is it possible that I've gone too far? Have I created something that is just plainly nasty?', which I wouldn't have wanted to do.

So, I went back and read it just on the screen of my word processor, and I thought, 'No, actually, I'm glad that I went as far as I did', because I think morally, that is its saving grace. I thought that if I'm going to approach Lovecraft, then all of the things that Lovecraft considers unnameable, I'm going to name them.

I mean, a lot of Lovecraft's stories are talking about hideous forbidden rites or rituals that somehow result in hybrid beings, you know? This is obviously talking about sex. With whom it is not necessarily… given at least one of the partners in this act is some kind of slithering horror from beyond, it would seem that is not necessarily consensual sex that we're talking about, in which case we're talking about rape.

And I've got quite strong feelings about the way that comics have handled rape in the past. There were the kind of lusty, 'it's not really rape is it?' kind of erotic adventures of Conan where it didn't seem that the sex was consensual. Although generally the lusty tavern wench would melt into Conan's arms, after she'd put up a token resistance. This is sending out entirely the wrong signals. It's making rape a kind of ornament of an adventure story which it should never be.

I decided with *Neonomicon*, that if we were going to investigate this, then it would be unflinchingly, and there would be no evasions. There would be none of the… there would be a full presentation of the horror of that situation. I mean, yes, alright, it's with a big, hideous monster, but on the other hand, isn't it always? So, you know, I was pleased with the way that me and Jacen handled that sequence. I mean, considering that it went on for a couple of excruciating issues, then I suppose I'd have to be, you know?

But it seemed to me that people these days when they're talking about… they seem to have, if anything, an increased thirst for

horror. It was quite a minor genre, back when I was young, it wasn't like science fiction, it was one of those things that only a certain type of person, generally a very young one, would read.

These days, everybody seems to be a real fan of horror in the cinema or on television and I am suspicious of the use of the word. I don't think that it's horror that they're looking for. I think it's kind of titillation of one sort or another, generally. And so what I wanted to do was a story which was not at all titillating. Even though it had a huge amount of sexual content. I mean, as Melinda [Gebbie, Moore's wife] said when I showed it to her to ask what she thought about it as a woman, and she thought she liked it. And she said: 'Well, nobody could be aroused by this unless they were mentally ill.' And yes, I was pleased to hear that. It meant I'd presented it exactly as I wanted to.

So, yeah, you know, it was a piece of work that I was pleased with, and it was interesting to see some of the comments that greeted it, you know? I think there was a certain amount of debate. I mean, I'm probably immune to a lot of it because I've not got an internet connection, and I've not seen the YouTube piece that you mentioned.

It's interesting…

…but, it sounded like there was a certain amount of debate, and I think that generally people got what we were trying to say.

A podcast of this interview can be downloaded or streamed at https://panelborders.wordpress.com/2011/12/11

THE AGONY OF MEDIATION: THOMAS CLAY'S THE GREAT ECSTASY OF ROBERT CARMICHAEL

Jay McRoy

Abstract

Thomas Clay's debut feature, *The Great Ecstasy of Robert Carmichael* (2005), combines highly stylised compositions and meticulous – at times virtuosic – camera movement with representations of extreme sexual violence that, in their graphic and visceral intensity, rival the most gut-wrenching moments of 'French extremist' cinema. While most film critics savaged the film, *The Observer*'s Phillip French was more generous. He recognised 'poise' in the fledgling filmmaker, though he quickly conditioned this assessment by positing that much of the film's visual rigor was undoubtedly the result of the contributions of Theo Angelopoulos' and Catherine Breillat's longtime collaborator/cinematographer, Yorgos Arvantis. While French is correct that Arvantis' bravura tracking shots assist Clay in realising his disturbing vision, his review, like many others, ultimately approaches Clay's film through a conspicuously oblique rhetorical strategy: comparison. While by no means unusual within the discourse of film analysis, this approach seems appropriately ironic, and perhaps unavoidable, when discussing Clay's notorious debut feature. For, as a careful close reading of the controversial film reveals, it is *mediation* as technological process and ontological practice that ultimately emerges as one of the film's dominant themes, as well as Clay's primary political and aesthetic strategy. In this sense, the 'great ecstasy' of the film's title is, to appropriate a phrase from Jean Baudrillard, nothing less than the 'ecstasy of communication'. As this essay demonstrates, *The Great Ecstasy of Robert Carmichael* is a startlingly accomplished and philosophically complex work that examines the plurality of intersections emerging at the very core of film spectatorship itself, namely the negotiation between *text* and *context*, *image* and *idea.*

Key Words:

Thomas Clay; class; gender; rape; violence; cinematography; Stanley Kubrick; analysis; spectatorship; mediation

Widely excoriated upon its release in 2005, Thomas Clay's debut feature, *The Great Ecstasy of Robert Carmichael*, combines highly stylised compositions and meticulous – at times virtuosic – camera

movement with representations of extreme sexual violence that, in their graphic and visceral intensity, rival the most gut–wrenching moments of 'French extremist' works like Coralie Trinh Thi and Virginie Despentes' *Baise–moi* (2000) or Gaspar Noe's *Irréversible* (2002). However, unlike these films, whose insightful critical defenders included internationally acclaimed scholars like Nicole Brenez and David Sterritt, even the more positive reflections upon *The Great Ecstasy of Robert Carmichael* have been restrained at best. Writing for the *Guardian*, for example, Peter Bradshaw described *The Great Ecstasy of Robert Carmichael* as a 'deeply horrible and objectionable film' in the style of 'European extreme cinema'.[1] Similarly, in his slightly more generous review for *The Observer*, Phillip French quickly conditioned his recognition of the fledgling filmmaker's 'poise' by noting that much of the film's visual rigor was undoubtedly the result of the contributions of Theo Angelopoulos' and Catherine Breillat's longtime collaborator/cinematographer, Yorgos Arvantis.[2] In his review for *Total Film*, Jamie Graham, while by no means adulatory, positions Clay's portrait of disaffected Newhaven teenagers within a cinematic tradition that includes 'Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange,* Haneke's *Funny Games*, and Bergman's *The Virgin Spring*'.[3]

While French is correct that Arvantis' bravura tracking shots assist Clay in realising his disturbing vision, his review, like Bradshaw's and Graham's assessments, approaches *The Great Ecstasy of Robert Carmichael* through a conspicuously oblique rhetorical strategy: comparison. While by no means unusual within the discourse of film analysis (see this essay's opening sentence), this approach seems appropriately ironic, and perhaps ultimately unavoidable, when discussing Clay's notorious debut feature. For, as a careful close reading of the film's form and content reveals, it is *mediation* as technological process and ontological practice that ultimately emerges as one of the dominant themes within the film's diegesis, as well as Clay's primary political and aesthetic strategy. In this sense, the 'great ecstasy' of the film's title is, to appropriate a phrase from Jean Baudrillard, nothing less than the 'ecstasy of communication'. As this essay demonstrates, *The Great Ecstasy of Robert Carmichael* is a startlingly accomplished and philosophically complex work that examines the plurality of intersections emerging at the very core of film spectatorship itself, namely the negotiation between *text* and *context*, *image* and *idea.*

Few critics would argue that Clay's film lacks its share of

sensationalistic content. Indeed, the inclusion of highly disturbing and occasionally graphic depictions of physical and sexual violence – including one of the most brutal depictions of sexual assault in film history – has almost single–handedly accounted for the majority of the invectives directed towards Clay's feature. BBC film critic Jamie Russell, for instance, claims that the violent scenes punctuating the film's narrative lend themselves to being potentially misunderstood as 'shock tactics' orchestrated merely to incite spectators rather than as set pieces that provide valuable insight into why such intense conflicts could, and do, occur. Such negative receptions and 'outright dismiss[als]' of the film's more extreme content unfortunately blind viewers to the work's larger socio–political revelations.[4] 'Shock tactics', as theorists of visual culture like Sean Cubitt have demonstrated, can even be said to serve vital progressive purposes. By making 'sensation an end in itself', artists 'challenge as radically and as deeply as possible every aspect of the audience's physical, emotional and intellectual life' through an aggressively immediate confrontation with 'death, finality, the sublime, the abject, the incommunicable, and the timeless that violently compels viewers to re–acclimate themselves emotionally and haptically to the simulated world on the screen'.[5] This cinematic gesture reinforces, if only momentarily, the spectator's awareness of the schism between the images and the ideas we impose upon them, allowing for a more active engagement with the implied logics behind the depicted acts of extreme violence. One could even go so far as to assert that reducing *The Great Ecstasy of Robert Carmichael* to an inconsequential exercise in 'transgressive cinema' created for the purpose of offending audience sensibilities is not simply missing the forest for the trees, but deliberately cutting down all of the trees with a hatchet and then complaining that nobody ever showed you a forest in the first place.

What, then, are the cultural critiques informing Thomas Clay's *The Great Ecstasy of Robert Carmichael*, and how do they emerge from a comprehension of mediation as a rhetorical and socio-political practice?

The Great Ecstasy of Robert Carmichael presents a fictional portrait of the fishing community of Newhaven, a township in which the gap between the 'haves' and the 'have-nots' has become a nearly unbridgeable chasm. Faced with diminishing employment opportunities and restricted chances for upward mobility, the

film's eponymous teenage cellist and his friends Ben, Joe and Larry meander through a cultural landscape marked by disillusionment and despair. Additionally, although Clay's camera mainly follows the exploits of his teen protagonists, much of Newhaven's adult population, particularly the parents and teachers to whom we are introduced, barely mask their own despondency over their variably precarious positions within a society fueled by exploitative labour practices that create a sporadic and ultimately disposable work force to which only a select few have increasingly tenuous access.

In one of the film's early sequences, for example, Robert's friend Joe, having been expelled from school during what would have been his final year, visits a pub in the middle of the day. There, he meets up with his father and several of his father's friends. The men, struggling to find consistent work in the town's fishing industry, drink beer and complain about unfair labour practices, including their employer's failure to provide any compensation to a new widow and her children following a fisherman's death while at work. When Joe enquires about finding work on one of the boats, his query is met with mildly derisive laughter. 'You'd be lucky, mate,' one of Joe's father's friends flatly states. 'There ain't enough work to go around as it is, you know that.'

An important component in the film's depiction of social class relations and labour alienation is the inclusion of a conspicuously wealthy couple: Jonathan Abbott, a chef and prominent television personality with a lucrative book deal, and his glamorous, newly pregnant wife, Monica. Cruising through Newhaven in expensive sports cars and estranged from the general population through their bourgeois lifestyle (pilates classes, L.A. shopping expeditions, etc.), they are seemingly oblivious to the gap between their privileged position and the daily trials and tribulations of the people with whom they occasionally interact. In a narrative detail that directly contrasts the chef's ravenous consumerism with the plight of the exploited workers in the pub scene discussed above, Jonathan giddily celebrates his purchase of an enormous fish. 'It was so cheap,' he remarks, as if the actual cost of the food were ultimately reducible to the sale price rather than the physical labour and the time expended by the workers on the fishing boats. Given the chef's inability to recognise the human labour value behind his acquisition, his wife's subsequent remark that 'it's only a fish' – a statement originally voiced to ease her husband's

disappointment at potentially having to freeze his culinary conquest – assumes a far more profound resonance.

As the exchange in the pub deftly illustrates, it is by no means 'only a fish'; rather, it is emblematic of the very livelihood and economic (in)security of Newhaven's residents. This is not to suggest that Clay depicts the upwardly mobile couple as monolithically antagonistic. Their prattle may seem banal and clichéd, but they are not portrayed as void of feeling. They are presented as very much in love, and although their social relations with the Newhaven community borders on the painfully naïve or the insultingly condescending, Clay is careful to avoid letting his portrait of the wealthy couple slip into dehumanising parody. The chef happily obliges when asked to speak at the high school music recital, and his wife politely resists clumsy flirtations that she sees as unwelcome and sexist intrusions upon her personal space. Indeed, if Clay had not resisted easy narrative reductionism, the notorious assault that comprises the film's climax would fail to elicit the visceral reactions experienced by audiences.

Thus, a concentrated engagement with the aesthetics and politics of the presentation/re–presentation of violent images is crucial to understanding Thomas Clay's ultimate project in *The Great Ecstasy of Robert Carmichael*, and an exploration of mediation as a discursive practice constitutes a vital first step to revealing the film's systemic critique. Of course, as a filmmaker, Clay is well aware of the power of images and the influence that cinema can have over how people conceptualise themselves and the world in which they live. He even goes so far as to have Robert's teacher lecture to a classroom of largely uninterested students about the more obvious – and, hence, perhaps the most pernicious – impacts of motion pictures and other technologies upon the cultural imagination:

> There is no such thing in the media as objective reality. Now, think of all of the films we've looked at today. *Lifeboat*, *Le Corbeau, Saving Private Ryan*, *Come and See*… Now the point is all these films deal with the Second World War, but each gives us a different version, a different interpretation. Now it's different because it's filtered through the perception and ideology of its creator… This doesn't just apply to fiction. It applies to all forms

> of media: newspapers, broadcasting, documentary filmmaking… The media is media because it mediates between you and the reality it seeks to represent.

The curriculum Robert's teacher espouses begs viewers to consider the efficacy of one of the more (stereo)typical and short-sighted neoliberal responses to mass media's perceived coercive potential. Specifically, by asking his students to realize that the media functions as a mechanism for furthering subjective agendas, Robert's teacher fails to consider how the realization he wants his class to make is itself an integral component of a culture's ideology, of the society's 'imaginary relationship…to their real conditions of existence'.[6] In other words, if, as Marx posits, ideology is a kind of 'distorted conception' comprised of what people do when they don't know that they are doing it, then the lesson Robert's teacher endeavors to impart fails in that it doesn't go far enough in its consideration of how ideas, beliefs, and prejudices circulate.[7] As Todd McGowan notes in *The Real Gaze: Film Theory After Lacan*, '[o]ne does not resist ideology through the act of becoming conscious'.[8] Rather, 'consciousness is itself a mode of inserting oneself into ideology and avoiding one's unconscious desire. Ideology operates not only in unconscious ways, but also through the illusion of consciousness itself – namely, the assumption of mastery implicit in consciousness with vision that allows us not to see the role of the gaze in structuring our vision.'[9]

Robert's teacher further perpetuates this 'illusion of mastery' through his coordination of the class project: a collaborative student-produced video that replicates conventional war films while using local landmarks and monuments to Great Britain's former military supremacy as convenient (if unconvincing) settings and props. Removed from any significant connection with the historical moment they are charged to recreate, the students' performances vacillate between rote utterances inflected by anachronistic colloquialisms, and melodramatic pronouncements that foreground the clichéd content of many World War II films. Rather than contextualising the students' work in relation to his previous explanation of mediation and ideology, or even locating the politics of the 1930s and 1940s in relation to the news reports of the US-led invasion of Iraq that fills virtually every television screen we see in *The Great Ecstasy of Robert Carmichael*, the teacher

rushes the students from scene to scene in an effort to get the assignment finished as quickly as possible.

The depiction of the class project affords Clay the opportunity to make valuable observations. The first of these transpires when Robert and a fellow student clash over the placement of the school's video camera and, consequently, the composition of a single shot. Frustrated by his classmate's criticism of his arrangement, Robert lashes out violently, knocking the camera and tripod to the ground, and beating his peer so viciously that he has to be physically pulled off of his bloodied classmate and restrained. This attack, though clearly an overreaction on Robert's part, comes as little surprise given an earlier scene in which the introverted, seemingly sensitive cellist is verbally chastised by a group of fellow students. 'Keep your filthy eyes to yourself, Robert Carmichael,' a young woman sneers when she catches him looking at her as she passes; adding, in an aside that takes on a chillingly ironic connotation given Robert's character arc, 'he's such a rapist'. An awkward, marginalised teenager, Robert absorbs the verbal assault with a disquieting indifference, a response that allows for a plurality of potential readings of his character, including that he may morph into one of cinema's more resilient dramatic tropes – the figurative walking time-bomb. In addition, Robert's violent eruption during this class project conforms to the logic informing many of the film's violent scenes: repressed anger and gender-based insecurities manifest themselves in what is, on the surface at any rate, an apparently unrelated moment of frustration. The altercation is nothing more than a struggle for representation, a violent contestation between two males vying for control of vision/the image in a culture in which economic crisis has led to widespread class and gender alienation.

Furthermore, the collaborative class project, like the school recital at which Robert displays his musical talent before embarking on a night of rape and murder, posits insufficiently reflective art as an inadequate response to the cultural inequities inherent within the contemporary social relations. The performance at the recital, while technically proficient and aesthetically pleasing, apparently lacks any significant meaning for either the students (absurdly touted as 'stars of the future') or the audience. With dour expressions and rigid postures, the students robotically 'go through the motions' before an audience that shifts uncomfortably in rows

of folding chairs, laughs politely at even the lamest gestures toward humour, and applauds at the appropriate moments. Perhaps the most telling detail is the inclusion of Jonathan Abbott as the guest of honour, a distinction that, by the chef's own admission, is questionable given his lack of musical knowledge. 'So why am I here?" he enquires. As he freely admits, he 'played the violin…badly', giving up 'after grade three'. The answer to his question is simple: the decision to invite 'television's favourite chef' to provide the program's commencement is based solely on his social status as a celebrity.

Like the student video project Robert disrupts with his violent outburst, *The Great Ecstasy of Robert Carmichael* draws upon multiple cinematic texts for inspiration. However, in the case of Clay's film, three instances of self-conscious intertextuality illuminate cinema's potential for advancing a sustained social critique by 'draw[ing] the viewer's attention to his or her relation to the screen in order to make him or her "realize" the social relations that are being portrayed'.[10] Of the films Clay's feature references, Jean-Luc Godard's *Weekend* (1967) and Stanley Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange* (1971) and *Full Metal Jacket* (1987) are at once the most obvious and the most vital. An extended oblique tracking shot past an extensive array of parked cars recalls the famous absurd traffic jam from Godard's skewering treatise against bourgeois consumption run amuck, while the aggressive use of the chef's fish as a sexually suggestive instrument of torture echoes a similar sequence preceding *Weekend*'s climactic cannibal feast. In addition, in a visual strategy in-keeping with, but by no means as overt as, the Brechtian distantiation techniques deployed by Godard, Thomas Clay constructs his work so that sequences structured around sublimely elegant cinematography vie with graphic and prolonged representations of extreme brutality. The resulting juxtapositions jolt the viewer, frustrating any possibility of maintaining a comfortable distance from the film's action. As a result, *The Great Ecstasy of Robert Carmichael* compels spectators to re-acclimate themselves to the subject matter and their assumptions regarding the central character's motivations.

It is here, as well, that Clay's film intersects most productively with Stanley Kubrick's more rigidly formalist and politically sardonic cinematic exercises. In spite of its notorious 'excesses', Clay's *mise-en-scène* is always carefully considered, meticulously constructed, deliberately edited, and precisely paced. Consider,

for instance, the so–called 'blue room' sequence, which encapsulates many of the text's most important themes and motifs while exposing the works' – and, by extension, cinema's – artifice. After popping pills and smoking dope at the local playground, Robert, Ben, Joe, a girl named Charlotte, and Joe's drug–dealer cousin, Larry, drop by an apartment in which a small group of young people are gathered, getting high and listening to one of the tenants mixing house music on a pair of turntables. In an unbroken tracking shot, the camera meanders throughout the apartment's main living space; eventually, it travels about the perimeter of the room's blue walls, periodically coursing in towards the middle of the room to capture simple yet illuminating actions – Robert purchasing half a gram of coke, Charlotte slowly slipping into a state of semi-consciousness as Joe and Larry loom lasciviously. Approximately halfway through the sequence/long take, Joe, Larry, and a third male abscond to the bedroom with Charlotte, whom they subsequently rape. The assault occurs off screen, behind a door that soon comes to occupy the centre of the shot. To screen right we see the young man mixing music behind his turntables, to screen left we see Robert and Ben reclining in chairs and watching as a news program on a small colour television delivers updates on the overthrow of Saddam Hussein's government. What follows is a brilliant combination of cinematography and sound design. The lighting in the room shifts dramatically. What at first seemed a close approximation to ambient and motivated lighting gives way to spotlights illuminating the actors on either side of the bedroom door as the camera dollies further and further back until it becomes obvious that it occupies a geographical location far beyond where the room's 'fourth wall' was earlier shown to be. We are now clearly witnessing an event transpiring on a set in a studio; any pretense towards verisimilitude has been thoroughly abandoned. As the camera dollies back, an artful if harrowing mélange of three distinct sounds coalesce to complete the scene: the pop rhythm of the dance music (DJ Hixxy's rave anthem, 'Toyland') "originating" from the turntables, Charlotte's screams of pain and terror as she is sexually assaulted somewhere beyond the bedroom door, and soundbites from British Prime Minister Tony Blair espousing plans for a 'post-conflict' Iraq, which includes an 'oil for food' program. The scene concludes as the young man mixing the music kicks out the rapists (and Robert) for making too much noise and then stands beside his roommate at the open bedroom door, with Charlotte's desperate sobbing now the only audible sound.

Structurally, the 'blue room' sequence is an accomplishment, fusing form and content to evoke meaning. The spotlighted areas accentuate the *mise-en-scène*'s overtly formalist symmetry, effectively dividing the frame into thirds, with the bedroom door in the centre of the shot impeding a visual apprehension of the assault so chillingly evoked by Charlotte's piercing screams. By combining the screams, the voices on the televised news report, and the throbbing dance music, the sound design coalesces into a kind of dialectical aural montage that links the literal rape occurring behind the bedroom door with the figurative, if all too real, rape of Iraq by the US-led coalition forces. It is here that Clay advances his most incisive critique of violence in both its most explicit, as well as its most treacherously subtle, dimensions. In each instance, human beings are reduced to objects, but the inclusion of footage of Tony Blair advocating a 'post-conflict' 'oil for food' program takes the connection between the 'local' and 'global' atrocities one vital step further. Specifically, it reveals the violence that lurks, often unrecognised, beneath the pretenses of civilisation. It is, after all, the imperialist cultural, economic and military aggression against Iraq that created the humanitarian crisis that the 'oil for food' program is intended to address through a coercive, exploitative exercise masquerading as charitable cultural exchange.

As well, by integrating (or mixing) the dance music, the girl's screams and the news report's level tone in a manner that allows the disparate sounds to complement, rather than conflict with, one another, Clay illuminates the extent to which Robert and his friends are removed, emotionally and politically, from both the immediate trauma of a fellow classmate suffering, and the mediated anguish of a populace experienced exclusively through the filter of a mediating technology like television. The result is a disturbing scene, but it is a scene deliberately orchestrated *to disturb*. In other words, it is a scene constructed to disrupt conventional viewing pleasures for the purpose of interrogating the processes through which people understand actual or imagined violence, especially when their own material reality is conditioned by an increasing sense of alienation from a larger historical continuity.

For the vast majority of the population of Newhaven in *The Great Ecstasy of Robert Carmichael*, the sun has long since set on the British Empire. Wars are either reimagined nostalgically or presented in

a series of flickering images originating in a distant time and place made increasingly (in)accessible through a process of mediation that obfuscates far more than it clarifies through a discourse of easily digestible and ambiguous words and phrases like 'terrorist', 'Osama', and 'Weapons of Mass Destruction'. It is perhaps fitting, then, that the lyrics to the music being mixed during the 'blue room' sequence expresses the romantic desire to be transported 'together… soul to soul' to a magical 'promised land'. Thus, despite the array of war films mentioned by Robert's teacher, that with which *The Great Ecstasy of Robert Carmichael* has the most in common with is Stanley Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket*. In their aesthetic and critical sensibilities, both films deploy narrative strategies intended to prevent audiences from succumbing to the illusion that what they are witnessing is in any way intended as representational reality. Rather, Kubrick and Clay create cinematic experiences that allow for more expansive, self-conscious critiques of the motivation for, and the proliferation of, psychological and physical violence in a culture dominated by images, including motion pictures. While *Full Metal Jacket* achieves these ends largely through the use of direct address, a strategy that Thomas Clay avoids, the debt that *The Great Ecstasy of Robert Carmichael* owes to Kubrick's postmodern riff on war (and war movies) is most apparent in a comparison of the long shots with which the respective films end. As Robert, Joe, and Ben walk into the sunrise after an extended bout of carnage, the reference to Kubrick's weary soldiers marching off into the flaming sunset while singing the theme from *The Mickey Mouse Club* (another idealised 'promised land' of unfettered capitalist consumption) is hard to overlook.

The influence of Kubrick upon Clay is further evidenced when one considers the lengthy homage to *A Clockwork Orange* that dominates much of *The Great Ecstasy of Robert Carmichael*'s final fifteen minutes. Fueled by a plethora of chemicals and motivated by a combination of envy, rage and a virulent despair over the steady realisation that the economic divisions that define Newhaven's social hierarchy are in all likelihood far too wide to overcome. Robert, Joe and Ben wage a three-person class war on the local signifiers of unattainable wealth, chef Abbott and his glamorous wife, Monica. 'Do you think you're ever going to own a car like that?' Joe asks, gesturing towards Monica's Porsche when Ben and Robert initially balk at his plan to break into the wealthy couple's secluded residence and rob them. 'Cunts like this

have been ripping you off since the day you were fucking born. To them we're just a spot on the fucking windscreen just waitin' to get wiped off.' Like Alex and his 'droogs' in Kubrick's screen adaptation of Anthony Burgess' dystopian vision of an England populated by disenfranchised youth and precariously teetering on the brink of totalitarianism, Robert, Joe and Ben take the wealthy couple by surprise, their yearning to merely flee with money and jewels giving way to baser desires for power in the face of their own powerlessness.

Cinematographically, *The Great Ecstasy of Robert Carmichael* closely approximates the visual grammar at work in Kubrick's depiction of Alex and company's memorable attack on the subversive writer and his wife, a particularly unsettling sequence that contributed to *A Clockwork Orange* being taken out of circulation Great Britain and that reintroduced the song, 'Singin' In the Rain' to a new generation of film-goers. Jonathan and Monica Abbott are physically dragged through their home, and Monica is raped by each of the intruders in full view of her husband, who, like the writer in Kubrick's film, is bound, gagged and forced to watch. At one point early in the prolonged sexual assault, Clay places the camera at floor level, strategically recalling the low angle photography Kubrick deploys as the writer is forced to 'viddy well' the surprise intruders abusing his wife. However, unlike Kubrick's low-angle shots, which are established – through shot–reverse shot editing – as conforming in part to the beaten writer's POV, Clay's camera placement reveals both Monica (in the foreground) and the battered, trussed-up chef (in the background). Thus, while Kubrick aligns his viewers' perspective with that of the assaulted writer, Clay locates the audience as both victim, in that our angle of vision approximates – albeit in reverse – Jonathan's, and voyeur, in that the spectator's gaze is definitely not intended as an absolute surrogate for the sightline of a character compelled against his will to watch what he does not want to see.

Consequently, Clay ups the ontological ante in this homage to Kubrick's infamous meditation on violence's scopophilic allure. Through a *mise-en-scène* explicitly arranged to portray violence as paradoxically unpleasant (it causes physical pain to the recipient) and visually compelling (we are, after all, voluntarily watching it), Clay appeals to his audience's prurient instincts even as he raises the spectre of their complicity in the tacit acceptance and mass consumption of media(ted) violence. In this sense, Clay's strategy

visually echoes the sentiments of the film critic Serge Daney who, in his famous essay on the social and political implications of aestheticized violence, writes: 'To Lacan's formula "Do you want to watch? Then watch this[,]" there was already the response of "Has it been recorded? Well then I have to watch it," even and especially when "it" was painful, intolerable, or completely invisible.'[11] Through his homage to *A Clockwork Orange*, then, Clay uses overt intertextuality (between two films/artifacts within a popular mode of mediation) to mediate/convey to his audience a meta-cinematic reflection of the very economies of mediation that inform the proliferation of violence in its most conspicuous and inconspicuous forms. In a patently filmic moment that functions in large part through the play of artifice that has long pervaded the history of cinema, Clay accomplishes a task that Colin MacCabe, in his discussion of 'realism' in cinema, understands as an imperative for filmmakers:

> The filmmaker must draw the viewer's attention to his or her relation to the screen in order to make him or her 'realize' the social relations which are being portrayed. Inversely, one could say that it is in the 'strangeness' of the social relations displayed which draws the viewer's attention to the fact of watching a film. It is at the moment that an identification is broken, becomes difficult to hold, that we grasp in one and the same moment both the relations that determine that identity and our relation to its representation.[12]

Clay's film by turns allows audiences to forget that they are watching a film and reminds them of the medium's artifice, forging and breaking 'identification' in ways that require us to realign our 'social relation' to the images on the screen.

The vicious rape and murder of Monica Abbott likewise furthers the economic and political critique suffusing virtually every frame of *The Great Ecstasy of Robert Carmichael*. If, as I suggest above, we understand Robert, Joe and Ben's attack upon the celebrity chef and his pregnant wife as a kind of class war in miniature, with the teenagers' actions motivated by an awareness of the insurmountable social and economic inequities slowly evaporating their hopes for a better future, then the events that transpire in the

Abbott home are clearly intended as far more than mere 'shock tactics' mobilised to sell tickets and generate hype. The violent acts portrayed may indeed be considered 'extreme' when compared to the content of most contemporary films, but a closer reading of these brutal actions reveals a strikingly nuanced deliberation upon the politics of violence in late capitalist culture.

Consider, for example, three movements within the larger symphony of violence enacted during this notorious sequence. In the first of these, after Joe and Ben have each raped Monica, Robert stands above the chef's traumatised wife. His expression is deliberately ambiguous. Is he excited? Bored? Numb? Clay cross-cuts between a medium close-up of Robert from a slightly low angle and an extreme high-angle close-up, presumably from Robert's POV, of Monica prone upon her living room carpet, breathing laboriously. The lack of matching shots in this cross-cutting eradicates Monica's gaze from the scenario, thus aligning the audience's view so that it approximates a perspective akin to that of one of the perpetrators; or, at the very least, positions the spectator within the role of a witness who is ultimately complicit in the violence occurring on screen through the very act of spectatorship. Soon after Robert disrobes and mounts Monica, Joe, who from the film's earliest scenes is established as the most aggressive and domineering of the trio, pushes Robert off Monika and proceeds to rape her again. This action, similar to that of an alpha dog maintaining supremacy within its pack, illustrates one of the best-acknowledged traits of individuals participating in a cultural and political economy predicated upon the importance of economic status and social stratification. In his exploration of the role of violence and desire in contemporary capitalist culture, Slavoj Žižek makes the following claim when investigating how capitalism compels people obsessively (and subconsciously) to desire not only what they don't have, but also what they already possess and yet see other's trying to obtain:

> The problem with human desire is that, as Lacan put it, it is always 'desire of the Other' in all senses of that term: desire for the Other, desire to be desired by the Other, and especially desire for what the Other desires. This last makes envy, which includes resentment, constitutive components of human desire… [13]

It is this 'envy' and 'resentment' that motivates Joe to advocate breaking into the Abbott residence in the first place, and it is these 'constitutive components of human desire' that drive him to usurp Robert the moment he notices that Robert is empowering himself, and potentially enjoying himself, at the expense of Monica and the class difference she symbolises for many of Newhaven's residents.

The second movement takes place when Robert, shoved aside by the domineering Joe, acknowledges that he once again has been assigned a subordinate position within a social hierarchy that disturbingly parallels the larger cultural logics reinforcing widening class differences within capitalist nations generally, and the community of Newhaven specifically. Like the town's exploited labourers, Robert becomes increasingly aware of his social impotence. His response, enacted through a series of grotesque mediations, leads directly to the sequence's third movement, in which Thomas Clay substitutes stock footage of World War II battles in the place of a literal representation of physical aggression. Enraged to the point of psychosis, Robert desperately struggles to reassert a semblance of individual power by grabbing a wine bottle and, after ordering Joe and Ben to hold Monica Abbott's legs apart, drops to his knees and repeatedly plunges the bottle's neck into her vagina. Still not satisfied, Robert smashes the bottle on the floor and grabs a small sword–like object hanging decorously on the living room wall. As Robert stares contemplatively at the phallic blade, Joe and Ben react with obvious, if fleeting, trepidation. 'Oh man, Robert…I don't know,' Ben says before he, like Joe, ultimately obeys Robert's command to 'pull her fucking legs apart!' In a visual strategy reminiscent of Pier Paolo Passolini's decision to lens many of the most sadistic sequences in *Salo o le 120 giornate de Sodoma* (1975) in long shot, Clay frames the violation that follows in an extreme high angle shot reminiscent of surveillance footage if the camera were mounted near the ceiling of one of the room's furthest corners.

As Robert thrusts his arms forward, the blade–like object arcing downward towards its target, Clay cuts to a short montage of World War II footage. Exploding bombs hurtle debris towards an ashen sky; a burning fighter jet spins out of control. The stock footage culminates with a well–known medium close up of Winston Churchill smiling as he bites down on a cigar and holds up two fingers in a gesture of victory. By punctuating the film's

most brutal moment with filmic reminders of Britain's lost glory, Clay temporarily removes his viewers from the visceral immediacy of the attack on the Abbotts to further advance the film's consideration of the extent to which the social conditions informing human relations result from a significant, sustained connection to a comprehensible historical past. In keeping with the depiction of the class project and the repeated presence of television broadcasts of the most recent invasion of Iraq, Clay deploys these scratchy black and white images of Britain's former military glory to engage with the theme of an increasingly expansive – and potentially destructive – ahistoricism. For the characters in Clay's film, the understanding of one's position within a larger historical, national or communal continuum resides almost exclusively in a system of mediated images bereft of context – a series of visual signifiers that circulate without even the remotest pretext of adhering to a coherent or meaningful system of signification.

Furthermore, this moment of extreme phallic violence culminates a theme of masculinity as a fragile construct imagined to be collapsing within a culture informed by both economic precarity and vast income disparity. In the roomy confines of the Abbott's fashionable home, class and gender anxieties collide in a brutal display of ultra-violent, hyper-masculine aggression. In forcing the trussed-up husband to witness his wife's rape and murder, class rage finds its release through a battle for male dominance that apexes in the most extreme form of misogynist objectification possible – the reduction of a female human being to an object to be used and ultimately destroyed in a panicked display of male sexual dominance/hyper-potency.

Importantly, Clay follows this notorious sequence with a brief scene depicting several police officers discovering the corpse of the young woman assaulted in the 'blue room' scene. A shot–reverse shot edit reveals the young woman's body: a slit wrist at the end of an outstretched arm. Brief even in relation to the shots that precede and follow it, this cut away from the nightmare unfolding at the Abbott residence, rather than removing us from the aftermath of a grotesquely violent scene, further underscores the destructive consequences of male aggression and sexual violence by begging the viewer to consider both assaults as not only linked narratively, but ultimately as variations on a very disturbing theme.
Finally, as Joe repeatedly stabs the utterly drained and heart-

broken Jonathan and leaves him to bleed out onto the floor, the back of the chef's head beating an involuntary staccato rhythm against the edge of his designer coffee table, it becomes clear that there will be no retribution for this attack, no revenge. *The Great Ecstasy of Robert Carmichael* concludes with the dawning of a new day that promises to be every bit as bleak and hopeless as the one before it. Consequently, the 'Great Ecstasy' of the title proves to be an ironic one at best. There is no orgasmic bliss, no spiritual or philosophical transcendence. In keeping with the effects of the synthetic party drug of the same name, this 'Ecstasy', like religion and mass media, is yet another illusion, another quick fix, another opiate for the masses.

Footnotes

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EMBATTLED BODIES, RESISTENT VOICES: INTERVIEWS WITH THREE RAPE-REVENGE FILMMAKERS

Conducted by Alexandra Heller-Nicholas

Abstract

Whether in terms of on-screen representation or the identity of the director behind the camera, the gendered body lies at the heart of discourse surrounding rape-revenge films. For the second edition of *Rape-Revenge Films: A Critical Study* (McFarland, 2021), the author emailed three very different filmmakers about three very different films, but all linked through the range of ways they engage with the rape-revenge trope. Featured here are interviews with Peter Strickland about his 2009 film *Katalin Varga*, Karen Lam about *Evangeline* (2013), and Sam Ashurst about *A Little More Flesh* (2020). The interviewees reflect on a range of subjects, including production histories, their own relationship to the trope, and broader social and cultural attitudes to sexual violence.

Introduction

It's hard to think of any cinematic trope other than rape-revenge that demonstrates the idea that bodies can be battlegrounds. And while predominantly those bodies are those of women, it is not always the case. What remains true, however, is that those bodies in this context are always emphatically gendered. But the body-battleground of rape-revenge transcends mere plot mechanics, and in recent years in particular questions surrounding the gendered body of the director behind the camera has become a subject of almost equal critical investigation. What does it mean when a man makes a rape-revenge film? What does it mean when a *woman* makes a rape-revenge film?

These questions have dominated my recent engagement with rape-revenge. In 2011, I published my first book with US publisher McFarland, *Rape-Revenge Films: A Critical Study*. In the decade that followed, to say that the conversation around this controversial category went through dramatic shifts feels like an understatement; particularly in light of the discourse spawned from the #MeToo movement that in the mainstream media focused on the film industry due to the centrality of once-revered Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein, rape-revenge felt almost perfectly suited as a forum upon which broader anxieties surrounding gendered violence and screen culture could be

explored. Releasing a heavily updated second edition of my book in 2021, then, it was important for me to turn to filmmakers themselves and explore their own personal and professional relationships with rape-revenge. While I quoted from these email interviews in the book, until now they have not been published as a whole, and with the permission and co-operation of these filmmakers I am therefore delighted that *Cine-Excess* have found a home for the full text. Representing a range of tonal engagements with rape-revenge, generic frameworks, budgets and national contexts, the three interviews that follow primarily concern Peter Strickland's *Katalin Varga* (2009), Karen Lam's *Evangeline* (2013), and Sam Ashurst's *A Little More Flesh* (2020). We would like to express our gratitude to Peter, Karen and Sam for allowing us to reproduce these interviews.

RAPE-REVENGE FILM 1: AN INTERVIEW WITH KAREN LAM ON *EVANGELINE* (2013)


Director Karen Lam

Canadian filmmaker Karen Lam's *Evangeline* (2013) – and the short film that predates it, *Doll Parts* (2011) – give a supernatural twist to the usual rape-revenge formula, turning it into something uniquely effective and thoroughly unforgettable. *Evangeline* follows the young woman of the film's title (played by Kat de Lieva) who had a tragic home life that she hopes to turn around once beginning university. With a great roommate, the future looks bright until the awkward Eva goes to her first campus party. She dresses up – cute as a button – and catches the eye of the handsome rich guys, with sparks seeming to fly. She hooks up with the handsomest of the group, who invites her to an isolated family cabin where she discovers that this exciting new romance is in fact a plan hatched by violent sadists; this guy and his friends genuinely hate women, and it is revealed that they lured Eva there to prove how gullible and stupid women are. They beat her to a pulp, leaving her for dead, and what follows from there is an unravelling list of gendered harassment and violence that culminates in her death at the hands of a serial killer based on the still-unidentified, real-life murderer responsible for Canada's notorious 'Highway of Tears' killings. It's only when Kat comes back as an avenging spirit – focused not just on avenging what happened to her, but protecting and seeking vengeance for all women – that Evangeline flourishes as a powerful rape-revenge film, using and reimagining the key ingredients to speak to real-life horrors.

Alexandra Heller-Nicholas: *Evangeline* is such an intriguing film in terms of how strategically you map rape as part of a broader ecosystem (for want of a better term) of gendered violence. I revisited the film again recently and I had it in my head that she was raped much earlier in the film than I remember, and I was so impressed by how much nuance you have in there regarding the different 'shapes' gendered violence and abuse can take. I'd love to hear your thoughts on this!

Karen Lam: In so many rape-revenge films, the rape seems to be the film's centrepiece – as if it is the most enticing thing about

the film, and I actively chose to make the rape scene a catalyst for her transformation. To me, it was about revenge more than the rape, which is an act of violence and domination for me. The challenge was always about de-sexualizing the act and make it much more about attempted dominance. Where I put the camera, what images I showed, her reactions versus his, were vital to my process. I wouldn't film a rape scene for the sake of it, unless I felt like I had something to bring to the discussion.

There's obviously a strong relationship between *Doll Parts* and what you do in *Evangelin*e, but it is expanded and goes in a really interesting new direction. Leaping off from this point, can you tell me about the real-life horror story that inspired the earlier short and how you creatively 'processed' that into the context of a supernatural horror film? How would you describe the relationship between *Doll Parts* and *Evangeline*?

Doll Parts was a pivotal film for me: I had just finished my first feature film, *Stained* (2010), and after a rather brutal reception, I needed to find out if I even wanted to continue on as a filmmaker. A distributor told me that I was incapable of filming sexual violence, based on what he saw in my feature, and if I couldn't 'go there' then I had no business being in the industry. I remember that meeting and feeling like I had been kicked in the stomach.

The genesis of the short film came when I was in Hong Kong, visiting my grandmother for the last time before she passed. She didn't recognise me at that point in her illness, but spent every night arguing with the demons in her head. I think I felt the veil between our worlds lift at that time, although I don't know if I knew it at the time. I came up with the broken doll image in Hong Kong and the storyline fell into place.

When it came to adapting *Doll Parts* into the feature film, *Evangeline*, I did a lot more research. The Highway of Tears is a northern highway in my province of British Columbia where many young women have gone missing from hitchhiking over decades. And there was the serial killer Robert Pickton, who was also preying on young female sex workers in Vancouver, and it affected our Aboriginal community extensively. The idea of their ghosts and spirits haunting our forests where I assume their bodies have been left, and building up a mythology of these restless spirits is an

amalgam of First Nations and Japanese mythology. Our northern communities also housed Japanese families during the internment of World War II, so it seemed to be a natural and organic fit between the two.

Some of the most striking images in *Evangeline* are of the abstracted, internal 'prison' (I am not sure I am describing that properly, so feel free to clarify my words here!). How important was it to make tangible her inner life in terms of the film's broader themes?

The internal prison is an idea I took from Asian mythology. I have no idea where I read it now, maybe it was an issue of Neil Gaiman's *Sandman*, but that purgatory would take place in a windowless, doorless cell. In my mind, I had pictured a mansion where rooms and rooms of these restless spirits would wait for their penance, hearing only the sounds of their own heartbeats and haunted by their own inner demons.

The room sometimes looked like the cabins that I read about internment camps, but eventually, we settled on a kind of cell block with a single chair. It was the perfect place to deal with the rape scene, where I wanted to symbolically show how we detach from the reality of our life, from violence and can go 'inside'. The key was always that I wanted to be with our heroine, with Evangeline, wherever her mind went, regardless of what was happening in her so-called real world.

***Evangeline* is a film that definitely holds rape/gendered violence and revenge at its core, but it's not what people might usually think of when they hear the often-disparaged term "rape-revenge film." How do you see the film in relation to that (very explosive) label?**

I did choose to do a rape-revenge film, and wanted to make sure that there was more to the genre than the conventional. To me, being a feminist horror filmmaker at my core, it's using the conventional as a springboard. I wanted the film to be a reaction to the genre, to add another voice and perspective to a well-trodden trope.

I love how the film has a very strong horror core; what is it about the intersection of horror, gendered violence

(not just rape, but all the horrors Evangeline endures) and revenge that gels so much for you as both a filmmaker and as a viewer?

Horror has such a narrow definition in cinematic terms, but in literature, genre fiction can take so many other forms. My favourite kind of film is one that doesn't fit neatly into any box but one that transforms in the storytelling. I love the images and themes in horror filmmaking, I love how experimental I can be within the genre, but I also love when you can add elements that aren't strictly horror. We can discuss big social ideas, world religion, history, and psychology and make everything fit, and hopefully, we can entice viewers to watch without dreading the message. Also, it's the only genre where I can leave on an unhappy ending and it's expected.

How much is too much? Is there any film in this category that you've seen and just thought 'NO, this has gone too far'? Have you seen anything that would fall under a rape-revenge banner – even if to deconstruct the formula – since you made Evangeline that's got under your skin, for better and/or for worse?

In researching *Evangeline*, I watched two films called *(The) Dead Girl*: [*The Dead Girl*, 2006] was made by a female filmmaker [Karen Moncrieff] and was about a murdered young woman who was caught hitchhiking by a serial killer and told in a series of short stories from different perspectives. It was deeply humanistic and challenging. The other [*Deadgirl*, 2008] was made by two male filmmakers [Marcel Sarmiento and Gadi Harel], about some young men who find a beautiful corpse in an abandoned hospital and proceed to rape the dead body. It had the opposite effect on me. These two films bookended my own version and I was inspired by one, and revolted by the other. I think I owe a debt to both.

Out of curiosity, have you had much reaction to the film from rape survivors? This is something I find personally fascinating because so many survivors have spoken to me about my book [*Rape-Revenge Films: A Critical Study*, 2nd edition 2021] since I first published it. I often wonder if filmmakers have the same experience.

I have actually had incredible feedback from women's shelters and rape centres who showed *Doll Parts* and *Evangeline* to some of their members. I think it's clear to those women that my intent was not about exploitation but about exploration, and taking on the story from the perspective of the victim. She isn't the catalyst by which the male hero sets about on his journey, but it's about surviving and fighting for herself. To me, there's nothing more powerful than a story about a woman who is fighting for her own salvation, not just her family or loved ones. It's important to show that women need to fight – not just to save the people they love – but for themselves.

RAPE-REVENGE FILM 2: AN INTERVIEW WITH PETER STRICKLAND ON *KATALIN VARGA* (2009)


Director Peter Strickland

While *Katalin Varga* (2009) is not commonly discussed in terms of the rape-revenge film category, this approach sheds fascinating light on the debut feature film by internationally acclaimed auteur Peter Strickland (whose subsequent credits include 2012's *Berberian Sound Studio*, 2014's *The Duke of Burgundy*, 2018's *In Fabric* and 2021's *Flux Gourmet*). The film follows its eponymous protagonist (Hilda Péter) after she is thrown out of her home by Zsigmond (László Mátray) when he learns he is not the biological father of their child, Orbán (Norbert Tankó). As the film unfolds, it is revealed that Orbán was conceived as the result of a rape at the hands of Antal (Tibor Pálffy). The film follows Katalin as she travels towards Antal to confront him, with tragic consequences. Aside from its exquisite pastoral landscapes and low-key, even slow tone, *Katalin Varga* is marked by the *absence* of a rape scene; rather, the film's climactic revelation takes place on a relatively quiet boat trip where Katalin verbally accounts the assault to Antal and his wife. Strickland's thoughts on this approach to the material – and his reflections on rape-revenge more broadly – were discussed when I spoke to him while revising my 2011 book *Rape-revenge Films: A Critical Study* and included in the 2021 publication of the updated version. This is the first time the interview has been published in full.

Alexandra Heller–Nicholas: Considering the low-brow reputation of rape-revenge film, what made you decide to pursue a film that hinges on these two elements in a way so outside the usual cliches of the trope in *Katalin Varga*? I, of course, wouldn't be the first to describe the film as a post rape-revenge film (or even an *anti*-rape-revenge film); I know you are enormously film literate in terms of both art and trash cinema – how did you creatively process the presence of rape-revenge (or even the spectre of rape-revenge is a better way to phrase it) from development through to the final product?

Peter Strickland: I was always attracted to the idea of taking genres regardless of their merit in the critical canon and seeing if it's possible to go somewhere different with it. With *Katalin Varga* and rape-revenge, it's more a case of changing the balance of

emphasis, so we are focusing less on the rape and revenge and more on other things that are not so foregrounded in some of those films. In a way, *Katalin Varga* mostly exists between the 'rape' and 'revenge', but it's still very much a rape-revenge film. I was much more interested in the revenge side of things, specifically the lead-up to the act when you're dealing with that impotent rage. For me, what really defines the atmosphere of the film is impotent rage and that feeling of knowing you're on your own when it comes to dealing with trauma and pursuing justice. The music by Steven Stapleton and Geoff Cox (who co-wrote Lucile Hadžihalilović's *Earwig* (2021)) was also a big part of the sense of foreboding and the overall cloud that hangs over the film. I got permission to use it very early on, so I could write the script to it.

The scene on the boat is really such a powerful scene not only on its own merits (it's beautifully shot), but in terms of it being so thoroughly unique in how this sort of revelation is usually delivered in the more orthodox terrain of quote-unquote 'rape-revenge' film, I am fascinated in hearing your thoughts on why precisely that information was delivered in that way?

I was trying to see if by withholding visual information, the audience might compensate more in their heads. Paradoxically, we all know that words can sometimes have more impact than images. I remember a woman I was staying with in Sarajevo unexpectedly telling me about the siege back in 2003. I wanted to record her talking about local recipes and we misunderstood each other. It would've felt insensitive to ask about the siege, but maybe she assumed that was what most Western tourists wanted to know. Initially, I didn't understand why she was getting so distressed over a recipe, but then it dawned on me that she was recounting her experiences over those horrors. I didn't understand anything, but hearing the cracks in her voice and seeing her face affected me far more than the images of brutality on the news back in the 90s.

When we shot the film in 2006, to feature a talking head was one of the most passé crimes against cinema, which made me want to be confrontational with it. To trap the audience with that kind of eye contact and not let them go. The crew could be quite rebellious due to their low fees and had no hesitation in telling me if something was rubbish. I remember some of the crew on the neighbouring boat complaining how boring the scene was, which

put Hilda off. She was very sensitive to that kind of criticism and believed that what she was doing was boring. I had to really coax her into doing it and she managed to go into herself and ignore everyone and everything around her. We spent so long arguing that by the time we got around to filming, it started to rain midway through the take, which looked ridiculous (in a bad way) and unrealistic. I was about to call 'cut', especially as we were running low on film rolls, only I could see Hilda was going even further into this reverie of hers. It almost looked as if she was in a trance and the best thing I could do was to stay out of her way. Not calling 'cut' was the best decision I made on that film and the scene felt very powerful even though we had to dub it a year later after we lost the sound. When I wrote it, someone suggested I use flashbacks to the attack within that lake scene, but that would've undermined everything I wanted to convey.

How important was it that Katalin's journey ended the way it did?

The injustice was vital to the story, as that is a reality all too often. Maybe it's cathartic for some people to see a film that recognises injustice and the randomness of death. There was never any doubt that Katalin had to die and I was very much thinking along the lines of ballads and tragedies that employed that kind of inevitable trajectory. What's strange for me is the power of it, as we were so desensitised to that scene given how exhausted we were by the end of the shoot, which is when we shot it and also that Hilda and Sebastian (who played the assailant) were friends, which somehow shielded me from its brutality.

Male violence and abuse (particularly paternal violence) really seems to bookend the film, starting with Katalin's husband rejecting her and Orban and triggering her journey, and then the revelation about Antal and Orban's paternity. Because Katalin is such a strong and central character (obviously – the film is named after her!), I'm fascinated to hear your thoughts about how so much of her life is dominated by men – not just her husband and Antal, but even Orban himself.

Sadly, it's a universal truth that the vast majority of violence in the world comes from men. I don't want to come across as a man-

basher and I know that fact shouldn't diminish the impact of female violence even if it's much less common. The script was always set in a patriarchal culture even before I decided which country to shoot in. It should be emphasised that I wrote the script in English in some mythical, 'nowhere' land and once I found actors and locations, I tailored the writing to that place. I wasn't making any comment on Romania specifically even though the film is set there. That kind of patriarchal community can be found everywhere. Even though I tend to write female protagonists, I'm very interested in masculine power and how that manifests itself in different types of behaviour. Women who grow up in those environments can also sometimes adopt those patterns of behaviour even without realising it and Katalin is probably an example of that even if it's as a means of survival.

The seduction and murder of Gergely is such an interesting moment, and feels like both a recognition but also a subversion of the 'woman rape avenger as seductress' motif that is so typical of more orthodox grindhouse/horror/exploitation examples of the trope. Am I overthinking this?

You're not overthinking it at all, as we're almost giving the audience what they expect up until Gergely's death. That is the classical narrative, where the victim picks her assailants off one by one. The counter-revenge that follows, however, is what was more interesting for me and is where the film takes the wrong turning. I was interested in the consequences of vigilante justice, as no matter how repellent Gergely is, the contagion of suffering will be transferred to his kids when they'll be told that their father isn't ever coming home again. I was interested in that link from 'evil' to innocence and that an assailant is probably someone's son, sibling or father. It's not my job to decide on what kind of justice Gergely or any other character in the film should face. All I can do is show the audience what is at stake for everyone and look beyond the acts of brutality.

We tend to discuss cinema still very much in terms of national cinemas, but the production history of *Katalin Varga* really challenges such easy discursive frameworks. How do you conceive these frameworks functioning – or perhaps not functioning – in terms of this movie? Is it a Romanian film? A British film? A

European film? A transnational film? Or something that transcends all of this?

There was confusion as to the film's nationality upon release. It could be British because of its writer/director and financing, Romanian because of its location (and co–financing) or Hungarian since it mostly stars ethnic Hungarians in Transylvania and is in the Hungarian language apart from three small scenes where Romanians speak in Romanian or when a Hungarian speaks Romanian to a Romanian. I've never really been that bothered about these things and always saw European culture as something much more all-embracing, especially now, in the face of Brexit. There are countless trans-national films if one thinks of Luis Buñuel or Jess Franco as just two examples. I haven't given it a great deal of thought since the film came out. I'm half-British and half-Greek and never really agonised over my identity even though there are huge differences between those two cultures.

How much is too much? Is there any film in this category that you've seen and just thought NO, this has gone too far? Have you seen anything that would fall under a rape-revenge banner – even if to deconstruct the formula – since you made *Katalin Varga* that's got under your skin, for better and/or for worse?

My limits differ in terms of what I can and can't tolerate watching and can and can't tolerate making. I actually haven't seen that much in the genre, but rightly or wrongly, I'm a great admirer of films such as Abel Ferrara's *Ms. 45* (1980) or Gaspar Noé's *Irreversible* (2000). There is this very intense, caustic energy in those films that is very unique. Limits are very difficult to quantify, as a lot depends on the intentions of filmmakers, which vary widely. I do have a problem with filmmakers that want to titillate an audience with a rape scene, but even with that in mind, films such as Shaun Costello's *Waterpower* (1976) are so deranged that you somehow get dragged into its nightmare logic even though you know it was probably made to get people off, which actually makes it even more nightmarish. There is always that very grey area between any given film placing the audience in a nightmare or fantasy and that line is impossible to delineate given that it's different with each viewer. I personally have no interest in titillating an audience with sexual violence. Titillation in film is fine, but only within the boundaries of consenting adults. The

problem is that we as filmmakers don't get to control how audiences process and use our images or words or sounds even if we're trying to be honourable and show sexual violence in a responsible manner.

RAPE-REVENGE FILM 3: AN INTERVIEW WITH SAM ASHURST ON A LITTLE MORE FLESH (2020)


Director Sam Ashurst

The very fact of including Sam Ashurst's outrageous *A Little More Flesh* (2020) in an article about rape-revenge films contains a spoiler of sorts; in large part, the vengeance in question provides the deeply satisfying yet unequivocally perverse twist in the tail of this very dark horror comedy. Assuming the reader has seen it, then (it is streaming on TromaNow for those unfortunate enough to have missed it), what follows is a deep dive into the film with Ashurst who helps unpack its very funny, deeply metatextual and ideologically not–shy–at–all examination of sexual violence, harassment and discrimination.

The setup is as simple as it is effective; the film's main character is a filmmaker called Stanley Durall (James Swanton on camera, with Ashurst providing Stanley's voice uncredited) who we *almost* solely hear off-camera as he records an audio commentary to accompany a home entertainment release of his controversial first film, *God's Lonely Woman*. We learn early on the reason for this controversy; the two women who appeared in the film – Candice Embers (Hazel Townsend) and the star of *God's Lonely Woman*, Isabella Dotterson (Elf Lyons, who co-produced the film with Ashurst) – would die by suicide, clearly as a result of horrendous sexual harassment and abuse. In both Candice and Isabella's case, this culminates in rape; statutory rape in the case of 14-year-old Candice who Stanley seems to disgracefully interpret with shocking casualness as being in a consensual sexual relationship with the film's adult cinematographer, and in the case of Isabella, a gang–rape at the hands of two dangerous non-professional actors Stanley hired for the film and explicitly instructed to assault Isabella for the film's climactic scene.

As a character study, Stanley is a masterful demonstration of someone being given enough rope to hang themselves. As a horror-comedy, *A Little More Flesh* has the far-too-rare ability to be both horrific and very, very funny, albeit in a deeply twisted sense that contains perhaps surprising ideological potency. I spoke to Sam about the film when I was updating my 2011 book *Rape-revenge Films: A Critical Study* (McFarland), which was published in 2021 – below is my interview with Sam, reproduced in full for the first time.

Alexandra Heller-Nicholas: #MeToo and the 'Weinstein climate' feel like they play a significant role here in the topicality of the film, without ever becoming preachy or didactic. Was this a conscious thing to tap into, or was it really more of a 'soaking up the zeitgeist' vibe?

Sam Ashurst: The original idea came from working around technical limitations. The film was going to be self–funded, on a very tiny budget, so the plan was to shoot it and edit myself, so I could pay the actors and feed them. But I knew I couldn't do the sound. If I was going to make a film with just me as the crew, I couldn't hold a camera and a boom microphone at the same time.

That's where the concept of delivering a narrative through an audio commentary came from, something I could do in a booth later on. Once I had that idea, the thought of using the driving force of a commentary – to analyse past choices and behaviours – as a weapon against the person delivering the commentary felt like a strong starting point. My character would revisit an old film, and reveal something about himself.

I also wanted the film to have a *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974) feel, believe it or not, and I've always loved the way Tobe Hooper used real news stories to inspire the feel of that film. So, it was very much a conscious decision, I was looking to the news for inspiration in the same way he did.

Weinstein was in the news, and my mum – who was an actress and model in the 60s and 70s – had told me about similar experiences she'd had with agents. So there was a personal connection there. She'd also been spiked with LSD in the 60s, so that was a direct inspiration.

The 70s are seen as a different time, and they were – a lot of this kind of stuff was a lot more open, you had Jodorowsky talking about raping his actress for real in *El Topo*. Whether he did or not is disputed – he's said he made the comments to shock the interviewer, but the point is, women were so objectified he felt safe to say that.

All of this was swirling in my mind when I decided to create the most monstrous director of all time – I've described him as the ultimate movie monster – who would revisit a 70s film, reveal his

dark side with no remorse, and get punished, like the people who are still being exposed today.

That's when Japanese horror influences started creeping in – this idea that people get punished for past transgressions – and I arrived at the decision to have the film haunted by the people he'd hurt. He wouldn't see them, but the audience would (or would they? There are hidden ghosts no-one's spotted yet). So, films like *Ringu / Ring* (1998) and *Kairo / Pulse* (2001) are really obvious influences.

Ghosts haunting the film would allow me to have really unique jump scares. Usually, with a jump scare, the music and framing let you know one's coming. I wanted my audience to feel tension throughout the film – like a jump could come at any time. It's part of the aim of the experience of *A Little More Flesh*, to make the audience feel as tense as if they were in the actual presence of this malignant man. If you were in a room with him, you wouldn't be able to relax, I wanted the audience to feel that.

Figuring the female voice: *A Little More Flesh* (2020)

The flip side to this is the question of female agency and voice, of which in literal terms there is at first seemingly very little in the film, but the supernatural premise allows enormous creative freedom with which to turn that on its head. When I first saw it I was reminded of the mute rape 'avengestress' figure that permeates rape-revenge history – from Thriller: *A Cruel Picture*

(1973) to *Ms. 45* (1981) and beyond – and in a way it felt to me that you were really pushing this ideas to the limit by having her voice effectively drowned out by an extremely over-chatty man (he's so perfectly unbearable; again, well done!). So there's a few things here I guess – agency and gender, the supernatural framework, and voice, and how all of these relate to the genuinely quite tragic and shocking story we hear through the voice of the villain himself.

So, there were two versions of this script. The first version was way too dark, Stanley Durall was just so horrendous from the start, there was no real journey – it was too much. And these people start out charming, before revealing their depravity, the first version really missed that key truth.

But, that draft did have a detail that stayed with me when I created Isabella's backstory – her grandmother was a silent film actress and Isabella's mum was conceived at a 'legendary fuck-party' and her dad could have been anyone from Howard Hughes to 'Fatty Arbuckle's favourite Coke bottle'. The point was to underline that this stuff has always been a part of Hollywood, it's embedded. The lines got cut, but I think both Elf and I saw Isabella as having that silent star energy, if that makes sense.

And there's a deeper level to her silence. Obviously, practically, we weren't going to hear her speak, but in the fake film itself, there are moments when she refuses to say her lines – she uses silence as a weapon, but it doesn't go well for her, it's not a useful tool. Only when she speaks, and takes over the narrative (literally, by supernaturally forcing Stanley out of the commentary booth, and into the silence of the film) can she use her power against this overbearing bully. Her power is in her voice, not in her silence.

That was one of the first ideas I had, actually – that the director would get pushed into the film and she would take over the commentary, to tell her own story – as so many people are doing now. It was in my original pitch to Elf, and in that pitch I talked about going into a lengthy torture sequence, with her doing the commentary over it, and she said 'Nah, I just want to cut his cock off'. And I said: 'Yes! Perfect!' So one of the greatest – some might say the greatest – ideas in *A Little More Flesh* came from Elf.

You have in my mind created the perfect #MeToo villain here; something about the structure of the film where he is literally the dominant voice seems to aggressively step beyond 'softer' ways men have dominated filmmaking ('the male gaze', etc.) that works so well in that he is the one who lets his own words bury him. Can you tell me a little about the novel commentary structure, what inspired you, and also about the character himself?

To create Stanley Durall, I was inspired by a lot of different things. His name is a play on a combination of Stanley Kubrick and Shelley Duvall. Not that I'm saying Kubrick was as bad as my character, I love Kubrick, but that legendarily difficult dynamic between Kubrick and Duvall when they made *The Shining* (1980) was essential for *A Little More Flesh*. I was pushing that to its furthest extreme, which is why there's the joke in there about Durall influencing Kubrick, and there's a specific shot that I lifted from *The Shining* that Kubrick technically could have lifted from *God's Lonely Woman*, which premiered before *The Shining* in the universe of the film. One of the fake producers is called 'Torrance Towns', there's a couple of references to *The Shining*.

Bizarrely (and I had no idea about this) the first time I met Elf's mum during the pre–production phase of the film, I was a bit nervous, because I'm from a working-class background, and Elf's family live in a very fancy house, but then she told me that she was at the premiere of *The Shining*, because her best friend had created the photo at the end of the film, and she'd also seen *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* at the cinema, and we connected on that level…

But, anyway, after the character had a name, I started doing research into these types of people. For a while, my YouTube recommendations were an absolute cess-pit. I was watching all of these red pill movement videos, manosphere stuff, and stuff about how to pick up women, reading books by these kinds of people, all to try to get into the head of someone who absolutely dehumanises women, hates them, and objectifies them. I also watched some interviews with directors of the period, to get some of the turns of phrase you hear in the film.

In terms of the actual construction of the commentary, we filmed

the fake movie first, *God's Lonely Woman*. We had an outline, detailing the men Isabella would encounter on her journey after she rejects Temptation, and what they'd put her through, but we improvised fake dialogue on the day (which we knew would never be heard). Then I edited as we went along, and I wrote the commentary script based on what we had.

Maybe the most difficult element of constructing Stanley – aside from recording the commentary itself, that was very, very hard, memorizing the script, getting exact timings right and still making it feel like it was being made–up as he went along, was very tough – but more difficult than that was making him feel relatively likeable at the start, or at least compelling – someone you could almost feel sorry for in those early stages, because he's so pathetic, before he fully reveals himself – to give him something resembling an arc, so the audience would go on the journey.

Getting that balance right was such a challenge, keeping his monstrous character consistent. He was based on people with narcissistic personality disorder, who can be charming to begin with, but they cannot accept that they are / were wrong, they have no empathy, and get off on cruelty: and these things can be their ultimate undoing, especially in the current climate of consequences.

Reconfiguring the vendetta format: *A Little More Flesh* (2020)

A Little More Flesh **clearly hinges on key acts of rape and revenge, but it is by no means a typical 'rape-revenge' film in how it is most broadly conceived. What are your thoughts on how the film relates to that broader category?**

It's not a typical rape-revenge film, but I do feel like it relates on a broader level. I really do believe that rape-revenge films can be a positive force for good. No right-minded person is pro-rape, obviously, but some people don't think about it as much as they should. I wanted this film to be a weapon against some of my audience, and catharsis for the rest (I'm not gendering that split, by the way). For me, the most powerful rape-revenge films deliver extreme discomfort, to represent trauma.

Sometimes that's through the rape scene itself; a contrast between cruel pleasure and extreme pain. But I wanted to do things a little differently. The only rape scene we show, neither person is getting pleasure, they're both marginalised people who are upset during, and afterwards. Then, at the end, we cut before we really get into the much–hyped 'final sequence'.

A Little More Flesh's discomfort comes through the intended omnipresent jump-scare tension, like someone walking home alone at night, who feels that constant terror until they arrive at their front door – our movie's ending is the metaphorical front door. Or the discomfort comes through a seemingly never-ending dance sequence, or a force-feeding scene that feels so real, or the constant stream of consciousness from Stanley, that you literally can't escape.

And then the frequent mentions of 'the final sequence' that got *God's Lonely Woman* banned – I wanted the audience to think 'what could that possibly be? What are we going to see here?' (and we're told it's half an hour long!). Then I wanted them to feel relief when it cuts, and we don't see the actual rape. But then we do see something extreme, with the tables turned.

I wanted to build and build to a moment that would make most people experience extreme catharsis, and make some people groan in discomfort. It was so satisfying to sit in the audience at the world premiere and hear both of those reactions. It worked! I'm glad it worked when you watched it too.

I believe the two most important emotions in rape-revenge films are discomfort and catharsis. The more extreme one is, the more powerful the other can be. I wanted to play with that balance, through the filmmaking itself.

I find it really interesting that rape-revenge is considered a low genre, because I think it's a feminist genre, one that can provide a voice for victims. It can also be a safe environment to process trauma. Yes, it's depicting a harrowing crime for 'entertainment', but so much of cinema does the same.

The hope is that the vast majority of people watching the film feel the catharsis of seeing a brutal monster dispatched brutally. But those who don't... well, they've had an experience too!

I don't expect you to be my therapist here, but any ideas why I delighted so much in this ending? Is this something you've seen in screenings of the film – like, I was literally *screaming* with laughter. I don't think I have ever enjoyed an act of vengeance so much.

Because of all the above, your personal reaction absolutely delights me. You don't know what it means to read that you enjoyed the act of vengeance that much.

My theory on why you reacted that way: you're an expert in the genre, and this film was made with those genre tropes in mind, embedded into every decision along the way – to subvert, but still deliver, under the surface. Both this and my first film are aimed at the conscious and subconscious minds of my audience, and some brains are more responsive than others!

Also, let's face it, Elf's idea that the target of the vengeance should be so symbolic of the crime is a significant part of the joyful reaction people have had. And Dan Martin's unbelievably realistic special effects, Elf's brilliant giddiness in the sequence, James Swanton's agonised reactions... it all combined perfectly, I couldn't be happier with it.

Tell me about the castration – was this always something that was going to be included?

I've talked a bit about this already, but some other facts (maybe not useful for the book, but may be of interest!): It took a long time to find the scissor prop, as I was determined we wouldn't cut across the penis, but up it (for maximum audience discomfort / catharsis), and you'd be surprised by how difficult it is to find scissors long enough for the task!

We filmed the effect on the very last day of production, and it was in the back of my mind the whole shoot – if it went wrong, or if I didn't capture it correctly, the whole film wouldn't work. Luckily, it all came together. But it was my most intense day during filming, by far.

The big thing I guess I've averted thus far is really core to what I think makes the film work so well: comedy. It's not a common approach to stories that incorporate rape and revenge to frame them in the context of a horror-comedy, but that is precisely what you do here, and very well indeed. This feels like quite a radical approach; how did this take shape in your mind from fruition to the end product? Were there other comedies or comic-toned films that either consciously or subconsciously inspired you to take this tonal approach to the subject matter, do you think?

My comedy past isn't something I talk about loads, but I actually met Elf doing stand-up comedy, and Dane. We were all part of the same scene. Going into stand-up, I'd researched the laughter impulse, and discovered some people believe laughter originated as a fear response, as a noise that acted as a warning when confronted with shock or surprise. So I used to do a character who was a psychedelic serial killer, who did deadpan observational comedy based on his very specific, very violent experiences. The logic was, if I scared people in comedy clubs, they'd laugh – and it worked. I made it to the final of the Leicester Square Theatre New Comedian of the Year Awards with that character.

So that mixture of fear and comedy has always been there for me, and I also thought this project could use a bit of cognitive dissonance – people are laughing, but what are they laughing at?

It's a spoonful of sugar – people are laughing, they're having a good time, then the film gets darker and darker, and more and more extreme, but the jokes still come... how does that affect the audience psychologically? How complicit are they? Some people laugh at Stanley, some people laugh *with* him – which side will that land them on the discomfort / catharsis scale?

So the film was cast with comedy in mind, everyone in the film is a comedian – except for James, who plays Stanley in the fake

film, and David Houston, who does experimental theatre and was Elf's partner at the time. I approached Elf first, and asked her to star and produce, putting her in charge of casting, so she'd be as comfortable and in control as possible. I didn't want her to feel peer pressure in this film at any point. I ultimately signed off on everyone, but I had no reason not to go with her first choices.

Elf and Hazel had met at the Philippe Gaulier Clown Workshop, so both of their physicalities were amazing. Dane had his own BBC3 series, and had been on Live at the Apollo, Rob tours an 'Evil Dead meets Elvis Presley' one–man musical, and Gabriel Thomson was a child star in the BBC sitcom *My Family*.

I always warn people that it isn't a traditional horror-comedy, it's more in-line with Chris Morris' work, who is a huge inspiration for me. His Channel 4 series *Jam* is an incredible, incredible creation. I didn't want people walking into this thinking they were getting a typical British horror-comedy!

HYBRIDITY AND TRANSGRESSION: THE ARCHI-SEXUAL POLITICS OF DARIO ARGENTO'S CINEMA

Émilie von Garan

Abstract

Focusing on the films *The Bird with the Crystal Plumage* (1970), *Deep Red* (1975) and *Tenebrae* (1982), which feature openly queer characters, this paper argues that director Dario Argento subtly disrupts 'conventional' and binary notions of gender without portraying transgressive identities, sexualities and bodies as sights and sites of horror. Instead, Argento imbues these characters with the same hybridity that regulates much of his worldbuilding. Turning to the body's relationship to architecture, this paper traces the contours of a mutually constitutive relationship between the built environment and queerness. Taking the history of body and gender analogies in architectural theory as a point of departure, this paper argues that Dario Argento disrupts heteronormative coding in architecture to dazzling effects, offering instead a pluralization of sex, desire and gender normativity within the built environment of his films. Using these characters, possible avenues to configure the affects – emotional and political – of queerness are clarified in a way that can account for the malleability of boundaries, whether they be physical, sexual or architectural.

Key words: queerness, sex, gender, architecture, hybridity, affect, transgression

Mapping the impossible spaces of murder: *Tenebrae* (1982)

The threat of becoming, its strangeness, its unpredictability, is embodied in architecture in the cinema of Italian horror auteur Dario Argento. The act of transgression and the production of difference happens by and through the representation of architecture in his films, in which space fulfils both practical and expressive functions. Architecture combines with or sometimes adapts to characters, playing a role in the formation of identity. This condition of hybridity expands beyond the built environment to the city, ultimately revealing the entanglements of bodies and architectures as products of continual transformation and translation that perpetually undermine logics of normalcy. In his films Argento defines a queer space that is determined through the dynamic relationships between design (functionality) and use (performativity). His establishment of this queer space is most apparent in three films, representing three key moments in his career: *The Bird with the Crystal Plumage* (1970), *Deep Red* (1975) and *Tenebrae* (1982). All three feature openly queer characters and also, understood in relation to the sociohistorical and cultural developments in Italy, key stages in his treatment of architecture as materialisations of queerness. In other words, through and by their use of prominent queer characters, these films are most effective in defining Argento's queer architecture.

Within the ever–expanding scholarship dedicated to Argento, gendered and sexual transgressions have remained a central object of study, often through engagements rooted in questions of violence, spectatorship and the gaze. Adam Knee remarks that Argento's film 'often forcefully confounds many of the generalizations about relations of gender, power, and spectatorship in the horror genre put forth in film studies'.[1] The gendered dynamics and transgressions in Argento's cinema unfold on both a narrative level and through architecture. Moving away from heteronormative understandings of the built environment, a queer theory of architecture offers a renewed entry point into Argento's films. When queerness and its representations are discussed, it is often to highlight the problematic nature of these representations, from their caricatural nature to their association with mental illness. Yet scholars such as Colette Balmain,[2] Xavier Mendik,[3] Adam Knee[4] and Marcia Landy,[5] among others, have opened up new avenues of reflection on the director's cult cinema. Indeed, while Argento's queer characters do occasionally fall victim to tropes and stereotypes, the director's commitment to include these characters in his films and to present them as a

matter of fact during a time in which explicit queer representation was rare, especially in a conservative country like Italy, is worthy of attention and in-depth consideration. As Knee suggests,

> Indeed, in historical, cinematic, and generic contexts hardly known for their acceptance of homosexuality and transsexuality, Argento offers us many images of sexual and gender variation which, even when not especially positive, are nevertheless surprisingly neutral; as a result, he establishes a framework within which mainstream assumptions may be thrown into doubt.[6]

These characters clarify possible avenues to configure the affects – emotional and political – of queerness in a way that can account for the malleability of boundaries, whether they be physical, sexual or architectural.

Queerness as a concept is purposely expansive and pliable, allowing it to be perpetually unfolding, rooted in becoming rather than being. As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick writes, queer refers to 'the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or *can't be* made) to signify monolithically'.[7] To think of queerness and architecture is to return to the latter's purest expression through the former's critical interrogation of normative conventions and expectations. A denaturalising project, to think of queer architecture is to think not of a 'natural given' but rather 'a historical construct', to repurpose Michel Foucault's writing on sexuality.[8] In its opposition to the normative and the binary, queerness embraces hybridity and transgression. For Judith Butler,

> If the term 'queer' is to be a site of collective contestation, the point of departure for a set of historical reflections and futural imaginings, it will have to remain that which is, in the present, never fully owned, but always and only redeployed, twisted, queered from a prior usage and in the direction of urgent and expanding political purposes.[9]

A queer body, be it human or non-human, is a body in perpetual

dialogue with the world. As such, queerness can be conceived of as a hybrid condition, albeit one rooted in a material and historical reality that at times contradicts its nature.

The tension between the inside and outside, inner and outer life, used to dazzling effect in the cinema of Argento, can be traced back to the inception of modern architectural theory in the Renaissance. In Western architectural history, starting from the first–century Roman architect Vitruvius and continued through the Renaissance into Modernity, the body constitutes an essential object and a source of ideal measure and proportion. Anthony Vidler defines architecture as a 'living organism' that, from Vitruvius to the present, has been understood as a body endowed with bodily or organic characteristics, sometimes both.[10] As architectural theorist Gerard Rey A. Lico points out, 'a transhistorical research [survey] on the history of architecture will reveal the presence of the body as an omnipresent canon and the image of the male body as the perfect earthly creation, the natural microcosm of universal harmonies'.[11] Yet it must be stressed that the body used as the basis for this lineage of body-architecture metaphors is distinctly male. Raluca Livia Niculae highlights the fact that, against as assumption of neutrality, the male body becomes the foundational 'form, through orders, hierarchies, symmetry, and proportion rules' of Western architectural systems.[12] Going through the richest symbolic and classic stages of the body-architecture analogies' history, one can assume that male anthropomorphism stems from and is deeply rooted in the Western canon in which 'the woman's figure is repressed and her unique qualities including motherhood are projected onto and substituted by the man's figure'.[13] In line with Judith Butler's ideas that binary relationships of gender and sex cannot automatically be assumed, stressing through her term performativity a conception of the body as hybrid, disrupting this male-centric body-system of architecture requires a queering not just of the body but also of the space, both its design and usage. This is the basis for the gendered performance of architecture that we see in Argento's cinema. This body of architecture, under the new regime of modernity, 'no longer serves to center, to fix, or to stabilize'. Vidler continues,

> Rather, its limits, interior or exterior, seem infinitely ambiguous and extensive; its forms, literal or metaphorical, are no longer confined to

> the recognizably human but embrace all biological existence from the embryonic to the monstrous; its power lies no longer in the model of unity but in the intimation of the fragmentary, the morselated, the broken.[14]

Argento embraces these qualities, putting forth a cinema that is both formalist and experimental, embracing excess in a way that is both reflective and reflexive of Italy's socio-cultural and historical structures. He establishes an uncanny correspondence between his characters and their urban environments, translating the crises of modernity on screen.

Inside out

From his first *giallo*, *L'uccello dalle piume di cristallo / The Bird with the Crystal Plumage*, Argento establishes a spatial practice that actively interrogates gender and sexuality. Early in the film, American writer and *flâneur* Sam Dalmas (Tony Musante), who lives in Rome with his girlfriend Julia (Suzy Kendall), witnesses an attempted murder in an art gallery. The mysterious assailant is thought to be an infamous serial killer. Sam's entrapment within the art gallery's glass doors reveals a narrative impotence, a moment of emasculation, that is soon revealed to be tied to Sam's potential queerness. His 'enforced inactivity and inability to determine the course of narrative events serves to situate him in the position of passive femininity'.[15] Queerness takes place in a literal sense both through function and performance. In this glass box, Sam is both inside and outside – a condition that recalls Jack Halberstam's contention that gender representation in the horror film is a 'destruction of the boundary between inside and outside'.[16] Without judgment, Argento shows Sam in relation with the world. Sam's unease when interacting with openly queer characters, such as a gay shop owner and a cross-dressing sex worker, bring to the surface his own disembodied and ungendered qualities. In other words, Sam's queerness is neither stable nor fixed, and it cannot be *seen* by other people on his body. Instead, it shows up in moments of intimacy, haunted by flashes of the architectural structure within which he was trapped. This architecture, to paraphrase Mikhail Bakhtin on the grotesque, is not a closed, completed unit; it is unfinished, outgrows itself, and is always transgressing its own limits.[17] Space in Argento conjures the very fear at the heart of grotesque body, which cannot be truly individuated from the rest of the world – from, most

significantly, the non-human. Complicit in the violence that is unleashed, this queering enables death, but also engenders an unforeseen hybridity, one that manifests itself in the doing as much as in the being. It represents both the promise and the threat of an uncertain future – or perhaps what Mikel J. Koven has identified as an ambivalence towards modernity.[18] Within the uncanny correspondence between the architecture and the characters in *The Bird with the Crystal Plumage*, there is a clear attempt to bury or hide within interior spaces, whether they be physical and metaphorical. Operating at the level of the unconscious, such traumatic defamiliarisations are nonetheless telling, especially as they relate to concealment or purposeful obscuring of a story or history so that it might be forgotten.

The presence of explicitly queer characters is an important feature of Argento's early Animal Trilogy, made up of *The Bird with the Crystal Plumage, Il gatto a nove code / Cat 'O Nine Tails* (1971), and *4 mosche di velluto grigio / Four Flies on Grey Velvet* (1971). There is a gay informant among many other transgressing characters in *The Bird with the Crystal Plumage,* and in *Cat 'O Nine Tails,* we encounter a gay scientist and a murderer with an extra sex chromosome. *Four Flies on Grey Velvet* is the most significant in this regard, featuring a gay police inspector, Roberto, as a secondary hero, as well as an antagonist with gender dysphoria. Infused with homoerotic undertones, it features reversed gender roles that fuel the oneiric qualities of the film. Early in the film, for example, Roberto enters the building and finds himself moving through a series of thick burgundy curtains before arriving at an empty, desolate theatre littered with garland and confetti. There, he stabs his stalker – an act of penetration. From that moment on, there is a dream-like, almost alien quality to the film, which emphasises the psychoanalytic aspects of the narrative. In fact, the gay subtext is present from the beginning of the film when Roberto bids farewell to his attractive bandmate after a coy exchange; as critic Ed Gonzalez writes, the 'longhaired Roberto's Neapolitan looks are complimented by that of his short-haired wife's. His relationship to Nina (Mimsy Farmer) is a relatively sexless one. Nina goes away and Roberto shares a retro-giddy tub moment with his wife's cousin, Dalia (Francine Racette).'[19] This 'homocentric framework' is heightened by the arrival of Detective Arrosio, an out homosexual man that 'offends more than he provokes'.[20] His queerness is purposely performed, becoming, in Maitland McDonagh words, 'a point of honour'.[21] Unapologetic

and flirtatious, the detective meets his end in a public bathroom. The setting of the murder, Gonzalez points out, emphasises 'the film's concern for gender confusion – [as] the spectator's eye immediately focuses on male/female drawings on the bathroom's door'.[22] An architectural metaphor for queer space, the bathroom – not unlike the closet – has long been intertwined with non-heterosexual identity, specifically as an interiorised place of hybrid performativity.

The impossible city

In *Profondo Rosso / Deep Red*, female and male characters are rendered explicitly hybrid, which is also true of the environment within which they operate. Argento returns to key thematic concerns from his earlier films. The narrative structure of *The Bird with the Crystal Plumage* finds resonance in *Deep Red*, which also reflects the architectural metaphors of the city performed in the former. *Deep Red* follows English jazz pianist Marc Daly (David Hemmings) who, while on an evening walk in Rome, witnesses the murder of his psychic neighbour, Helga Ullman (Macha Méril). Powerless at the time of the attack – an impotence that is reminiscent of *Bird*'s Sam Dalmas – Marc is haunted by his memory of the event, convinced that he holds the key to finding the killer. He begins to investigate the murder himself, with the help of reporter Gianna Brezzi (Daria Nicolodi). The killer is ultimately revealed to be Martha, the mother of Marc's friend Carlo (Gabriele Lavia), who happens to be a gay man. The film is permeated with gendered transgressions and hybridities, suffused by a queerness that also unfolds at the level of the spaces and places of the film. Such queer sensibilities first emerge through its characters: male and female characters do not conform to a binary understanding or performance of gender, instead embodying divergent sexualities to expansive gendered identities. Nearly every character is queer-coded in one way or another, including background actors who often appear androgynous or other-than-human altogether.

The most explicit instances of queerness in the film come from Carlo and his lover Massimo, a transvestite. Although the character of Massimo is intended to be male and read as a man who cross-dresses, wearing lace lingerie and a woman's robe, he is portrayed by a female actor (Geraldine Hooper). Encoded in the character is an explicit transgression of the gender binary both within and outside of the diegesis. Despite a deep voice – in both

the Italian and the English dubbing of the film – and a pencil moustache, Argento casts Massimo as distinctly feminine. His character purposely eludes and, in some ways explicitly resists, gendered conventions and readings. Similar to this is the hybridity and transgression embodied by the effeminate Dr. Bardi (Piero Mazzinghi) and the masculine Gianna, who not only works in a male-dominated field, but also proudly defies feminine conventions in both her style of dress and her demeanour. Less conspicuous, however, is the ways in which the film's central character, Marc, who sees both his masculinity and heterosexuality consistently questioned throughout the film, himself performs queerness. As McDonagh points out, he is the subject of 'a variety of implicit and explicit sexual allusions' and is marked as Carlo's 'structural double'.[23] From their arm-wrestling match that Marc sorely loses to the recurring gag of Gianna's tiny car that emasculates him, to incessant innuendos, both characters fail to appropriately perform their 'real' or 'assigned' genders, which thereby highlight their respective gendered transgressions. Tellingly, Marc and Gianna inhabit and move through their environment as outsiders, as 'the other'. These brief and subtle moments are revelatory of the way space functions to reinforces these aspects of the film.

The hybridity of *Deep Red* takes place on many levels, including the built environment and urban space defined through the film. Infused with a profound sense of otherness, the film features a city that is not one – a hybrid fantasy. Despite being set in Rome, most of the landmarks witnessed in *Deep Red* are actually in Turin, which amplifies the film's sense of unreality. As Alexia Kannas writes in her book on the film, 'Argento's goal here is not to survey the city in the spirit of the documentary form, but to evoke senses of present and past that are historically ambiguous and hauntingly unspecific'.[24] The film prominently features the Piazza Comitato di Liberazione Nazionale and its Po and Dora Fountains, which are represented by a man and a woman lying at the foundations, from which water flows. With its colonnades and two statues-fountains which symbolise the rivers of the city, the square represents a dream-like space which dwarfs the characters. Almost hinting at the reveal that is to come, Argento uses the setting for some of the most revelatory dialogues of the films at the Fontana del Po, the man, while the Fontana della Dora remains offscreen – the masculine obfuscates the feminine at both the architectural and the narrative levels. This space is where

Marc meets a drunk Carlo and witnesses the murder of his neighbour. It is where the gender confusion that drives much of the narrative first materialises. Interestingly, to the real piazza Argento adds the fictional 'Blue Bar' based on Edward Hopper's 1942 painting *Nighthawks*, which creates a hybridised space that exceeds the borders and boundaries of the real. '*Deep Red*'s imagining of Rome is a chaotically rendered collage of decontextualised Italian locations, post-classical and modernist architecture and interiors, and fictitious places lifted from other art forms,' writes Kannas.[25] Fulfilling a symbolic cinematic boundary which coincides with material reality, architecture fuels the tension between Argento's investment in realism and his resistance to it.

For McDonagh, the film is a noticeable departure from its predecessors. 'Beginning with *Deep Red,*' she writes, 'Argento's films become full-length nightmares whose diegeses are disturbed from the outset; whose oneiric qualities are consistent, achieved by way of subtly […] disordered compositions, colour values, and angles.'[26] In *Deep Red,* architecture intensifies the disavowal of gendered boundaries and analogies. Indeed, the need for secrecy, deeply rooted in the history of queer spaces, emerges in the film as it does for queer people: it is predicated on survival, adaptability, anonymity and ephemerality. No longer only the predicament of architecture, the city similarly performs queerness in the film through its expansive, unknowable, and unfathomable identity. The trope of coming to terms with reality, with identity, that is at the core of queer mythologies becomes the source of both fear and liberation. Radical and dangerous, architecture and the city conceal as much as they reveal.

Hybridity and transgression

Tenebrae, released nearly a decade later, represents the apogee of Argento's architectural practices and queerings. As McDonagh writes,

> This spectre is raised as early as in *The Bird with the Crystal Plumage*, when one assumes that the killer in the black slicker must be a man, only to find that it's pretty Monica Ranieri, who has made herself over as the madman who attacked and nearly killed her as a young woman. The transvestites of the St. Peter's club in *The Cat*

> *O'Nine Tails*, where homosexual Dr. Braun spends his leisure hours, evoke the same confusion. But while they're scattered through *Bird* and *Cat*, *Four Flies on Grey Velvet* abounds in such references and so lays the groundwork for *Deep Red* and *Tenebrae*, whose sexual landscapes are veritable minefields.[27]

Tenebrae centres on American writer Peter Neal (Anthony Franciosa) as he arrives in an unrecognisable Rome to promote his latest novel, the bestseller *Tenebrae*, a murder-mystery. The city is empty and without a past, or perhaps it is haunted by it – Argento has said it is a post-atomic Rome. Peter's novel receives a mixed critical reception, which is made clear during a press event. In a moment that recalls accusations of sexism and misogyny levied at Argento, lesbian journalist Tilde (Mirella D'Angelo) tells the writer '*Tenebrae* is a sexist novel'. She then asks him why he despises women so much. Similarly, a television program critic (John Steiner) presses him about the punitive value of violence in his novels. '*Tenebrae* is about human perversion and its effect on society,' he laments. During these interviews, Peter receives an anonymous letter claiming that his book inspired the correspondent to go on a killing spree. Soon after Peter reads it, the police come to him in search of answers. We learn that the murderer has indeed begun to emulate the serial killer in the book. Peter becomes embroiled in the investigation when, in the presence of the chief investigator Germani (Giuliano Gemma), the murderer calls him.

Set in a not-so-distant future, the film abandons the colour palette and baroque sensibilities of earlier films such as *Suspiria* (1977). Instead, Argento privileges pastels and Brutalist architectures in *Tenebrae*. The emphasis on harsh concrete as opposed to glass represents not only an aesthetic shift, but also an ideological one. Glass, a reflective yet transparent barrier has been replaced with opaqueness. Cultural processes and gendered transactions now hurt themselves against the built environment, as does the body. Windows, doors and other transitory openings that previously populated Argento's cinema have become gates and fences in *Tenebrae*. Geometrically determined and physically defined, structures are now enclosures.

This aspect is perhaps best embodied in a breath-taking sequence at the home of Tilde and her lover Marion, a bisexual woman.

After a brief but tense argument between them, Tilde makes her way to a window through which she peers nervously. The camera then begins to scale the walls of the building. Seemingly autonomous, it freely moves along the external wall of their modern home. The scene materialises a liminality embodied by the Sapphic relationship between the two characters and literalises their act of transgression. The camera surveys the boundaries between real and imagined, body and architecture. It carefully attends to its materiality with disorienting extreme close-ups that emphasise the texture of concrete. The camera enters and exits the home through windows. No longer porous, architecture shifts the meaning of transgression, which is in keeping with *Tenebrae*'s thematic concerns. In the film, the crimes of both killers are revealed to be sexually motivated, by the desire to eliminate sexual deviancy for one, and due to past trauma of sexual humiliation for the other. Sexuality, now concrete in its materiality, is rendered shameful, hurtful or destructive, depending on the character. The inability to confine queerness to the margins, or to eradicate it, is at the heart of the killer's rationale to kill. The primary scene at the centre of the film plays on Argento's desire for hybridity and transgression.

Sadism, space and structures of constraint in *Tenebrae*

In the primal scene of *Tenebrae*, yet another unrecognisable space in the film – one devoid of any architecture – a woman offers herself to a group of young men on a beach. Erotically charged at first, the scene shows her on her knees, surrounded by them as another young man slowly approaches. She promptly rejects him, leading the man to strike her. This moment is followed by a chase and the woman orally raping her aggressor with the heel of her red shoe. The scene is marked by a further ambiguity: Argento cast Eva Robins (sometimes credited as Eva Robins or Robbins), a transgender woman, in the role of the temptress. Interestingly, this aspect never figures in the narrative, functioning as a non-event for Argento. Yet Robins embodies the very hybridity that regulates the world of *Tenebrae.* She is introduced in a natural landscape that contrasts with the alienating and artificial urban setting of the rest of the film, its present. This memory is later revealed to be Peter Neal's motivation for murder, shown through flashbacks. Even the boundaries of time are malleable and fluctuating, they are expansive and transgressive.

Argento's queer constructions

In *The Bird with the Crystal Plumage, Deep Red* and *Tenebrae*, Argento creates analogies among the spaces characters occupy, the architecture of his filmic worlds, and the murders committed within them. Despite being heavily structured and regimented, the geometrical abstraction at the heart of Argento's spatial practice finds itself troubled by illogical and fragmented spaces, with queer reality on the level of both the characters and the architectural space. *Tenebrae* represents the theoretical apex of Argento's spatial practice. The Baroque and Art Nouveau architectures that featured prominently in previous films, in which queer characters played major roles, has been replaced by Brutalist, modern architecture that forces queerness to the margins, where it finds new ways to thrive. The house of the killer in *Four Flies on a Grey Velvet* and the 'house of the screaming child' from *Deep Red* – which both housed the respective killers and hid their secrets – each represent queer repression not only on an aesthetic level, but also through their respective anthropomorphisation. The grotesque transparency that began with *The Bird with the Crystal Plumage* is then replaced by an architecture that swallows secret identities and traumas, ultimately culminating in a world in which time and space achieve boundlessness.

Throughout Argento's films, architecture functions as a boundary,

concrete in its materiality within the diegesis and yet one that can be transcended on the level of performativity. The ideological function of architecture in his cinema is one that articulates hybridity; it establishes the parameters for a reading of queerness in which physical surrounding reveals the instability of those within it. 'There is no queer space,' the historian George Chauncey writes, 'there are only spaces used by queers or put to queer use.'[28] Yet Argento's cinema defines a queer space that uses non-compliant bodies, suffused with queerings and queerness, to perform itself. Architecture and queerness are linked through what is expressed and repressed, which unfolds at the levels of both processes and (re)presentations, culminating in performance.

The political bodies of Argento's narratives become entangled with the sometimes porous convergent and affective built environment of the worlds he creates. *The Bird with the Crystal Plumage* established a set of spatial and architectural practices, transforming the *giallo*. Architecture is not a means to an end; it is a character that interacts with other actors. *Deep Red* and *Tenebrae*, two subsequent returns to form, solidified core aspects of Argento's queer architectures. Subtle queerness becomes more expansive as time and space become more malleable and open to diegetic forces. Through the inclusion of openly queer characters and architectures, he subtly disrupts 'conventional' and binary experiences of gender without portraying transgressive identities, sexualities and bodies as inherent sights and sites of horror. Instead, Argento imbues these characters with the same hybridity that regulates much of his worldbuilding.

By understanding architecture in the cinema of Argento as a mechanism of representation, his spatial practices render visible the social, political and cultural processes that exist in his filmic worlds. Humans and their environments are mutually constitutive in and through this queer presence that reveals how the effects of characters' hybridity – or queerness – is a material and psychical dialogue with their environment. Stated differently, the psychological terrain of characters and the physical geography of made-made constructions in which they operate are masterfully explored in and through a lineage of body-architecture metaphors and analogies. These films help undo normalised constructs of the cultural self and defamiliarise the familiar. Each film is representative of a stage in his *gialli* that enable an exploration of the socio-cultural and historical structures of Italy,

which find themselves reflected in the crisis of identity affecting characters and the fear it engenders. Argento disrupts heteronormative coding in architecture to dazzling effects, offering instead a pluralization of sex, desire and gender normativity within the built environment of his films.

Footnotes

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VOICES FROM THE UNDERCURRENT: DECOLONISING *MARLINA THE MURDERER IN FOUR ACTS*

Sharon Y.X.R. Ndoen

Abstract

This essay discusses the Indonesian art-house film *Marlina the Murderer in Four Acts* (2017) from a local perspective. Using the 'oppositional gaze' and an 'oppositional reading', it builds on Stuart Hall's work on representation by deconstructing and reframing the narrative of the film *Marlina* and the film production itself. By taking an inter-textual approach, this essay argues that the representation of the island of Sumba, as well as the Sumbanese people in *Marlina*, are derived from Javanese colonial perceptions of Eastern Indonesia as 'uncivilised' and calls for the need for a more critical stance when receiving and discussing films that deal with ethnically diverse and minority-oriented content.

Keywords: *Marlina the Murderer in Four Acts*, Sumba, Indonesia, power/knowledge, de/coloniality, subjects, regime of truth, Javanese hegemony, representation, stereotyping

Bhinneka Tunggal Ika, Indonesia's official national motto means 'Unity in Diversity'.[1] It aims to signify the unity of the more than 270 million Indonesian people[2] who consist of 1,340 different ethnicities, speak around 2,500 different languages, adhere to one of the six officially recognised religions,[3] and inhabit about 6,000 of the more than 17,000 islands that make the Indonesian archipelago – which, by spanning more than 1,900,000 square kilometres, is the largest in the world.[4] However, Indonesia's political, economic and cultural axis is centred on the island of Java, where the nation's capital Jakarta is located. As one of the five largest Indonesian islands, Java is home to almost 152 million people, or 56% of the population.[5] Around 40% of all Indonesians are ethnic Javanese, making up the largest ethnic group.[6]

During President Soeharto's authoritarian New Order regime (1966–1998), discussing ethnicity was deemed a 'political taboo' as attention to – and acceptance of – its wide ethnic variety was seen as an effort that could threaten the nation's integrity.[7] Under Soeharto, Indonesia was thoroughly centralised, with the areas

outside Java regarded as inferior 'regions' as opposed to the island of Java, the superior 'centre' (a contradistinction that can simultaneously be seen as a continuation of the Dutch colonial administrative system).[8] Moreover, as Melani Budianta describes, Soeharto's heavy Javanese expression had shaped the New Order regime's culture in such a fashion that Javanese hierarchies of state officials were replicated across the nation. The Javanese language had become 'the unofficial state idioms and jargon', with Soeharto frequently giving national speeches in Javanese. These Javanese idioms and symbols were employed by Soeharto to buttress his status quo and thereby the legitimacy of the New Order regime as a whole. Soeharto, behaving like 'a Javanese King', made sure power was centralised in the capital – and in his hands in particular as the sole decider of meaning, knowledge and truth.[9] After Soeharto was forced to resign in May 1998, Indonesia started the process of democratisation and decentralisation, but its persistent Java-centric and Jakarta-centric outlook exposes its prevailing bias.[10]

It has proven difficult to shake off decades of Java-centrism and non-Javanese marginalisation (even for the well-intended). 'Regional' neglect is slow in catching up. Today's unequal economic and infrastructural development outside Java is still a testament to this. One of the most marginalised and underdeveloped provinces is East Nusa Tenggara, or *Nusa Tenggara Timur* (henceforth NTT). NTT comprises Indonesia's southernmost area, with the largest islands being Flores, Sumba and (West-)Timor. Ironically, NTT's most famous inhabitants are not even human; they are the Komodo dragons, native to Komodo Island, located west of Flores. One fictive human NTT native, however, might be well-known: the head-slaying Sumbanese Marlina.

Marlina the Murderer in Four Acts (2017) is the third production by Jakarta-born filmmaker Mouly Surya (b. 1980). Surya received the synopsis for the film from renowned Indonesian filmmaker Garin Nugroho (b. 1961), who told Indonesian media in 2016 that the idea for the film was based on a true story. When he went to Sumba in 1986 and 2004, he explained, there were several incidents at a marketplace whereby someone was beheaded. Nugroho added that revenge killings were not uncommon on the island. Nugroho said that 'the person walked to the market and cut off the neck of a seller, then took the head and handed

himself over to the police station'.[11] Having the synopsis ready but feeling he had nothing new to add, he gave it to Surya, curious as to what she – as a *female* director – would do with the story. Surya admits she was 'disoriented' at first and had never been to Sumba 'but only heard about it'. After visiting Sumba to conduct research and having googled images of Sumba's nature, she settled on the Western genre and, finally, the narrative.[12] The title character Marlina is played by seasoned actress Marsha Timothy, for whom the role was specially written[13] and who joined the film project early, when Surya and her producer/husband Rama Adi were still in the process of scriptwriting. Describing Sumba as 'a foreign land', Timothy followed Surya to East-Sumba to observe local women going about their daily lives in Kampung Raja village. Marlina's character, Surya tells, was inspired specifically by the village's queen.[14]

To address the symbolic power exercised through the representational practices in *Marlina*, this essay seeks to offer an inter-textual, Foucauldian analysis of the film, setting both the film narrative and the film production itself in a broader socio-cultural and geopolitical context, both within Indonesia and internationally. I will first give an outline of *Marlina*, whereafter I will examine the film by analysing, among others, its knowledge production, de/coloniality, and representation. I approach the film and its production from a local perspective and with an 'oppositional gaze' as I am originally from NTT myself.[15] In addition, in examining the topic, I specifically take the position of what can be called an 'international local'. By this, I mean that by having lived in Timor, Java (Jakarta), as well as in the West (Europe), I believe I have sufficient knowledge of the socio-cultural structures and unequal power dynamics in all three locales. I use this empiric experience by setting the observations against each other while raising awareness and addressing the need to decolonise (Indonesian) films that deal with ethnic minority-oriented content, such as *Marlina*.

Marlina: The plot

'Act I: The Robbery', the first part of this 93-minute film, begins with wide shots of Sumba's landscape and a male motorcyclist nearing an isolated house located on a hill. Before the man, Markus, makes his way into the house uninvited, he passes the stonework in the front yard, including two traditional burial markers, though only one has a name stone. Once inside, he

notices a traditionally mummified body – wrapped in several traditional Sumbanese *kain tenun* (weaved cloth) and folded into a foetus position – in the corner of the living room. He asks the homeowner, the widowed Marlina, where her husband is while already knowing that her husband is the mummified body. Despite knowing that Markus knows, Marlina says her husband will be home any moment. Markus sits down on the floor, demands coffee and *sirih* (betel leaves), and starts playing a tune on his *jungga* (a Sumbanese string instrument) that he carries around his neck. Marlina, who wears a blue shirt and red *kain tenun* as *sarung*, goes to the back of the house, preparing what her 'guest' has demanded. Once back in the living room, Markus demands she sit down with him. After claiming that Marlina's husband's mummified body is sitting in the corner because she still has financial debts from a previous funeral (her stillborn son Topan), Markus announces that his friends will arrive soon to take her livestock, and 'if they have time', gang-rape her. But first, Markus demands, Marlina must cook for them. With poisonous berries covertly mixed in chicken soup, Marlina kills four of Markus' friends. When Marlina brings Markus – who is sleeping on her bed – his portion, the tampered chicken soup falls out of her hands. Before Marlina can get him a new portion to poison him, too, Markus starts raping the resisting Marlina. Then she feigns consent and rolls Markus over to sit on top. While rolling over, she grabs Markus' *kabeala* (Sumbanese machete) from a bedside table, and after a few seconds of seemingly consensual intercourse to lead him on, Marlina slashes Markus' head off in one stroke. She tries to call the police, but the number is not available. After Marlina has hidden the five dead men in a pantry and burned Markus' *jungga*, she falls asleep leaning on her husband's mummified body's shoulder.

'Act II: The Journey' starts with a close-up of Markus' decapitated head. The head, together with Sumba's landscape, seems to play the main lead of the film from now on. Marlina – wearing a pink shirt, red *kain tenun* as *sarung*, and a *mamuli* necklace – stands on the roadside, holding Markus' head wrapped in a cloth, and waiting for public transport to the nearest village to file a police report. Her 41-weeks-pregnant friend Novi jogs up to her and sees the head but is unfazed by it, especially when Marlina tells her she is taking it to the police station. Novi is deep in a monologue about her pregnancy and mistrusting husband when the public transport truck, filled with people and livestock, arrives.

Novi yells her destination to the driver, Paulus, and climbs in, but when Marlina does the same, Paulus spots the head and pulls Marlina off the truck, telling her she cannot board. Marlina pulls the *kabeala* (from Markus, now hers) and holds it to Paulus' throat. Marlina orders him to get in and bring her to the police station. The passengers get their livestock and jump out of the truck in annoyance, leaving only Novi, Marlina and Paulus to continue the journey. While Paulus is driving, Marlina keeping the *kabeala* at his throat, suddenly a traditionally garbed older woman jumps in front of the truck, bringing it to a halt. While Paulus is begging her to wait for the next truck one hour later, the woman, Yohana, climbs in and argues they have already waiting for an hour and that her nephew Ian needs to go to his wedding immediately to deliver his dowry, the two horses he is loading into the truck. After Yohana's fierce monologue about the dowry and the future in-laws, Paulus gives up, and they continue the journey. During a pit stop, Novi is again holding a deep monologue about her jealous husband and gossiping mother-in-law when Marlina sees Markus' headless body sitting across her, playing his *jungga*. She wants to leave immediately, but Novi holds her back, asking her what happened. Marlina confides in her about the rape and the murders. Novi forecasts the police will blame Marlina for what she did 'even if it was self-defence' and suggests Marlina comes to church with her 'to confess her sins'. 'But I didn't commit any sins,' Marlina snaps back. Then they see Paulus and Yohana being attacked by two of Markus' friends, Franz and Niko, who found out about the murders and are searching for Marlina. To lead them on, Novi tells them she saw Marlina go in another direction, and they get in the truck and drive away – leaving behind Marlina and one dowry horse, which she takes to continue her journey.

'Act III: The Confession' opens with Marlina riding the horse, with the head dangling on the side and a headless Markus playing his *jungga* trailing behind her. When she arrives in town, Marlina has *sate ayam* (chicken satay) for lunch at a *warung* (food stall) served by a young girl also named Topan. Marlina leaves the head (now in a small chest) at the *warung* and goes to the police station, where the officers are initially too involved in a ping pong game to notice her. Eventually, Marlina files a police report for the robbery, but when she tries to report the rape, the officer asks, 'if he was old and skinny, why did you let him rape you?'. Moreover, to process the robbery report, the police need to investigate her

house. But, says the officer, there are no vehicles that day, only two or three days after that. Similarly, to file the rape report, Marlina is required to do a special medical check-up. But they will only have the tools next month, the officer says, adding that they are waiting for the funds. Unless Marlina gets the check-up done by a doctor at her own expense, the police cannot process a rape report. Marlina returns to the *warung* and breaks down in tears but is comforted by Topan. She stays at Topan's place for the night, and, after she has changed into a clean blue blouse, she leaves town early in the morning.

The final part, 'Act IV: The Birth', starts with Niko digging a grave for Paulus, whose throat was slit by Franz. Novi, Yohana and Ian look on in anguish while Franz sings a song in Sumbanese (the same song Markus sang earlier) while cleaning his bloody *kabeala*. Novi's husband Umbu calls, and a scuffle breaks out, giving her, Yohana and Ian the opportunity to flee with the truck. Ian and Yohana drop Novi off at a deserted market on the roadside to meet Umbu and continue their way to Ian's wedding. Umbu, jealous and suspicious, flies into a baseless rage and leaves Novi battered on the roadside; for Novi, this is the final nail in the coffin, and the end of their engagement seems imminent. Franz witnesses the fight and comes up to Novi, forcing her to lure Marlina back to her home, where Franz and Novi will wait for her to return Markus' head. Shortly after arriving at Marlina's house by Franz's motorcycle, Novi's water breaks. She takes Marlina's blue shirt and red *sarung* off the washing line outside. She finds a sole poisonous berry in the kitchen, giving her an idea. She takes a *kabeala* of one of the dead men tucked in the pantry and intends to kill Franz but changes her mind when she sees him crying over his dead friends and feels sorry for him. She then changes into Marlina's clothes and sits down to wait for her while Franz is unwrapping Marlina's husband's mummified body and putting the *kain tenun* around Markus' corpse. Both then wait. When Marlina arrives home, Franz takes Markus' head – which he places on Markus' neck – and *kabeala*. Marlina and Novi want to leave, but Franz demands Novi cook for him first. While she is cooking, Novi is in great turmoil. Her contractions are getting heavier, and she hears Marlina getting battered and raped by Franz – all the while the Sumbanese song sung by Franz is playing. Finally, she grabs the *kabeala*, forces the bedroom door open, and chops off Franz's head mid-rape. Right thereafter, Novi goes into full labour, and the child is born with Marlina's help.

At daybreak, Marlina, Novi and the baby leave on Franz's motorcycle to an unknown destination, marking the end of the film.

Reframing *Marlina*

In this section, I seek to deconstruct the film's discourse as a system of representation and reconstruct it in a broader contextual framework. While connecting this narrower, theoretical discourse with a broader, empirical inter/national discourse, I pose the following two intrinsically linked questions: what knowledge is produced in *Marlina*, and where does it derive from? What are the consequences of this knowledge production for its subjects?

As Stuart Hall explains, Michel Foucault was concerned with the production of knowledge through discourse – that is, knowledge production through language and practice.[16] Foucault asserted that 'not only is knowledge always a form of power, but power is implicated in the questions of whether and in what circumstances knowledge is to be applied or not'. For Foucault, the question of the application and *effectiveness* of power/knowledge – i.e. the combination of power and discourse – is more important than the question of its 'truth'. Moreover, Hall continues, '[k]nowledge linked to power, not only assumes the authority of "the truth" but has the power to *make itself true*. All knowledge, once applied in the real world, has real effects, and in that sense at least, "becomes true"' (*italics* in original). Importantly, for Foucault, 'knowledge does not operate in a void' but is 'put to work in specific situations, historical contexts and institutional regimes'. The combination of power and discourse – 'power/knowledge' – produces a certain conception about a particular matter. For Foucault, one can therefore speak of a 'discursive formation sustaining a 'regime of truth''.[17] Crucially, for Foucault, knowledge production always intersects 'with questions of power and the *body*' (*italics* mine). As the object to which the 'micro-physics of power' is first and foremost applied, '[t]he body is *produced* within discourse, according to the different discursive formations' (*italic* in original). In other words, placed 'at the centre of the struggles between different formations of power/knowledge', the '[d]ifferent discursive formations and apparatuses divide, classify and inscribe the body differently in their respective regimes of power and "truth"'.[18]

The concept of 'de/coloniality' is embedded in power and knowledge. Nelson Maldonado-Torres explains that 'coloniality refers to a logic, metaphysics, ontology, and a matrix of power that can continue existing after formal independence and desegregation'. Decoloniality then, 'refers to efforts at rehumanising the world, to breaking hierarchies of difference that dehumanise subjects and communities and that destroy nature, and to the production of counter-discourses, counter-knowledges, counter-creative acts, and counter-practices that seek to dismantle coloniality and to open up multiple other forms of being in the world'.[19] De/coloniality – not to be confused with 'de/colonisation' – here must therefore be connected to the Javanese hegemony, superiority and privilege during and after Soeharto's New Order regime. Rather than focusing on borders that demarcate the Indonesian archipelago as an independent nation-state, we must focus on the borders *within* the archipelago. A useful approach is the 'trans-archipelagic decolonial feminist trajectory', put forward by Intan Paramaditha, which addresses two forms of coloniality: first, Western imperial power, that dominates knowledge production; and second, 'the political and cultural dominance of another West, in this case, Western Indonesia or Java'. Interrogating the (geo)politics of knowledge production, this new trajectory transcends archipelagic borders by being critical of colonialism, capitalism and racism. It poses questions around knowledge production, such as: 'who produces the knowledge? For whom is the knowledge? And who benefits from it?'[20]

Returning to Foucault's discursive approach to discuss the matter of the subjects, '[i]t is discourse, not the subjects who speak it, which produces knowledge'. Hall explains that according to Foucault, '[t]he "subject" is *produced within discourse*. This subject *of* discourse cannot be outside discourse because it must be *subjected to* discourse. It must submit to its rules and conventions, to its dispositions of power/knowledge.' Aside from the subject as bearer or personification of knowledge produced by discourse, or 'the object through which power is relayed', discourse simultaneously produces 'a *place for the subject*' – i.e. the viewer/reader who is likewise 'subjected to' discourse – from which its specific knowledge and meaning make most sense. For the viewer/reader to do so, according to Foucault, they must locate themselves 'in the *position* from which the discourse makes most sense, and thus become its "subjects" by

"subjecting" [themselves] to its meanings, power and regulation'. Stated differently, all discourses construct 'subject-positions', where the viewer/reader '*subject* themselves to its rules, and hence become the *subjects of its power/knowledge*' (*italics* in original).[21]

To apply this theoretical framework to *Marlina*, I suggest we need to start with the conception of the film. I have already mentioned how Nugroho got the idea for the synopsis from witnessing a beheading at a Sumbanese marketplace. This is not the only version of the story, however. Another version says that Nugroho, while in Sumba, saw someone carrying a human head to the police station. It was further stated that the man had been involved in a duel, beheaded his opponent, before turning himself in to the police. This version, too, argued that incidents like this are 'quite common' in Sumba.[22] Whatever the correct version, a few aspects are constant: Nugroho, Sumba, beheadings. Therefore, I argue that the idea for *Marlina* is not so much based on 'true events' but rather on a Javanese colonial *fetish*. Hall explains that fetishism brings us 'to the level where what is shown or seen in representation, can only be understood in relation to what cannot be seen, what cannot be shown'.[23] Recall that during Soeharto's New Order regime, discussing ethnicity was considered a 'political taboo' and the regions considered 'inferior' (an idea that still prevails in the Java-centred mindset), and it becomes clear that Markus' head in *Marlina* stems from fetishism, i.e. a strategy 'for both representing and not-representing the tabooed'. We are allowed to look at it because it provides us with an 'alibi'; in *Marlina*, it is depicted in the name of 'entertainment'.[24] As such, Marlina as the *beheader* is simply a stereotypical, colonial Javanese *fantasy*. A Sumbanese female rape victim, Marlina is primarily depicted as a survivor; but as she is 'trapped by the binary structure of the stereotype, which is split between two extreme opposites', she is still *Sumbanese*, and that 'confirm[s] the fantasy which lies behind or is the 'deep structure' of the stereotype'.[25]

Unbeknownst to the viewing/reading subject, fetish and fantasy are reproduced in the film production's rhetoric in the media. Both within Indonesia and outside, the preferred meaning of *Marlina* is countless times 'anchored' in the captions. Hall cites Roland Barthes when explaining that it is 'the caption which selects one out of the many possible meanings from the image, and *anchors* it with words'. The (preferred) 'meaning' of *Marlina*

thus lies in the conjunction of image *and* text; these two discourses (i.e. that of written language and that of the image) are necessary to produce and 'fix' the meaning (*italics* in original).[26] A worn-out example is a review for *Marlina* by Variety's film critic Maggie Lee.[27] By coining the arguably obnoxious term 'Satay Western' – a label trailing *Marlina* the way a headless Markus is trailing Marlina – she anchored *Marlina* exactly where Surya had wanted it, as the director uses the term herself now, too. Calling the film 'flamingly feminist', Lee's written text anchors *Marlina* as a feminist survival film, blissfully unaware of its roots firmly stuck in coloniality. Doing an oppositional reading, I prefer to call the film 'flamingly fetishist'.

Lee's rhetoric (and that of many others), however, focuses on the *material world* – i.e. the space 'where things and people exist' – when discussing *Marlina*. But this space, argues Hall, should not be confused with 'the *symbolic* practices and processes through which representation, meaning and language operate'. Crucially, meaning is not conveyed through the material world, but through the language system we are using to represent our concepts.[28] A language, Hall explains, is '[a]ny sound, word, image or object which functions as a sign, and is organized with other signs into a system which is capable of carrying and expressing meaning'.[29] Rather than on the sign's material quality, the meaning depends on its *symbolic function*. 'It is because a particular sound or word *stands for*, *symbolises or represents* a concept that it can function, in language, as a sign and convey meaning' (*italics* in original).[30]

An example of confusing – conflating, even – the material world with symbolic practices and processes is a news article on *Marlina* in which the Indonesian journalist poses the outrageous question of 'whether the Sumbanese are really culturally inured to issues like rape and murder', clearly harking back to the dehumanising colonial Javanese stereotypes of Sumbanese people I mentioned above.[31] Another Indonesian journalist has numerous ponderings and assumptions about Marlina's mummified husband. While his entire article shows a stunning ignorance, his remarks, 'Also, why didn't Marlina bury her husband? Poverty can let the dead stay, after all. So I think the Island of Sumba becomes a stand-in for areas where these things happen,'[32] touches upon

a specifically sensitive issue. Timorese independent filmmaker Manuel Alberto Maia argues in his excellent criticism of *Marlina* – likewise from a local NTT perspective – that Marlina, as a Sumbanese Marapu-follower born as part of the post-1965 generation (i.e. after the 1965 'Communist Coup' and the subsequent ascendance of General Soeharto), must have changed religion and be steadfast in burying her husband.[33] As Sumba is now predominantly Christian, the Marapu tradition of mummifying the diseased is not important. In fact, due to the stigmatisation of local traditional practices during the New Order and thereafter, it has become illegal. By including the mummy, the film produces a discourse that accords with the Javanese idea of an 'uncivilised' Sumba.

Moreover, during the New Order, every Indonesian had to follow, or convert to, one of the five allowed religions (Islam, Protestantism, Catholicism, Hinduism and Buddhism; in 2006, a sixth, Confucianism, was added). Any other beliefs, such as animism or local traditions, were strictly forbidden. It is only since November 2017 that the Indonesian Constitutional Court allowed followers of indigenous faiths to list their religion as *pengyahat kepercayaan* ('follower of indigenous faith') on their national ID cards (much to the vocal dismay of several prominent Indonesian Islamic leaders). In Indonesia, it is mandatory to state your religion on your ID card. If this section is left blank, as it was in the case of indigenous faith followers, it will lead to severe social discrimination. When *Marlina* was shot in 2016, (practicing) Marapu-faith was still not allowed. Marlina's mummified husband is thus a gross appropriation of a tradition that itself was the victim of severe stigmatisation for decades – simply for the film's aesthetics.

Another issue is the sub-plot of Ian's wedding and the dowry. Depicted in the film as a groom with merely one relative on his way to his wedding by public transport with two horses in tow, Ian's situation erases Sumba's elaborate wedding rituals and the importance of the dowry ritual (*belis*) that brings together two extended families. Maia argues that the responsibility *Marlina* carries is not simple and warns that cultural authenticity needs to be maintained, as New Order perceptions of 'Eastern Indonesia' still make an impression on Indonesian society to this day.[34] Aside from claiming that this sub-plot is included for aesthetic reasons, I also argue it needs to be set against the

highly expensive, lavish wedding norms prevailing in Java. This sub-plot 'exposes' Sumbanese wedding rituals as 'primitive'.

Discourses such as this sadly but inevitably also touch upon skin colour. As NTT continues to be seen as 'primitive' and 'uncivilised', the colonial notion persists that people are 'darker' in 'underdeveloped' areas. While across the archipelago, skin tones from Indonesians range from very light to very dark – no matter the island – it was determined by the *Marlina* production crew that the *Sumbanese* are 'dark'. So, it is curious that Timothy – a very light-skinned Indonesian – was cast for this role; they even had it written *for* her. In a problematic interview, make-up artist Didin Syamsudin enthusiastically explains the Brownface process of Timothy into Marlina while arguing that the Sumbanese are 'brown' and Marlina needs to 'blend in'.[35]

The character of Marlina was inspired by a real-life Sumbanese queen. Maia also mentioned that he assumed Marlina came from aristocratic circles.[36] This aspect is also problematic. My ancestors consisted of a collective of local kings and aristocrats in NTT, and it is only from my parents' generation onwards that social status became achieved rather than ascribed (although the present-day symbolic status is still considerable). Hence, I know first-hand the position and status that comes with it, and to have aspects 'lent to' a fantasised murderer is not just appropriation; for this real-life Sumbanese queen, it can be regarded as an act of robbery. Moreover, the fact that Surya constantly repeated this aspect in the media also suggests the expectation that no one would notice the disrespect or speak out against it: another show of Javanese hegemony.

Ironically, *Marlina*'s most realistic scene is so *because* of Java-centrism. When the officer at the police station says they have no vehicles available for several days, no tools for a special check-up, and are waiting for funds that will not arrive within a month, he describes Sumba's actual circumstances as it has been neglected by the state for so long. 'Java-centrism is violent,' states one of Selena Soemakno's interviewees, referring to the lack of resources sent by the central government in Jakarta to the regions.[37] Overall, however, it is

pointed out by several authors that Sumbanese aspects in *Marlina* are void of meaning. Umi Lestari argues that all things identifiable as Sumbanese 'are merely accessories'. The *kain tenun*, *jungga*, *mamuli* necklace, architecture, *kabeala* and so forth are 'arbitrarily stuck' to the characters' bodies and the island's locales.[38] Building on Lestari, Soemakno argues that Surya overlooks many cultural components of Sumbanese society. She views the film 'as an appropriation of the location' to profit from with her Western genre and states that Surya employs 'a colonial and patriarchal gaze'.[39] In addition to his arguments discussed above, Maia criticises that Sumbanese cultural elements in the film seem to be 'just a display' and finds it hard to see *Marlina* as a film set in Sumbanese society as opposed to simply a film shot on location and merely passing through. He argues that several Sumbanese socio-cultural elements are adapted and distorted to fit the Western genre while further stressing that '[t]aking *Marlina* for granted as a description of a Sumba civilisation might need to be rethought given that Indonesia is diverse'.[40]

Meike Lusye Karolus identifies three discourses in *Marlina*: that of infrastructure, exoticism, and stereotypes and prejudice. She argues that Surya's view of Eastern Indonesia is still tied to Orientalist and colonialist ideas that view this region as 'something exotic, primitive, and uncivilised'. After analysing several forms of representation in *Marlina* and considering how the non-Sumbanese Surya embeds her perceptions of what it supposedly is to be a Sumbanese woman in the narrative, Karolus concludes that Sumbanese representations in *Marlina* are influenced by commercial reasons only.[41] Jofie and Danang are the most scorching in their criticism. Aside from arguing that the singing of a Sumbanese song by Franz and Markus merely covers up the (cultural) shallowness of the film, they specifically question Surya's position and motive. Underscoring that Surya is a member of the Jakarta middle-class, they state she wants to represent '*Sumbanese* women, who – while living in complexity, ambiguity, and problems – become *women*' (*italics* mine). Jofie and Danang point out the seeming opportunism, that Surya now has a name and reputation thanks to 'representing' Sumbanese women. What is more, they say, she also expects esteem for 'supporting' Sumbanese women.[42]

In my view, Surya indeed has predominantly commercial and reputational objectives. Even so, for the (specifically Western)

inter/national audience, her personality is very likable and palatable – as any quick Google search for Surya on her inter/national *Marlina* media tour attests. Although this is positive for Surya, it also neglects – or even prevents – a (however rudimentary) consideration by the inter/national audience of whether the Sumbanese representation in *Marlina* is accurate. I acknowledge the uninformed position of the inter/national audience. Nevertheless, I also assert that, following Paramaditha, in places like the West and Java colonial structures lie embedded in the socio-cultural subconsciousness that receive *Marlina* seemingly unquestioned. Building on Hall, Surya and large segments of the inter/national audience share to some degree the same cultural codes or 'language' – coloniality – and her choice for the Western genre cleverly 'speaks' to this inter/national audience, making the 'translation' of the shared codes, the embedded Javanese colonial perceptions of Sumba, in the film easy to instigate *and* accept.[43] An added factor is that her being a (non-white) *female* director making a so-called 'feminist' film in a patriarchal nation like Indonesia leads to more praise rather than scrutiny. My suggestion is, then, that it is upon all of us – as the audience at large – to be attentive when receiving and discussing films that deal with ethnically diverse and minority-oriented content, especially when the filmmaker does not belong to the represented group themselves.

In this essay, I have shown that the knowledge produced in *Marlina* is a continuation of the Javanese colonial perceptions of Sumba. This is a perception derived from decades-long Javanese ethnocentrism during Soeharto's New Order and has survived well into the post-New Order era. In *Marlina*, colonial ideas of Sumba have been made easily digestible for the viewing/reading subjects thanks to the choice of the Western genre, but this has simultaneously led to a distortion of Sumbanese culture and society. The consequences of this knowledge production for its subjects, particularly those subjects produced within discourse, are further stereotyping, or, more specifically, what May Adadol Ingawanij calls 'self-exoticisation' – i.e. 'to project for the enticement of the "native" gaze a "native" object of desire as if it were foreign'.[44] If viewing/reading subjects accept the discourse in *Marlina*, either because it resonates with their views or because it is too foreign to be familiar with, they have successfully subjected themselves to the discourse's conventions. The symbolic violence done to Marlina through stereotyping is colonial and

patriarchal. Still, at the same time, the stereotyping is indeed what Hall proclaims, as it is 'part of the maintenance of social and symbolic order' – a 'violent hierarchy'.[45] But in *Marlina*, Marlina is not the only character subject to this discourse. Whether they are a female rape victim, pregnant, a male mummy, a headless man, or a man in uniform; all the characters' bodies are highly contested. Their body is *Sumbanese*, and *therefore* a battlefield.

Footnotes

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ONE OF US: A ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION ABOUT DISABILITY AND HORROR, IDENTITY AND COMMUNITY

Hosted by Ariel Baska

The intersection of disability and horror has long been a fraught topic, with audiences anxious about disability portrayals, uncertain whether they should enjoy films that don't accurately reflect the communities portrayed. Meanwhile, for many in the disability community, horror is one of the few spaces where any representation at all is likely to happen, and the horror community has been at the forefront in embracing those from the disability community into its ranks, as our panelists attest. In this roundtable, four film workers who specialise in horror content have a frank conversation about how their disabilities interact with their work and their love of horror and cult cinema. They each speak to the special relationship between identity and community, as well as the importance of representation.
Ariel Baska

From Ariel Baska's *Our First Priority*

- Ariel Baska is a filmmaker, journalist, and academic author. Her first film, *Our First Priority* (2022), was an Official Selection of Final Girls Berlin and Frightfest UK, and won the Disability Advocacy Award from Superfest Disability Film Festival. Her first animated film, *She's Never Been a Bird Before* (2021), was featured at the Engauge Experimental Film Festival. She has received multiple scholarships from Sundance Collab, was a speaker at SXSW 2022, and has produced a number of documentaries and horror shorts. Her podcast, Ride the Omnibus, is parked at the intersection of pop culture and social justice. More information at arielbaska.com.

- Cameron Mitchell is a filmmaker, film festival programmer/juror, and teacher. His films have premiered in over 20 countries worldwide with his most recent work, *Elsa*, about Deafblind author and fencer Elsa Sjunneson, premiering internationally on PBS. His first narrative film, *The Co–Op* (2021), was an Official Selection at Slamdance for its inaugural Unstoppable program which focuses on disability films and disabled filmmakers. His work has been featured on Netflix and in Rolling Stone and Variety. You can learn more about Cameron and his current projects at www.cameronsmitchell.com.

- Rabia Sitabi is a film programmer, marketing director, and pop culture expert with Asian and African roots. She has worked with many international film festivals, and is currently the Director of Marketing for Imagine Film Festival in Amsterdam, where she is based. She regularly appears on Dutch television and radio programs as a pop culture expert, and has spoken at SXSW. In 2022, she was the Diversity Ambassador to Sundance for the Film Festival Alliance. She co-hosts two podcasts, the Cultured Curators and Ride the Omnibus. More information at rpish.com.

- Pea Woodruff is a writer, director and producer, with extensive experience in camera and electrical departments in various roles for both television and film. She is currently finishing post-production on her film *Hunting Wolves,* which she has written and directed.

Ariel: When you first got into horror, either through content or community, did you find that it helped you face specific aspects of your disability or the experience of being disabled? How did your relationship with horror begin?

Pea: I know for me, when my children were dealing with what was happening to me, the horror community took them in. And so it's not just my problem. It's not my disability. It's our problem. It's everyone's disability, right? It's societal. We're lucky that film is a pocket of the world where we can talk about challenging subjects and we can challenge norms, particularly in horror. I don't think you can have this conversation elsewhere. This conversation would never happen in the world of action film, or the rom-com. This is a really important conversation to me because I believe

that being disabled isn't a problem or issue for disabled people. I believe this is everyone's problem. Because in the world we live, pregnancy is considered a disability. Old age is considered a disability. This is everybody's conversation. Media is all about representation and inclusion. So I think this is where our people need to be having really important conversations.

From Cameron Mitchell's *The Co-Op*

Cameron: Horror films are those types of films that you can get involved with just starting out because budgets tend to be thin. Financing is tough to find, even though it's genre film. And so I kind of cut my teeth on my first feature film with Mario Sarita, making *Deadly Gamble* (2015). How that interacted, this relationship with disability, for me, is that there's a lot of prosthesis in horror films. And so there were characters in these films that seemed disabled, but maybe were just there to be foils. And so, you know, I just spent a lot of time on set like meditating about what actual disabled people would look like in this film, and it actually inspired me to make *The Co–Op*, the first narrative short I did. I would just say the whole genre of horror is incredibly fascinating for what it doesn't say, I would say it's about like, Roger Waters or David Gilmour – it's the negative spaces between. So yeah, it led to a lot of meditation for me about what a disability horror film would look like.

From Cameron Mitchell's *The Co-Op*

Pea: Yeah, because you can't send a message. Nobody wants to hear a message, but you can reach people you know, or people we love. That's what stories are supposed to do, right? The campfire is supposed to reach you and move you and you can be effective or you can be right and that's true in conversations or in storytelling. I can beat you over the head with my message, or I can put something out there that forces you to think and that's what negative space does – it forces you to process. It's not delivered into your head. And I think horror specifically, horror fans are unique. There's no other genre that supports this depth and breadth of content. Or producers of content. Again, you won't find that disability group talking about their low budget successes in the action world or in the romantic comedy world. This is unique to horror. And I think it is specifically because of what horror doesn't say that it leaves a place for everyone. And I don't think there's another genre that comes close to that.

Rabia: I totally agree with that. But I think for me as well, looking at horror, I got into the community aspect of it because I started off going to festivals, and volunteering at Fantastic Film Nights… When I was younger, I was still at the precipice of discovering that I had been living with disabilities and that they were getting worse. The horror community was the community that was the most accommodating. Not *per se* on the screen. How much representation are you seeing? Not a lot, but in general, I was not seeing a lot of representation for me to start with because I'm a brown woman. So that's a whole other layer. But the community itself has always been so warm. Of all the pop culture communities that I'm part of, also for my work, all the travels that I've done, the horror community has always been the most welcoming, the most open. You can end up in a city in a country where you do not speak the language and go to a horror festival or movie and people are just enthusiastic. They're warm, they're happy to introduce you into whatever they just saw, or you should really go see as well. And let's go have a beer. So when my disability came out in that community more and more, it became more apparent that my disability was going to affect my being part of that community as a volunteer or being able to work at festivals or attend festivals.

I've seen a lot of people from within the community accommodate or reach out or be kind in a way that they were like, 'Hey, okay, you can't do this. Let's find you a car. Hey, you

know you can't walk the stairs. Let's find a way to get you up there.' And again, that's from the community side of things, not the film festival side of things, nor the filmmaker side of things. But gradually you're seeing movement on the 'professional' side of these as well. Festivals are trying to be more mindful of representation and accessibility. As a programmer myself, I've really almost fought with fellow colleagues, saying 'we really, really need this title. It might not resonate with you, because it's not from your perspective and it might not even be for you. But there's an audience out there, I can promise you, who it will be for and who it represents. And it's a good movie, even though you don't understand why it is.' So sometimes as a programmer, you need to be able to step outside of your own bubble of, 'I want this movie because I think it's cool.' And that's what I had to learn over the years as well. Sometimes I programmed stuff that I didn't like, but I think it's important for programmers to get a lot of training in not only stepping outside of the genres that I like, but also stepping outside of the perspectives that I know. And that's a slow movement at the moment. But the community itself, I've always loved, and like I said, it's always been like a cuddle.

Ariel: What about representation on screen? You started to talk about that?

Rabia: We all need to start voting with our wallets. I think that's the most important layer of this. We need fun projects like Ariel's or Cameron's. I want to see more representation from the disability perspective, either from people with that background or those who are able to look outside of their own perspective and then incorporate that in a different way. A way that's not, 'Oh, this person has a wheelchair, that's their whole personality.' There are too many horror movies that do that. Oh, this person has a scar, and that's why they're now the villain. Right?

Pea: That resonates a lot. I have a disfiguring degenerative disease, and its nickname is Quasimodo's Curse. And I keep trying to explain to people, have you never read the book? Quasimodo is not the villain. It's the way people treat Quasimodo and the way people see him, that's more the villain than he is.

Ariel: What's interesting to me also in hearing you talk about that, Pea, is this whole narrative around disfigurement on screen, and how that's supposed to communicate something to us. I know

for me personally, I had a very unusual experience as a kid, in that my first exposure to horror came from a bad babysitter who showed me *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984). She brought over her boyfriend and some weed and put on *A Nightmare on Elm Street* and I saw Freddy Krueger on screen.

As a child who was born with a capillary hemangioma that left the right side of my face completely red, I saw Freddy Krueger and I was like, 'Oh, I see someone that looks like me on screen.' Yes, he's a burn victim and a monstrous villain, but for the first time, I was able to actually connect with somebody that I saw on screen. And of course, it was Freddy. And for whatever set of reasons, I think it was at least partially because of my parents' reaction of absolute horror when they heard what happened. They wanted to protect me and shield me from all the bad horrible, nasty things of horror and sci fi. They were completely opposed to my ever watching anything with vaguely horrific content, for whatever set of reasons.

But for me, early on, I decided that that was where I saw myself. Not that that's a good thing. That was the only space where I felt like I had some kind of reflection of who I was. Because I always had this experience as a kid of being bullied by other people and not necessarily understanding why they perceived me differently. I finally had a cultural touchstone that explained why they were calling me pizza face, monster face, etc. As an only child, I didn't have any knowledge of what that was, and so for me, that experience was both the moment I got into their heads and the moment that I felt I could see something of myself somewhere in the external world.

So what about the genre and the history of the genre speaks most to you as a disabled person? Is there a particular work that embodies your relationship to the genre?

Rabia: I think what's interesting about looking at it through the lens of someone with a disability, I have an invisible disability, because if you meet me at first glance, you wouldn't *per se* know that I live with disabilities. Obviously, the longer you hang with me you're like, oh, okay, yeah, there's stuff going on. I'm restricted in what I can do but what's interesting with horror is that the restrictions have been lifted in horror. All the things that can happen in horror, the feeling that stuff can just go wrong in a

certain way to people who are generally not disabled yet or – wait, what's the best term to call someone who is currently not living with disabilities?

Pea: I call them 'wellies' in my world.

Cameron: The 'normies'.

Rabia: The 'normies', yeah. I feel that if you have stuff going on in your life that is so fucked up or so tiring, and it's taking so many spoons out of your life, horror can be this escape, right? And I think for me, at least, that I kind of trained my stress hormones, my cortisol levels, by just gulping down any type and as much horror as I could. And I think one of my therapists has even said that actually helped me survive. Being able to watch so much horror made me react better in real life when really stressful shit happened to me personally, because I was calmer, because I was like, okay, I can deal with this. This is not the end of the world. We can get through this – I can survive this.

And for some reason, I can relate that back to being someone who started at age six watching *The Thing* (1982). Like you, Ariel, I watched way too freaking young. For me, it was my mom and my aunt in the living room saying, 'we're watching a movie and you're a child. So, if you want to sit in this room, this is the movie that we're watching.' Which, I mean, I'm six years old, and *The Thing* might not have been the best thing, but here we are. I'm still alive. We're still going and partially that has to do with the fact that I wasn't getting scared anymore. And the older I got, the more I got exposed to horror, and the more I got exposed to stressful situations that I learned to deal with and not be scared of. And that helped me cope better with my personal situation.

Ariel: They've actually done a lot of psychological studies that show that people have better responses to traumatic experiences in their lives if they've been prepared for them by horror movies. And I find that fascinating. So, if you want to prepare for an apocalypse, watch a lot of movies about the apocalypse.

Rabia: Pretty much, right? I even saw something recently that a group of psychologists want to band together and actually create a horror therapy module, like cognitive therapy but specifically focused on having people basically watch horror as homework and then help them through their therapy, using horror as a vehicle basically.

Cameron: You know, I definitely identify with watching horror as a coping mechanism. I met my wife in high school, and it's something that we bonded over immediately. Early in our relationship, we were just watching lots of B-movie horror. In fact, I just remembered the After Dark Horror Fest, which existed briefly from 2006–2010, or something like that. And just watching all of those films and eating them up even though you know they're not films you've heard of, really, unless you're familiar with After Dark. But I find it interesting that a lot of films that I find to be the most influential on me are also ones that bend horror, or maybe try to break it in some way.

Like, Cronenberg is a big influence on me and his body horror. I feel like Cronenberg always gets it closer to right than anyone out there. But there's so many things we can name here. And then [the] *Scream* [franchise] also was pretty genre-bending, particularly in their most recent installment, but of course this is also avoiding some of the problematic disability portrayals in films like that. Because they're just there and we have had to accept them to this point, but at least it gets us some form of encounter, whereas we weren't seeing any representation in other genres of film.

So yeah, I definitely resonate also with the *Nightmare on Elm Street* story you told. And *The Thing* too, I mean, who doesn't like *The Thing*, you know? But also the disfigurement in that film is also a reflection of ourselves when we look into it in some way, but a horrifying reflection, right? We're made to look at something that's kind of been contorted and distorted in physically altering ways that's supposed to horrify us. So yes, so many things to talk about. The net is so wide. I'm curious to see where this goes.

Pea: I would just like to say that we have not forgotten our friends who struggle with mental illness as a disability and how they are portrayed and preyed upon in all manner of film and media. So I just wanted to send that shout-out that those are disabled people also. And their portrayal in any type of film and media has great room for improvement, across the board.

Ariel: Oh, for sure. And you know, when we think about physical disfigurement and things that are visibly obvious in film there are also so many representations that are specifically about differences in people's personalities or people who have anxiety or people who have intellectual disabilities, from *I Spit on Your Grave* (1978) to *Friday the 13th* (1980). We've got different kinds of examples of

mental illness that are shown in various different kinds of ways and the question is always, is the villainy related to the disability? Well, that's a whole other question, but first, I want to hear from you, Pea. Is there a particular work that embodies your relationship to the genre?

Pea: *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997–2003). I identify with both heroes and villains in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* because no one wants to be there. No one wants to be who they are. No one likes who they are. They all wish they were in another place in time. Buffy doesn't want to be a slayer, Spike doesn't want to be a vampire. He wants to be a person who could court the woman he loves, right? You know, everybody there is an embodiment of something they don't want to be and yet they soldier on. They band together and they fight forward and it was not something I would have immediately identified with early in my disability. I had difficulty being diagnosed because my disorder is rare. And so I was hospitalised with it and when I was in bad shape, my youngest came to me and gave me a stick. In the hospital, that's what he brought me. Everybody brings flowers. My little kid brought sticks. Because he saw on the television that Buffy's mama was in the hospital and all the vampires were trying to kill her. And he saw a girl kill a vampire with a pencil and he was so sure this stick was so much better than a pencil. So all I had to do was kill the vampires and get my ass home because he needed me.

So, I mean, again, we think of this through our own lens. But just like I say to anyone in any room who has issues with the LGBTQIA+ community or other communities, you think this is not your problem. But this is your problem. Because your kids have a life and when one of their friends comes home and takes their life because they're disabled or because they've been just completely isolated and ostracised from community – it does become your problem. Because now your child is dealing with this, because you did not prepare and inform them and educate them. So I think that *Buffy* was a great way for me to learn. I went from thinking it was all about me to 'you know what, this isn't just about me. I have a family. I have a community – there are other people with my disorder.' And it rallied me to get my shit together and fight a little harder. THAT – that is our thing.

Ariel: It's interesting how in all of our cases, looking at this question, it doesn't necessarily need to be specifically disability representation for us to glom onto a particular film or piece.

Sometimes just the message seems to be enough.

Cameron: Yeah. I just love Pea for bringing in *Buffy* because I think there's a reason that so many people in the disability community have latched onto that at one point or another because of exactly what she described. It's that these characters can be in these moulds that they don't fit in, while they want to be somewhere else. That's a very disability kind of concept. And actually, you know, I was kind of feeling the room out a bit before, what do we consider horror, right?

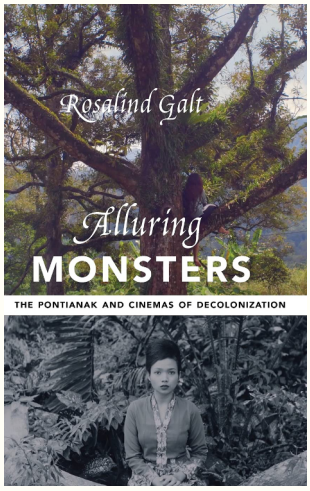
These are always tricky conversations of what films do we bring into the fold but it's sometimes most fun to read disability onto things that maybe weren't intended to be about disability, like *Terminator 2: Judgement Day* (1991) and *The Terminator* (1984) were super influential. In particular, I just really identified with Arnold and his dismemberment, when he gets dropped into the pit and then has to come back and save her. I just identified with that part as a kid who always had back issues and different parts of my body weren't functioning the way that they were supposed to be. And just imagining there's someone like the Terminator out there, who can do it, even if he's missing an arm and a leg. He comes back to save her and he's constantly being reconstructed. And also he has the threat of being replaced with this other Terminator – that's a read I have got to talk about. But yeah, that's something I resonated with, if it's horror.

Pea: That's really important, because that's the universal message that we have to tell. That what we're experiencing doesn't have to be a point of disability. It's a point of struggle, and every individual at some point in their life will encounter the struggle. And I think there's a great deal we can learn from the LGBTQIA+ community about representation. I mean, when's the last time in a crowd you saw somebody in a wheelchair or on crutches or with one arm? It just doesn't happen. So again, we're in the big picture. Those messages are for us as well as a global audience. I don't think we're talking only to disabled people.

BANANA TREES AND BLOODBATHS: THE PONTIANAK AS A DISRUPTIVE POSTCOLONIAL FEMINIST BODY – AN INTERVIEW WITH ROSALIND GALT

Lydia Wong–Plain

Filmed in Singapore and produced by Cathay–Keris Films, the *Pontianak* film trilogy was immensely popular and well received by not just the Malay community but also both the Chinese and Indian communities in the region. In fact, its first instalment, *Pontianak* (1957), was the first film to be dubbed into Mandarin, whilst *Sumpah Pontianak* (1958) was the first local CinemaScope (also known as wide–screen) film to be formatted in Singapore. Since the release of the original series in the 1950s and early 60s, many prequels have been remade and produced, reflecting the popularity of the *pontianak*, which never waned in Singapore and the rest of South–east Asia even after many years of narrating the horrific legend of a pregnant female vampire which preys on men. The *pontianak* is viewed as a disruptive postcolonial feminist body who challenges and questions dominating power structures and seeks to overthrow colonial attitudes and dimensions with her undying vengeance and consciousness outside of the Western canon. I spoke to Rosalind Galt, author of *Alluring Monsters: The Pontianak and Cinemas of Decolonization* (2021), about embodying beliefs and traditions of the Malay World, the *pontianak*'s bloodbaths, the influence of feminist perspectives, and the female vampire's stronghold in cinematic spaces and culture.



Rosalind Galt, *Alluring Monsters: The Pontianak and Cinemas of Decolonization* (2021

Lydia Wong–Plain

Lydia Wong–Plain: In Alluring Monsters, you mention that the pontianak is 'a terrifying, fanged monster (who) invites feminist interpretation', and 'certainly the foundation of the pontianak's potency is her overthrowing of gender norms'. Could you tell us a little more about the pontianak and how this alluring figure came into light for you?

Rosalind Galt: The *pontianak* is a Malay spirit – or *hantu* – who is associated with birth. Women who have died in childbirth, or at the hands of male violence, run the risk of coming back to life as

pontianaks. She is terrifying in part because she can look like a regular woman, and in fact is often imagined as beautiful and seductive. Thus, she's a figure of anxiety especially for men, who fear that women might transform into monsters with long, dirty fingernails for scooping out intestines. I first encountered the *pontianak* in a series of incredibly popular horror films made in Singapore in the 1950s and 60s: these films were the most popular series made by Cathay–Keris studios, and subsequently copied by Shaw Brothers, who made their own series. These films were made during the years in which Malaysia and Singapore won their independence, and I was fascinated by why this figure from pre-colonial folklore had become an iconic movie star exactly in the moment of imagining a postcolonial future.

Yee, I-Lann. *Like the Banana Tree at the Gate: Ibu or the Beast* (2016) (Photo courtesy of artist)

Malaysian artist Yee I-Lann observes that 'the pontianak continues to haunt us in 21st century patriarchal Southeast Asia', and 'is the woman standing at the gate like the banana tree in full view. She is potential and power and resource' [in Tyler Rollins, 'Like the Banana Tree at the Gate', gallery brochure, 2016]. Why do you think the pontianak has evolved to represent feminist values? How does the pontianak disrupt, complicate and challenge patriarchal conventions?

I would argue that the *pontianak* has always represented feminist values! Of course, there is a way of seeing her as completely representative of patriarchal anxieties about women. The *pontianak* seems beautiful and demure, but she might turn on you and reveal her true, monstrous face. Likewise, the myth of the nail can be seen as extremely patriarchal. According to folk belief, if you hammer a nail into the neck of a *pontianak*, she can be subdued, and can even marry and have children. Only when the nail is removed will she return to her monstrous form. Like the stake in *Dracula*, the nail can designate a very violent way to subdue women via bodily penetration.

But, from a feminist perspective, a female figure who has the power to transform, to take revenge, and to induce fear is just as obviously appealing. It would be easy to transpose this ambivalence onto Western feminist film theory that sees both the patriarchal logic of cinematic narratives and the spectacular power of female characters. I think there's something else at work with the *pontianak*, though. It's not simply that the films are sexist and our contemporary readings are feminist. That disruption, that feminine agency, and that ability to wreak havoc on normativity all exist within Malay cultures. Yee I-Lann sees that intrinsic potential in the *pontianak* – her art brilliantly articulates the *pontianak*'s feminism but it doesn't create it.

In Singaporean writer Alfian Sa'at's short story 'A Pontianak Story' (2012) [collected in Malay Sketches, 2012], the protagonist encounters a pontianak. He jots down in his notebook that he 'can also write about feminism: bloodsucking as draining the phallus of its hydraulic fuel. Hence male panic and impotence.' Do you see her as a feminist figure who can exists in varying registers? Or simply an enigmatic one who is restrained and anchored by traditional definitions and known consequences?

I definitely see her as existing in varying registers. Alfian's story really beautifully juxtaposes modern feminist and psychoanalytic perspectives with animist ones, and another fictional example I love is Zen Cho's [short story] 'The House of Aunts', (2011) which imagines a Chinese *pontianak* who has a family of busybody aunties. In visual media, there are television versions like *Ponti Anak Remaja* (2009), where a group of teenagers find a *pontianak* and use their biochemistry class to help her survive in the human world. In fact, you can look back to the late colonial *pontianak* films and see a similar engagement with traditional belief, modern science, religion, and so forth. So although the *pontianak* is anchored in some ways by traditional definitions, popular culture can spiral out from that anchor in many directions.

You suggest that 'the pontianak articulates feminist rage at injustice through the literary conjuring of a utopian violence and a wholly ironic mode of female apology'. You also propose the term 'Pontianak Feminism'. Could you explain a little more about the

pontianak's ability to confront and reject patriarchal values and what 'Pontianak Feminism' represents? How does she disrupt feminist and queer conventions?

Many *pontianak* films disturb patriarchy. One of the best known films is Shuhaimi Baba's *Pontianak Harum Sundal Malam* (2004), in which the heroine seeks revenge for her murder by an abusive man. More recently, Amanda Nell Eu's *It's Easier to Raise Cattle* (2017) imagines a young girl who looks up to a cool and vengeful *pontianak* as her best friend. But in developing the idea of Pontianak Feminism, I wanted to look beyond her obvious feminist agency and to think about how the figure demonstrates the intertwining of feminism and anticolonial histories. The idea of 'Pontianak Feminism' is an anti-colonial one. I don't want to apply feminism to the *pontianak*, but rather to start from the *pontianak* and to consider what this Malay figure can teach us about feminism and about cinema. One of the ways to do this is to realise that Pontianak Feminism is not about gender in isolation, but necessarily thinks about gender in relationship to colonialism and modernity.

With the pontianak embodying pre-colonial attitudes and animist worldviews, she is a complex figure who embodies the entanglements of the past and present which encompasses both imaginative and factual narratives. Do you think the pontianak is constantly transforming to accommodate more nuances? How does the figure and visual culture of the pontianak blur the lines of not only the binary of Self and Other within local contexts but also the global sphere?

An important aim of the project was to contribute to theories of world cinema. In film studies, we still often begin with Western models (say, of the horror genre) and then add and expand with examples from outside Euro-American cinema. Refusing that model, I wanted to ask how we might frame world cinema if we began from Southeast Asian cinemas? Priya Jaikumar makes a similar argument, noting in her recent book [*Where Histories Reside: India as Filmed Space*, 2019] that knowledge is sometimes seen as geographically located and other times seen as universal. So I wanted to think about the *pontianak* film as opening onto major questions for world cinema: such as, for example, the value of animism for understanding postcolonial aesthetics. Critical theory

in the West has drawn on animism as a mode of rejecting modernity, but it's very much abstracted from embedded cultural beliefs. By focusing on Malay animism as a historical worldview, I see it as knowledge that is grounded somewhere specific, but that can speak about cinema *per se*. And it does change over time, as filmmakers and artists – and audiences – reimagine the living world.

Many see the pontianak as a champion of the colonised and repressed— what postcolonialist thinker Gayatri Spivak termed as 'the subaltern', colonised individuals who are typically violently silenced [see Can the Subaltern Speak? Reflections on the History of an Idea, 2010]. Do you agree with this and why do you many think South East Asian societies resonate deeply with her despite our incessant fear of encountering one? How does the pontianak shape identities?

Colonial horror often takes its monsters from the belief systems of colonised people – think about zombies or *jinns* – and this expropriation of indigenous beliefs to be turned into monsters is a practice of colonial aesthetics. We can see in many cultural contexts a postcolonial resistance to that structure, and a reimagining of horror film that sees spirits as champions of the oppressed. There is a lot of popular fiction in which *pontianaks* kill British colonial men, for instance. But what is really fascinating is the way the *pontianak* continues to represent the downtrodden in postcolonial contexts. For example, in Eric Khoo's *Folklore* (2018) episode about the *pontianak*, the *pontianak* does not take revenge on her own long-dead killers but rather finds empathy for exploited Mainland Chinese and Indian construction workers in Singapore. The *pontianak* inspires love as much as she inspires fear, and that sense that she could speak where others cannot is a huge part of her enduring appeal and cultural complexity.

In your book, you also mentioned that the pontianak is 'a figure of disturbance, whose formal and narrative effect is to unsettle dominant narratives of decolonization in Singapore and Malaysia'. Could you explain how this observation came about?

I started to see that *pontianak* films were not only speaking about gender but a whole range of questions that are actually some of the key issues in understanding decolonisation in Singapore and

Malaysia. So there are tensions around gender and sexuality; but these aspects are also in relation to Islam and indigenous worldviews, race and national identities, tradition versus modernity, the environment and the politics of the forest. I realised that by centring the book on the figure of the *pontianak*, I could address a wide range of cultural and political histories. Moreover, often the dominant national narratives did not want to engage these issues substantively, or told reactionary or inadequate stories about belonging and difference.

Despite the pontianak deriving from Malay lore, the fear of encountering one transcends race, religion and cultural domains. Growing up in Singapore, we were told to never utter her name out loud for fear of her manifesting out of thin air and following us home. Unease also consumes us if an unexpected whiff of jasmine materialises out of nowhere. Such deeply ingrained horror still pegs us subconsciously despite the continuous engagement of science in debunking supernatural occurrences. What makes the pontianak a 'cross–cultural figure' and why do you think she still holds relevance and still haunts us all?

She is a cross-cultural figure because Malay culture has always been syncretic. Even the earliest historical artifacts of Malay culture refer to different languages and religions from across Asia, and I think that history of encounter and exchange has shaped something that is still meaningful in Singapore and Malaysia. Of course, the modern history of plural cultures in the region emerges from colonialism, and there are many ways we could criticise how race has shaped both nations in the postcolonial era. I think the *pontianak* calls back to an earlier era of cultural exchange, and something deeply rooted in the land of Southeast Asia – an experience everyone can share.

Anthropologists have always seen folklore as imperative in understanding culture as explained by Alan Dundes. He argued [in Interpreting Folklore, 1980] that 'folk' should not represent simply the past of groups of people from rural backgrounds. Do you think these figures or the pontianak have been 'weaponised' in the discussion of bigger issues and perhaps typifies a gentler approach in the discussion of sensitive socio-political dialogues?

It would be easy to assume that the *pontianak* is a straightforwardly 'Malay' and 'folk' figure, representing a distant folkloric past. But already, to see the figure as animist and pre-Islamic is to set up a problem, since Malay identity is so closely intertwined with Islam. She is Malay but not Muslim, and she equally belongs to both Singapore and Malaysia, so in this 'folk' figure, both national and ethnic identities are destabilised. Of course, both Malaysia and Singapore are cultures in which racialisation is a central facet of everyday life, and yet is very sensitive and hard to talk about. The *pontianak* is absolutely one of the ways that popular culture navigates these waters – whether it's through observant Muslim *pontianaks* in popular film and television series or through transgender *pontianaks* who engage in more direct activism.

Across the years the pontianak has been featured in countless horror films in Southeast Asia. Interestingly, she also appears in satire films being ridiculed in comedic and romantic subplots as seen in Tolong! Awek Aku Pontianak (2011) and Zombi Kilang Biskut (2017). How and what do you think encouraged this shift?

A production still from *Sumpah Pontianak* (1958), directed by B.N. Rao, Cathay-Keris Films (Photo courtesy of Wong Han Min and Asian Film Archive)

A big part of this shift can be explained by the trend toward genre hybridity in Malaysian cinema, and horror film in particular. Horror has really exploded in Malaysia in the last 20 years, to the point that it might seem strange to argue that there is still a certain cultural tension around the genre. Still, representations of the dead, or of spirits, *jinns* and *hantu* retain the power to unsettle religious sensibilities, and mixing horror with comedy has been one popular way to manage that difficulty. Even for audiences who are not highly devout, the *pontianak* is genuinely scary, and laughing at things we're scared of can also be powerful. Huge horror comedy hits like *Hantu Kak Limah* (2018) demonstrate that this has been a winning formula for Malaysian filmmakers. Also, I've been arguing that the *pontianak* film is often politically progressive, and comedy and satire have also been significant sites of political engagement in these films.

You explained that the pontianak evokes a 'vampiric decolonizing imaginary' and 'it tempers bloodthirsty revenge with cross-cultural bonds'. Could you speak more about the collapsing of distances between cultures and how the pontianak in cinematic spaces is a figure of activism and mediates global tensions?

I've already mentioned some ways in which we could see her as a figure of activism: feminist and transgender *pontianaks*, or *pontianaks* who take revenge on the perpetrators of racial injustice. But we might also look at the way that the *pontianak* is associated with forests and, specifically, those rainforests most urgently at risk from unchecked logging. These are truly global tensions, among the need for countries like Malaysia to leverage its natural resources within global capitalism, the dire consequences of this environmental degradation, and the animist worldview with which the forest and the spirits that dwell there might be better protected. *Pontianak* films are often set in and around forests, and I tried to develop a way of thinking about animism as cinematic form. When we see everything within the frame as imbued with the same *semangat* or spirit, then Western art historical distinctions of figure versus ground are not so relevant. In forest scenes, there is often little perspective or negative space, as tropical foliage fills the frame. Trees are important. In fact, Amanda Nell Eu went to ask 'spiritual permission' to film from the tree which was a focus of her film. Horror film might seem distant from global questions of environmental policy, but I see these films as mediating culturally our relationship to the earth.

Hantu Kak Limah (2018)

Speaking about cinematic spaces, could you share with us more about the intricacy and complexities of the relationship between the pontianak and Malay Kampungs? Why do you think the Kampung plays such a pivotal role in the discussion of the pontianak?

The *pontianak* is a figure from pre-colonial and even pre-Islamic times in Malay cultures. She's closely associated with the kampung, or rural village, in part because the kampung is also linked to a traditional way of life that is associated increasingly with the past. Some people think there may not be any more *pontianaks* in Singapore because the urban space is too modernised for them. But the kampung is not only a link to the pre-colonial past, but what that space evokes culturally. For some, the kampung suggests a conservative vision of traditional values, a patriarchal social order. Appeals to a kind of nostalgic kampung past can be compared to similar ideas about a phantasmatic conservative world before modernity in many cultures. The *pontianak* disrupts that fantasy, for example, reminding us of female social power in traditional Malay societies. In *Revenge of the Pontianak* (2019) by Glen Goei and Gavin Yap, for example, the *pontianak* takes

revenge against all the village elders who have allowed her murderer to go free. The kampung is where we might expect to encounter a *pontianak* but it is also the space in which the films reimagine Malay cultural spaces.

Disputing the popular notion that Dracula or the vampire is a Western construction, you remarked that Bram Stoker 'appropriated Malay indigenous narratives long before Malay cinema borrowed back European genre tropes'. Could you speak more about this?
I was fascinated to learn that one of Bram Stoker's inspirations for the novel *Dracula* was a colonial travel memoir that described various Malay *hantu* including the *pontianak*. You can look at his notes and see that there are only three sources on different vampire-like creatures, so this was a significant influence. I was not the first to make this discovery, and my research here builds on the work of Stu Burns ['Vampire and Empire: Dracula and the Imperial Gaze', in *eTropic: electronic journal of studies in the tropics*, 2017]. What seemed particularly relevant for me was that this major global figure of horror – Dracula – emerged out of colonial circulations. So where people sometimes describe the *pontianak* as 'like an Asian vampire', it would be more accurate to say that Dracula is like a European *pontianak*. This shift in perspective could change how we think about the history of horror film.

Revenge of the Pontianak (2019) (Photo courtesy of Tiger Tiger Pictures)

To conclude, what do you think the future holds for the pontianak?

Selfishly, I should want her to go global and thus sell many copies of my book… but I think there is also something stickily local about her. For whatever reason, she hasn't become a generic figure of Asian horror and I consider her localness to be very much part of her appeal. I would like to see more queer *pontianak*

films, though. There are so many hints across the genre and it's time for a boldly queer version of the story!

Selected pontianak filmography

Pontianak (1957, B.N. Rao, Singapore)
Sumpah Pontianak (1958, B.N. Rao, Singapore)
Anak Pontianak (1958, Roman Estella, Singapore)
Ponti Anak Remaja (2009, Nizam Zakaria, Malaysia)
Pontianak Harum Sundal Malam (2004, Shuhaimi Baba, Malaysia)
Tolong! Awek Aku Pontianak (2011, James Lee, Malaysia)
It's Easier to Raise Cattle (2017, Amanda Nell Eu, Malaysia)
Zombi Kilang Biskut (2017, Mamat Khalid, Malaysia)
Hantu Kak Limah (2018, Mamat Khalid, Malaysia)
Revenge of the Pontianak (2019, Glen Goei, Gavin Yap, Singapore)

‘THE WORLD IS ONLY WHAT IT IS’: A ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION ON POSSESSION (1981)

Hosted by Alison Taylor

It has been four decades since Andrzej Żuławski’s genre-defying *Possession* (1981) was released. With its tormented couple’s emotional evisceration playing out against the backdrop of the Berlin Wall, in some ways the film feels like a time capsule of a not-so-distant past. In other ways, the film feels very much of the present moment. It speaks to today’s apocalyptic mood; with the seemingly endless cycle of bad news about climate change, global pandemics and escalating geopolitical tensions, the world we live in feels laden with ambient horror. The suffocating proximity of the camera to Marc and Anna’s domestic disputes no doubt also captures something of the insular and claustrophobic feeling experienced by many amidst COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns. One could be forgiven for feeling the world weariness of Heinrich’s mother, lamenting ‘The world is only what it is… Murderous, if we are the best of it.’ Notwithstanding this very real atmosphere of disenchantment (or perhaps because of it?) Żuławski’s *Possession* – emotionally harrowing with moments of absurd humour – continues to resonate with audiences. To discuss the film, Żuławski’s complicated gender politics, and the pernicious cultural legacy of Oprah Winfrey, I am joined by Kat Ellinger and Daniel Bird.

Alison Taylor

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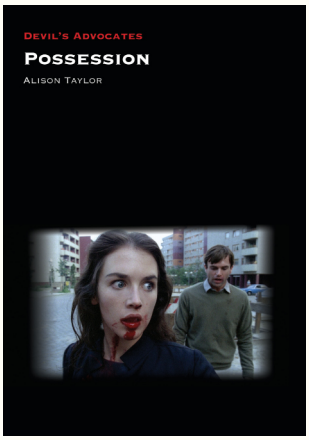

Possession, by Alison Taylor, in the Devil's Advocates series (LUP, 2022).

Ali: I think it's fair to say we've all dedicated a substantial amount of time to thinking about and researching *Possession* over the years, so I'm wondering what first drew you to this film, and what it was that compelled you to pursue it further?

Daniel: Isabelle Adjani, to be honest. I can't remember what came first: reading a description about *Possession* in *The Aurum Film Encyclopaedia of Horror* (and the accompanying still of Adjani in the U–Bahn) or Basia Baranowska's French poster. When I did get to see it, I was, obviously, struck by the intensity of the performances, the framing and blocking of shots (more *Texas Chain Saw Massacre* than Bergman), the blue look, the dialogue (yes, all the faith and chance stuff sounds pretentious, but it did intrigue me with regards to the author's/authors' intention), Korzyński's soundtrack and the general Cold War apocalyptic vibe, which is now back in fashion. Thanks for everything, Putin.

Kat: I'm going to have to go ahead and look like a total philistine here but to be completely truthful because it was listed as a video nasty here in the UK. Like many other horror fans who grew up during that time, where everything was hidden away or if it was lucky enough to get an official release, more than likely cut, anything that got a place on that list instantly became grail. I cut my teeth on nasty list favourites, so after *Cannibal Ferox* and *Evil Dead* it came as a bit of a shock – a good one though! I can't say I entirely understood the film until I was older, wiser, and had a divorce under my belt. That's when it really hit home. I think when it comes to the theme of toxic relationships it's one of the most emotionally truthful films ever made.

Ali: I came to the film pretty late myself. It was probably around 2007, I was working in a video shop and one day I came upon this DVD cover that had the arresting image of Sam Neill holding Margit Carstensen, her throat slit. It was so gruesome in fact that I think the managers had put a little circle sticker over the cut throat – usually this privilege was only reserved for the nipples on the front cover of our woeful collection of soft-core pornography. My exposure to Sam Neill to that point had been as the hero in *Jurassic Park* (1993) and *Dead Calm* (1989) so I just couldn't reconcile that this guy on the cover was the same man. I had never heard of Żuławski and went into the film completely unprepared.

It really got under my skin and was just so entirely unlike anything I'd ever seen before. I was really affected by the performances, particularly by Adjani who was just on an entirely different level to what I thought performance was or could be. The emotional pitch of it also just really got to me, as bonkers as the plot is, the emotions just felt so real. It's been a film I haven't been able to put down since I first saw it. Twelve years later I was giggling in the BBFC archives at the classification board's debates over whether bonking a tentacle monster counted as bestiality or not. It has been a ride! So in the course of your relationship with this film what is the thing that has struck or surprised you most?

Daniel: I think relationships with films are like relationships with people. As soon as you get to know everything about someone, they lose their appeal. Relationships that last, at least for me, always involve an element of unpredictability, something that comes with unknowability, and that's also true of my relationship with *Possession*. In other words, I've never been able to possess *Possession*. I still don't know what it is about, and I think some of that comes from a gap, a failing on Żuławski's part, not just artistically, but in communicating whatever it is he wanted to say, if he had anything to say, which I don't think he did, because he doesn't understand why Anna leaves Marc. Also, she comes back to him. Forget the sound of bombs, *Possession* has a happy ending – Marc and Anna kiss and make up, admittedly after being shot to bits. Anna fatally shoots Marc through her own back in a blatant act of female–male Freudian penetration.

Films, like relationships, and, let's face it, life, are best ending with a bang and not a whimper. What's left is something that's

independent of author intentions – *Possession* is all sound and fury, with a floating, monstrous signifier at the centre. It captures that feeling of meaningless and nothingness that accompanies a failing relationship with not just people, but also language (unfortunately for relationship counsellors, therapists, diplomats, and even philosophers, not to mention film critics, some problems just can't be resolved through talking or even words), and the world (that's what depression is, where suicide is the ultimate act of disconnection).

That said, I also find *Possession* very funny. The chef-waiter pile-up in the cafe, the bit where Marc looks at the slice of white bread as Anna puts clothes in the fridge. The bit when Marc says 'if I throw myself at your feet…' and she just ignores him – hilarious. Heinrich, when he says 'in other words, where is she' – he's aware of his own pretentiousness. Not to mention the gay private detectives' 'wives, wives, wives, wives' – if there is to be a *Possession* expanded universe then those guys need their own series.

Kat: The thing that always surprises me about *Possession* is the same thing that surprises me about most of Żuławski's work in that he clearly had a very complicated relationship with women and yet it's also weirdly feminist in ways I'm not sure Żuławski would have been entirely comfortable with. Feminine rage is such a key part of the director's films and this one is the screaming figurehead of them all. Anna is an angry woman, someone who has internalised that rage – rage as an abandoned wife, rage as a mother –and finally she lets it all out and it's cathartic (for me at least). When are women allowed to be angry like this in cinema or in life for that matter? There are acceptable forms of girl power anger and this isn't it. And yet to me it's all the more powerful for it. I am always taken aback by the fact that no matter how many times I see it, I always feel catharsis. What's more, that sense of cathartic release has only deepened as I've come to know the film more. It's like doing a good workout on a punch bag, just without the sweating.

Daniel: Kat, I have difficulty accepting your assertion that Żuławski was feminist, but at the same time, I know exactly what you mean. I remember Żuławski saying, 'why can't women be women and men be men?' At the same time, he characterised feminism as 'women behaving like men', and lamented men 'not learning from women'.

He wrote an interesting article once for *Twój styl* (incidentally, all of his later books were published by a spin-off publishing house associated with *Twój styl*, a Polish magazine for women – he wrote a popular series of articles on famous couples – he sometimes asked me to order him English biographies as part of his research, like Donald Spoto's biography of Lotte Lenya for his article about Lenya and Kurt Weill – these are collected in a book called *We dwoje / Two of Us*). It must have been the late 90s, and if I remember correctly it was called 'My Actors', as opposed to 'My Actresses'. His actresses, he said, were male, and his actors, female. While Greer has been side-lined for obvious reasons, she has written about the idea of the muse not as something passive, but psychologically penetrative. Orson Welles had a similar theory, and I suspect this is not necessarily where Żuławski got it from, but it certainly rang true.

In a *Cahiers Du Cinéma* interview around the time of *Mr Arkadin*, Welles argued that the only good artists are feminine. That's not to say that male artists are homosexual. Rather, Welles argued that intellectually an artist must be a man with 'feminine aptitudes'. When I interviewed Żuławski about *La Femme publique* (1984) and he said something like he had yet to see a female director who was effective when it came to eliciting good performances, I don't think it was as chauvinistic as it sounds – rather he was talking about the sexual aspect of directing, and the problem of a female director playing the role of a male with feminine aspects. As Welles put it, it gets rather complicated.

My response was to give Żuławski a pile of DVDs by [Czech director Věra] Chytilová, [Ukrainian–Soviet director Larisa] Shepitko and [Ukrainian director Kira] Muratova. For the record he had a lot of time for Chytilová and Muratova, and very much liked Shepitko's *The Ascent* (1977), but lamented her talking like 'a stupid communist' in [Elem] Klimov's [short film] *Larisa* (1980). All this is very 2022. There's a line in *La Femme publique*, when Kessling says something like he's not 'completely gay'. I think that's also true of Żuławski – you have what's become a stereotype now, typified by something like *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, as if aesthetic sensibility is, as Welles says, essentially 'feminine'. Żuławski clearly had an eye, you could at the very least imagine he would have had a career as a stylist – his films look great, in the way that, for example, Zanussi's or Agnieszka Holland's don't. They're TV, bad Polish TV, whereas *La Femme*

publique very consciously looks at the very least like a *North by Northwest* (1959) with styling by Helmut Newton.

I think the reason why Żuławski appeals to so many women, despite how badly he treated them, is that he projected himself into his female characters. Would you agree? Conversely, it's his male characters that are ciphers, they're the ones which are badly sketched… There's a lot more of Żuławski in Anna than in Marc, that's for sure. In my opinion, Anna bears very little resemblance to Małgorzata Braunek. I'd say both Anna and Marc are Żuławski's projections, but mostly Anna. I mention this simply because I think we must ratchet up this discussion – I don't think Żuławski hated women, but he was fascinated and terrified of them.

Like Donald Trump and sharks, going by what Stormy Daniels had to say. For me, I think most misogynistic behaviour can be explained on the grounds of a complete disinterest in women and femininity. As the sole male participant, I defer to my esteemed colleagues here… I think most behaviour that could be construed as misogynistic can be explained by either an inability or an unwillingness to empathise. Sure, Adjani is a hot body writhing around in goo – but I think the reason that scene makes such an impression with people is that it taps into a fear of being taken over without consent – whether it's by a spirit or illness. In other words, regardless of gender, you are her. Żuławski was really into archetypes, comparative religion and anthropology, especially symbolic imagery of vulvas, mirrors and circles – this, of course, is at the heart of *Possession* – in the doubling, the camerawork, the locations, etc.

In my opinion, there needs to be a lot more written about this aspect of Żuławski – the gay porn at the beginning of *L'important c'est d'aimer* (1975), the gay rape in *Diabeł* (1972), the gay detectives, the tendency to cast gay male leads as love interests to ingénue du jour, etc. If I was an enterprising distributor, I'd market *Mes nuits sont plus belles que vos jours* (1989) as an Almodóvar film – but a good one, like *Woman on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* (1989) or *What Have I Done to Deserve This?* (1984) – not as the polite, harmless middle-class John Waters-lite gay uncle he has been playing this last twenty, twenty-five years now.

Ali: This question of Żuławski and gender is really interesting because many people are horrified by the way his films treat

women, but at the same time they, and particularly *Possession* have a huge female following. For me, Anna feels like a feminist figure in some ways – though I realise this wasn't Żuławski's intention – because she is treated as this woman who has a very realised emotional depth. And maybe that's to say she feels real, more that she feels like a woman, but if you think of how lazy some writers are when it comes to female characters, who see them as a plot device as though there is no need to imagine them as having any meaningful interiority, Anna is different. Oh wow, a woman on screen that feels like an actual human – maybe I'm revealing how low my expectations are for a feminist icon… But there is something about her emotional life that feels very authentic. She has desires and fears of her own independent of Marc and Heinrich that she's trying to understand.

I think there's this fundamental duality here as with just about everything in *Possession*, though. I think I described in the book as feeling a bit like an unhinged telling of *A Doll's House* on the one hand – Anna leaves her husband and child to pursue her own desires – but on the other she's a neurotic woman who destroys the family unit. Neither of these feels to me like it explains the complexity of what's going on but at the very least, it feels like Żuławski understands his female characters to imagine that complexity. Perhaps this is the projection of himself into them that Daniel mentioned.

As you knew Żuławski well, Daniel, I trust your judgment regarding his feelings of fascination and terror towards women, it's just curious that the way his work translates to a lot of female audiences is perhaps in spite of these feelings. I agree with Kat wholeheartedly about the catharsis of seeing Anna's anger. How often are women told how to be in the world? They're too emotional, or ought to smile more, or fulfil certain expectations. And then there's this woman on screen who just lets all of that anger rip in the most unbridled, terrifying way. It's brilliant. Which nicely links to my next question…

Daniel: Not wishing to trample on your excellent segue to the next question, Ali, but I think that point needs underlining. We're living through a moment when there is a kickback against the idea of the artist and artwork being separate. Seems like the author wasn't dead after all – it keeps coming back for more, just like *The Terminator*. Nevertheless, I do feel, as you suggest, and as Kat's

responses proves, that you can have, let's say, complex thoughts and feelings about, for example, women, and yet your work isn't necessarily misogynistic. Conversely, I think we must not rule out the existence of people with wholly commendable views on, for example, women, turning out work which is, paradoxically, misogynistic. I see this a lot right now with these drives for representation – i.e. you got the gig because of your gender, not your voice – i.e. commissioners pretending to listen as opposed to listening – the silence of positive discrimination is deafening.

Obviously, I've never been in this position myself, but if I was a woman and was approached to bring a 'feminine perspective' or 'authority' on a gender issue, then I would probably respond like Anna during much of *Possession* – but I say this from a position of privilege. You can be a Nazi, run a company using slave labour, and sleep with your employees and still come out on top in history – just ask Oscar Schindler. Yes, Żuławski affected this Hemingway parody thing now and then, but, just like with Hemingway, it was perhaps an over compensation for a genuine affinity he had for women, let's say. He did, after all, work with as many women producers as men producers, not just Marie-Laure Reyre, but also Albina du Boisrouvray, not to mention writers – Danièle Thompson, Dominique Garnier, Manuela Gretkowska, not to mention adaptations of Raphaële Billetdoux (even though she didn't like *Mes nuits sont plus belles que vos jours* – in one interview she said something like 'Żuławski's pissed on my cupcake', but that was his *raison d'être*), Lafayette, an unfilmed (partial) adaptation of Rachilde, etc.

Ali: Everyone knows the infamous U–Bahn scene with Anna rolling in the muck, but is there another that you feel really gets to the heart of what *Possession* is about?

Daniel: My favourite sequence was always Heinrich's home movie, or rather Marc watching it – it makes perfectly clear that Anna has not just left Marc for Heinrich, but Heinrich making Marc aware that he knows all the drugs, tantric sex, new age bullshit, left-wing ideology with middle class comforts in the world won't solve Anna's troubles – her unhappiness is transcendental, or to use Anna's words, it 'pierces reality', like cancer or madness.

Kat: The bit that always gets me is Bob in the bath. But then I read the film through my own personal experiences I guess, on a

purely emotional level as blunt force trauma, a scream, composed of all the hurtful emotions attached to a bad relationship breakdown coming at you all at once – not sure what that says about me and relationships to be honest, but hey, *Possession* can be therapy. The kind of relationship that's become so nasty and toxic, destructive, where everyone has just lost sight of why they were angry in the first place. Bob in the middle of it, just floating, it's like: the kids suffer. I don't know, I am disgustingly sentimental so that one always pierces me right through the heart. Even though he's mostly at the sidelines, it's Bob's life too but nobody sees or notices him really.

Ali: Oh, don't worry, Kat. It's not just you! When I'm describing *Possession* to someone, I tell them to imagine the worst break up they've ever had and what that felt like, and then what that would look like on screen – not the break up itself, but the emotional expenditure. And I just hope they know what I mean, but maybe they've only had healthy functional relationships… Scene-wise though, I'm all about the Café Einstein blow up. It feels like a microcosm of the film for me. The expressionism of the staging of the couple at odds with the mirrors behind, the bristling tension that erupts and then becomes absurdist humour.

Moving on – *Possession* is Żuławski's best known film, but it exists in conversation with an entire career of incredible filmmaking. How do you see it in relation to Żuławski's broader authorial project?

Daniel: Clearly, Żuławski forges a stylistic association with *The Third Part of the Night* (1971). Also, *The Devil* (1972) is about a man who comes home to find his wife pregnant with his best friend as the father. *L'important c'est d'aimer* is also about infidelity, but from a horn dog's point of view, not the cuckolded. *On the Silver Globe* (1988) is also (partly) about a guy who escapes earth because his partner has been unfaithful (and meets an actress who 'performs' the role of the unfaithful wife as some sort of preordained ritual – she has sex with a monster too). In short, Żuławski only ever remade the same film. *La Fidélité* (2000) is another film about how faithfulness is just as awful as unfaithfulness – the jealous husband has an affair with a transexual before dying of congenital heart failure and reappearing as a ghost to absolve his wife, who is now a nun, the sound of a motorbike at the very end suggesting that she can now, finally, consummate her relationship with the guy

she is attracted to. *Cosmos* (2015) is about a guy who falls in love with a girl, her guy hangs himself, and the new guy and the girl set off for a new, and probably disastrous, relationship as actress and screenwriter. It's a happy ending too, even though we know deep down it's going to end like *Summer with Monika* (1953). *La Femme publique* is a commentary about getting performances out of actresses, like Adjani.

I don't know how Żuławski would have handled #MeToo. I guess he'd remind people that he called out Weinstein before it was fashionable, and probably accuse the entire industry of being populated by self-centred, subservient and sycophantic hypocrites, always putting their own careers before anyone and anything else. *L'Amour braque* (1985) is, ultimately, like Dostoevsky, about the problem of 'good', and how, paradoxically, the right, the just, the selfless, often makes things worse (think, for an example, of a missionary screwing up an indigenous tribe, or an effort to decolonise that results in a bloodbath) – this, of course, is a very conservative way of thinking. I think critics today are troubled with the idea that you can be both conservative and avant-garde. It's not conservative in the Roger Scruton sense, but conservative in the sense of someone cynical of the fallout from misguided idealism. Żuławski was born into Nazism, grew up during Stalinism and lived through capitalism – of course he was going to throw up when some Western intellectual lectured him on how everything would be better if we adopt Maoism, or socialism in its Trotsky form. He saw [critic Slavoj] Žižek as a clown, in the tradition of Diogenes, not someone to be taken at face value or even, perhaps, seriously.

Kat: I think this comes back to what I was saying about feminine rage and *Possession* also appearing all over his other films. As an entire thesis they work under the heading: Mad Love; where men quite often literally want to possess women, and women break down under the mental stress of it all, after remaining unfulfilled in some way or another. I see Żuławski as a romantic in the truest sense: love in his films is doomed, it's hurtful. It's like the line in *The Third Part of the Night*: 'I can't be close to you without suffering.' Some people can't be apart but they can't be together either, so instead they just tear each other to bits – or at least in one of his films eat their obsession in a cannibalistic rite. But there's something very earnest underneath it all. Something pure that speaks to the need to be loved. Outside of his early work, the

political level in some of those films, as a filmmaker working within the Soviet Bloc, I think they fit nicely into the entire canon of French existential romance that had its heyday in the seventies, or films like *The Night Porter* (1974) where love is a form of spiritual decay. But like I said, I am terribly sentimental about things.

Ali: It's now been four decades since *Possession* was released, and it continues to gain new audiences. What is it about this film that endures, do you think?

Daniel: I think we are living through a profoundly self-centred age, where socialism is dead and all the remains is the signification of selflessness (take, for example, the recent Australian TikTok video of the kid giving flowers to a woman and uploading it as an act of kindness and the woman in question quite rightly expressing her feeling of being exploited). Self-expression is everything, real dialogue (whether it is conversation, debate or screenplays) is nothing. All there is, is just discourse on the left and diatribe on the right. Everything is, 'for me', and 'my truth'. Thanks for nothing, Oprah. *Possession* is the perfect film to express oneself or rather through. Had a bad day? Crack open that U–Bahn freakout meme on Twitter. Boyfriend/girlfriend doesn't get you? Post a picture of Anna on Insta and say you're just like her.

In all honesty, the scene in *Possession* that says everything about Żuławski is the café one when Marc goes nuts. Żuławski could never quite understand why someone might not possibly be interested in him – he was, after all, the most handsome, the most talented, the most intelligent… and yet, why do they keep leaving me? In other words, for all his profound intelligence, erudition and, above all else, charm, he was emotionally stunted. The world, however, has caught up with him. We are a generation of emotional retards. We have a right to everything, and when we don't get it, we scream. On social media. It's unbearable. I think this aspect of the film, and it's only one aspect, is what resonates with most people. Regardless of gender, we all identify with Anna – beautiful, mysterious, misunderstood, the angelic slut – we forgive her emotional incontinence, because that's who she really is, her true self, she's being authentic, fuck what everyone else thinks, who cares about their ears going deaf with all the screaming, the broken furniture, etc. That sounds cruel, ruthless and horrible, I know. It is also, of course, a provocation. Much like *Possession*.

Kat: I agree with Daniel, there is an emotional purity to it, which we can all relate to. That said, I see a hell of a lot of women who discover the film and it resonates so much for them. Obviously Kier-La Janisse's seminal book *House of Psychotic Women* (which just had a tenth anniversary reprint) had a lot to do with this, in putting the film front and centre of her project and with good reason – Anna's madness to me is like the filmic equivalent of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper*, in many way. In the depths of complete madness and hysteria, stripped away of all ego, both women are entirely free. I think we've all had moments where we've felt like rolling around on a subway floor just screaming and smashing our shopping up. I know I have.

Daniel: Kat, on that subject of a relatable feeling of wanting to roll around on the floor; there was a moment during the press conference of *Cosmos* in Locarno when Żuławski referred to R.D. Laing. I remember, back in the 90s, Foucault was all the rage, but Laing was treated as some sort of dated countercultural remnant, along with the Anti-Psychiatry movement as a whole (that was my general impression). You couldn't move for discarded paperbacks of *The Divided Self*, Reich or Janov's *The Primal Scream*. I don't know about Reich or Janov, but maybe one could say Laing has had a bit of a resurgence in recent years, and I think his very brutal conception of interpersonal relationships, which seem to be born out of his own clinical depression, not helped by alcoholism and a Cold War way of thinking (i.e. we're not fighting only because we're frightened of what the other will do). It seems like a good lens when it comes to looking at *Possession*.

Ali: That's a really interesting point about the self-centredness of today and the self-expression through social media. It makes me think of the moment when Marc sees Heinrich's home movie of Anna. In context, it's this piercing insight into Anna's interiority, an articulation of how she feels that cuts through the chaos of Marc and Anna's fights and speaks to him (and us) directly. It's like this film is an artefact that reveals Anna, and watching her on screen is a necessary part of that revelation. But how could you make a scene like that now and have it carry that meaning? People are always filming themselves, the idea of someone speaking into a camera about their feelings has become banal. If anything, the culture of living through images speaks more to the artifice of experience as even something as ordinary as breakfast is perceived

as an event to be fashioned for an audience on Instagram. I remember thinking how odd it was in the Herzog documentary *Grizzly Man* (2005) when Tim is recording himself talking about the majesty of bears and then runs to reset the camera so he can do it again with a bandana. But that's the culture now. He was just ahead of his time. Forget the male gaze, it's like social media has everyone perceiving themselves through the eyes of others. No wonder the world is so anxious. I think *Possession*, though, has this emotional honesty, or purity, as Kat said, that speaks so directly to what if feels like to be a human. It's direct because it's so extreme, but part of that honesty is that we're not used to seeing conveyed on screen, then or now.

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Notes on Contributors

Rosa Barotsi is a researcher and lecturer at the University of Modena and Reggio Emilia (Italy). She recently concluded a Marie Skłodowska-Curie Action at the Catholic University of Milan with the data-based project CineAF: Women's Films in Italy (1964-2015) on gender inequality in the Italian film industry. Since 2021, she has been one of the coordinators of The Purple Meridians joint project. She received her PhD at the University of Cambridge in 2014. She has previously held a postdoctoral position at the ICI Berlin Institute of Cultural Inquiry, where she developed a project on Slow cinema and debt. Along with Clio Nicastro and Saima Akhtar, she co-founded the In Front of the Factory research collective in 2016. Her research focuses on the intersections between film, gender and work, with an emphasis on Italian and Greek cinema.

Ariel Baska is a filmmaker, journalist, and academic author. Her first film, *Our First Priority* (2022), was an Official Selection of Final Girls Berlin and Frightfest UK, and won the Disability Advocacy Award from Superfest Disability Film Festival. Her first animated film, *She's Never Been a Bird Before* (2021), was featured at the Engauge Experimental Film Festival. She has received multiple scholarships from Sundance Collab, was a speaker at SXSW 2022, and has produced a number of documentaries and horror shorts. Her podcast, Ride the Omnibus, is parked at the intersection of pop culture and social justice. More information at arielbaska.com.

Daniel Bird is the co-founder of Friends of Walerian Borowczyk. He directs the Hamo Bek-Nazarov Project, which is concerned with film preservation and restoration in the South Caucasus and Central Asia. Recently he has co-produced restorations of Franciszka & Stefan Themerson's *Europa* (1931), Stephen Sayadian's *Dr Caligari* (1989), and Peter Weir's *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1975).

Kat Ellinger is an author and film critic. She is the Editor-in-Chief of *Diabolique Magazine*, a disc producer for Radiance Films, and co-director of the documentary *Orchestrator of Storms: The Fantastique World of Jean Rollin* (2022). She is the author of the 'Devil's Advocates' volume on Harry Kümel's 1971 film *Daughters of Darkness* (2020) and *All the Colours of Sergio Martino* from Arrow Books.

Alex Fitch presents the UK's only monthly broadcast radio show on comics – Panel Borders – on the Arts Council Radio Station in London, Resonance 104.4 FM. Alex has been widely published on the topics of comics and film, by Intellect, McFarland, the University Presses of Mississippi and Chicago, Cambridge Scholars and The Conversation. He is an award winning lecturer in Architecture, Visual Communication, and Film Studies at the University of Brighton, where he is pursuing a PhD on 'The Representation of Architecture in Comic Books'.

Rosalind Galt is Professor of Film Studies at King's College London. Her most recent book, *Alluring Monsters: the Pontianak and Cinemas of Decolonization* (Columbia UP, 2021) addresses Southeast Asian horror, gender, and postcolonial politics. She is also the author of *Pretty: Film and the Decorative Image* (Columbia UP, 2011), which won the BAFTSS best book award, *The New European Cinema: Redrawing the Map* (Columbia UP, 2006), as well as co-author of *Queer Cinema in the World* (Duke UP, 2016), winner of the SCMS Katherine Singer Kovács book award, and co-editor of *Global Art Cinema: New Theories and Histories* (OUP, 2010). In 2019-20, she was the recipient of a Lee Kong Chian NUS-Stanford Fellowship on Contemporary Southeast Asia and a Leverhulme Research Fellowship. She publishes widely on world cinema, gender, sexuality, and political histories.

Alexandra Heller-Nicholas is a two-time Bram Stoker Award finalist and an author, academic and film critic from Melbourne, Australia. She has published nine books on cult, horror and exploitation cinema with an emphasis on gender politics, including the recently revised *Rape-Revenge Films: A Critical Study* (2011/2021*), Found Footage Horror Films: Fear and the Appearance of Reality* (2014), books on Dario Argento's *Suspiria* (2015), Abel Ferrara's *Ms. 45* (2017) and Robert Harmon's *The Hitcher* (2018), *Masks in Horror Cinema: Eyes Without Faces* (2019), *1000 Women in Horror 1895-2018* (2020), and *The Giallo Canvas: Art, Excess and Horror Cinema* (2021). She is on the editorial board for the University of Wales Press series Horror Studies, and a member of the advisory board for the Miskatonic Institute of Horror Studies (LA/NYC/London). Alexandra holds a PhD in Screen Studies from the University of Melbourne and is an Adjunct Professor at Deakin University. She is a member of the Alliance of Women Film Journalists and a top critic at Rotten Tomatoes.

Jay McRoy is Professor of English and Cinema Studies at the University of Wisconsin – Parkside. He is the author of *Nightmare Japan: Contemporary Japanese Horror Cinema* (Rodopi, 2008), the editor of *Japanese Horror Cinema* (Edinburgh University Press, 2005), and the co-editor, with Richard J Hand, of *Monstrous Adaptations: Generic and Thematic Mutations in Horror Film* (Manchester University Press, 2007). His most recent book, also co-edited with Richard J Hand, is *Gothic Film: An Edinburgh Companion* (Edinburgh University Press, 2022).

Cameron Mitchell is a filmmaker, film festival programmer/juror, and teacher. His films have premiered in over 20 countries worldwide with his most recent work 'Elsa' about Deafblind author and fencer Elsa Sjunneson is premiering internationally on PBS. His first narrative film, *The Co–Op* (2021), was an Official Selection at Slamdance for its inaugural Unstoppable program which focuses on disability films and disabled filmmakers. His work has been featured on Netflix and in Rolling Stone and Variety. You can learn more about Cameron and his current projects at www.cameronsmitchell.com.

Alan Moore is Britain's most acclaimed comic book writer, providing the scripts for such titles as *V for Vendetta* (1982-1989), *Halo Jones* (1984-1986), *Watchmen* (1986-1987), *Batman: The Killing Joke* (1988), *Miracleman* (1982-1989), *From Hell* (1991-1998), *Lost Girls* (1991-2006) and *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* (1989-2019). His short film series *Show Pieces* (2012) culminated in the feature film *The Show* (2021), both directed by Mitch Jenkins, and show a fantastical underbelly to his hometown of Northampton, which also features as the location of his first short story collection *Voice of the Fire* (1996) and novel *Jerusalem* (2016). His second short story collection *Illuminations* was published by Bloomsbury in 2022.

Sharon Ndoen is a PhD Candidate at the National University of Singapore. She is currently completing her doctoral dissertation focusing on anti-Communist gender propaganda in Indonesian horror films produced during the Soeharto regime (1966-1998). She is the author of 'The "Monstrous-Feminine" as Anti-Communist Propaganda Tool: Invisible State Violence and Psychological Warfare in Soeharto Era Folkloric Horror Films' (2022), which was presented at the Twelfth International Convention of Asia Scholars (ICAS 12) in Kyoto, Japan. With an academic background in cultural anthropology, development

sociology, Indonesian studies, cultural studies, and film studies, her interests sit at many intersections. These interests are – but are not limited to – gender and feminist issues, power relations, de/coloniality, media representation, Indonesia, politics, and history.

Alison Peirse is an Associate Professor of Film and Media at the University of Leeds, UK. Her research explores women's invisible or overlooked contributions to the production of the horror film genre, thus working at the intersection of production studies and feminist film historiographies. Her books include *Rewriting Television* (2024), *Women Make Horror: Filmmaking, Feminism, Genre* (2020), *Korean Horror Cinema* (2013) and *After Dracula: the 1930s Horror Film* (2013). Her books and films have won awards around the world, and *Women Make Horror* was the inspiration for the 'Women Make Horror' season at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City in the summer of 2022.

Rabia Sitabi is a film programmer, marketing director, and pop culture expert with Asian and African roots. She has worked with many international film festivals, and is currently the Director of Marketing for Imagine Film Festival in Amsterdam, where she is based. She regularly appears on Dutch television and radio programs as a pop culture expert, and has spoken at SXSW. In 2022, she was the Diversity Ambassador to Sundance for the Film Festival Alliance. She co-hosts two podcasts, the Cultured Curators and Ride the Omnibus. More information at rpish.com.

Alison Taylor (Ali) teaches at Bond University, Australia. She is the author of the 'Devil's Advocates' monograph on *Possession* (LUP 2022) and *Troubled Everyday: The Aesthetics of Violence and the Everyday in European Art Cinema* (EUP 2017), and is currently co-writing a book on the work of Nicolas Winding Refn for SUNY's Horizons of Cinema series.

Émilie von Garan is a Toronto-based critical writer and researcher exploring the intersection of gender, technologies and architecture in film and moving image art. She holds an MA in Art History from OCAD University and is currently a PhD candidate in Cinema Studies at the University of Toronto. Her dissertation explores the instability of the gaze in post-war Italian cinema through the works of filmmakers Michelangelo Antonioni and Dario Argento. Her recent publications include 'Appropriating Cinema: On Networked Constellations and Posthuman Resonance

in Janice Gurney's The Newspaper' from *Community of Images: Strategies of Appropriation in Canadian Art* (YYZBooks) and 'Argento's Evil Eye: Movements, Containments, and the Giallo's Possessive Gaze' in the forthcoming *Bloodstained Narratives* (University of Mississippi Press).

Lydia Wong-Plain holds an MA with Distinction in Museum Studies and Curatorial Practices from Nanyang Technological University (NTU) Singapore. Before her engagement in the Arts, she managed investment portfolios crossing between finance and the arts for an international clientele. Since 2019, Lydia has been pursuing her PhD at NTU where her research focuses on developing new trajectories between the arts and the community through critique of cultural institutions in tandem with cultural policy. Her research is supported by the NTU research scholarship. In professional practice, Lydia is an adjunct lecturer at both Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA) and Lasalle College of the Arts in Singapore and has worked as a writer, project manager and curator.

Pea Woodruff is a writer, director, and producer, with extensive experience in camera and electrical departments in various roles for both television and film. She is currently finishing post-production on her film *Hunting Wolves,* which she wrote and directed.

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