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POPULAR CULTURE REVIEW

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From the Editor

Editing *Popular Culture Review* for the last 27 years has been a labor of love. I would like to acknowledge the support of UNLV's College of Liberal Arts and Department of English as well as PCA/ACA and, most recently Policy Studies Organization.

Thank you all,
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Popular Culture Review
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From the Editor's Desk.....	3
Popular Culture and Epistemological Doubt: The Limits of Reality in Postmodern Science Fiction	5
<i>Daniel Ferreras Savoye</i>	
<i>Fernando Ángel Moreno</i>	
The Doubling of Death: Human, Animal, the Real, and the Irreal in the Films of Michael Haneke.....	15
<i>H. Peter Steeves</i>	
Of Baudelaire and Holmes: Ennui in Contemporary Culture.....	27
<i>Rich Logsdon</i>	
The Crime Fiction of Leigh Brackett	37
<i>Christine Photinos</i>	
Y Si, Yo Creo: Thought, Belief, and the Search for At-one-ment in Darren Aronofsky's <i>The Fountain</i>	43
<i>Amy Green</i>	
More Than Just Ghost Lore in a Bad Place	53
<i>Alexandra Reuber</i>	
BOOK REVIEWS	65
<i>The Portrayal of Social Catastrophe in the German-Language Films of Austrian Filmmaker Michael Haneke</i> by Dennis Eugene Russell Reviewed by Daniel Ferreras Savoye.....	67
APPENDICES:	
Appendix A, "To the Reader, By Charles Baudelaire	
Translation by Robert Lowell	71
CONTRIBUTORS.....	73

From the Editor's Desk

Welcome to the Summer Issue of PCR. We hope the contents afford you some relief from the sweltering heat. Oddly in Las Vegas, we seem to be sweltering much less than the rest of the country, an anomaly of the climate change it seems.

This summer sees us awash in blockbuster films about super heroes, many based on comic book characters, and genre smashers such Cowboys and Aliens which Roger Ebert says is based on a pulp cover. Reality shows dominate television. Some food shows offer us tasty ways to destroy our arteries, while others go a step further extolling the virtues of gluttony with competition eating competitions and visits to "diners, drive-ins and dives." Competitions among cupcake bakers, cake sculptors, chefs, home and fashion designers and grotesque tots in tiaras provide new couch potato sports arenas. Pawn brokers are elevated to star status, as are pickers and restorers.

All of this, of course, reflects the times and shows what we are or want, or, at least, what media moguls think we are or want. What I am not seeing are many submissions either to PCR or our annual conference (February 24 – 26, 2012) dealing with this most obvious popular culture. There is plenty to say that hasn't been said this editor would certainly welcome articles and papers in these areas.

That said, I'll put in a plug for my favorite escape this summer, NBC's Chaos, a witty and entertaining CIA spoof well worth your time.

February conference details are at <http://farwestpca.blogspot.com>

This issue of PCR is brought to you through the efforts our new editorial staff Carol Turner and Claire L. Hand to whom I am incredibly grateful.

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Popular Culture and Epistemological Doubt: The Limits of Reality in Postmodern Science Fiction

It is generally assumed that the great philosophical questions regarding human understanding belong to the realm of “high culture,” by opposition to popular culture, which on the contrary is considered as mass oriented, purely escapist, and determined by strict, naturally anti-artistic commercial imperatives. Although such a view might prove accurate regarding many current and financially successful cultural artifacts,¹ it is no longer functional when applied to the totality of our ever changing cultural landscape, and it appears necessary today to evaluate the significance of an entire cultural corpus without preconceived notions nor cultural prejudices. Besides the well-known fact that countless authors and works considered at one time as part of “popular culture” have been since then canonically re-evaluated and have become part of “high culture,”² which should already make us suspicious of any clear-cut distinction between high and low culture, one cannot deny the increasing scholarly interest raised by popular cultural artifacts, as if our academically sound canon proved more and more unable to satisfy our critical inquiries.³ More than ever, it seems that the creations emanating from popular culture are worthy of scholarly attention and rightfully so, for some of them do tackle serious epistemological issues, such as the dialectic relationship between our perception of the world and the construction of reality.

The nature of reality and the cognitive tools at our disposal to apprehend it have long been a major epistemological issue, and the latest developments in postmodern critical theory are precisely centered around this particular question: from Derrida’s deconstructive move to Spivak post-colonialist views, post-structuralist thought would have us believe that the notion of an objective reality is a simple chimera and that any idea of the world we may have is but a cultural construction, most likely informed by deplorable hegemonic tendencies, either racial, sexual, or simply territorial. Whereas one can hardly espouse such a radical relativism, denounced elsewhere as mere rhetoric pose and “fashionable non-sense,”⁴ we must nonetheless acknowledge the persistence of our doubts regarding the exact nature of our relationship with our environment in terms of rational reduction and consider it as a fundamental epistemological question: reality may be what it seems to be but then again, maybe not. We expect naturally such concern to be expressed within the domain of “high culture” and implicitly addressed to its logical recipient; however, we find that what the proponents of cultural constructionism fail to prove, that is the essentially constructed nature of our reality, is at the very core of a reputed popular genre such as the Fantastic, which is rooted upon an incomplete knowledge of reality;

in structural terms, the archetypical Fantastic narration introduces a basic opposition between an highly identifiable reality and a supernatural element, which, by its mere existence, not only becomes the very reason for the narrative conflict, but underlines as well our epistemological limitations. The irruption of an unexplainable element or event within a realistic context—the very definition of the Fantastic genre⁵—suggests that our comprehension of the real is incomplete, and that therefore our cognitive tools are tragically inadequate: we have constructed a reassuring, rational view of a world we cannot know, and the irruption of the supernatural phenomenon shatters such illusion.

If the Fantastic genre by its very conception implicitly challenges our certainties regarding our ability to comprehend reality in rational terms, many Science Fiction narrations turn the question into a central theme by presenting reality itself as an exploitative construct,⁶ thus rejoicing the concerns of many postmodern theorists who argue for social constructionism. However, whereas the repeated attacks of social constructionism against objective reality appear unattainable, especially when confronted to the hard facts of scientific knowledge, the artistic domain of Science Fiction provides the necessary flexibility to articulate a coherent, albeit imaginary, representation of this fundamental epistemological issue; it allows to say what is, as of now, inexpressible.⁷

Often merged with Fantasy and Space Opera, Science Fiction is still in the process of being generically defined, and its significance as an important narrative genre depends in part upon this definition. Narrations such as *Star Wars* or *Star Trek*, two shining examples of the Space Opera genre, do not convey the same type of significance as for instance *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* or *The Matrix*, do not correspond to the same type of recipient, and probably should not be studied in the same manner. Structurally, a narration such as *Star Wars* follows a fairly predictable pattern, very reminiscent of the traditional epic that opposes two very basic forces and primal moral values, and exhibits the same narrative motifs, which are either adapted, i.e., horses are replaced by flying mopeds, castles become space stations, and Merlin turns into Yoda, or simply transposed, i.e., there is still a princess held prisoner and a one-on-one sword fight between the hero and the villain. *Star Trek* responds as well to a pre-established storyline, similar to that of Sinbad's travels, the sea having become deep space and the ship having turned into the Enterprise. In this sense, Space Opera is very close to the Marvelous, for it presents a narrative universe having very little relationship with ours, where supernatural phenomena are no longer surprising, and that establishes narrative authority by creating an independent, coherent narrative structure based upon the same principles as those of any chivalry book. Space Opera, along with Fantasy as represented by *Star Wars*, *Avatar*, *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy or the *Harry Potter* saga, can be seen as modern evolutions of the most elementary narrative structures, and do not place the questioning of reality at the center of their narrative universes, but rather use it as a simple narrative motif. We find for instance the concept of

“holo-deck” in *Star Trek*, that is of a *trompe l’oeil* designed to replace reality; however, its existence never challenges the certainties of the Enterprise crew regarding their perception of “true” reality: there cannot be any possible confusion between the real and the virtual, for the “holo-deck” functions mainly as a training or recreational device.⁸ It is indeed significant to encounter an almost identical contraption in the narrative universe of James Bond, which by definition is based upon a very solid, fossilized conception not only of reality itself, but of an entire system of values: the last installment to feature Pierce Brosnan as 007, *Die Another Day*, presents a virtual reality training program, which is used by James Bond to perfect his skills and abused by Ms. Moneypenny in order to fulfill her ever-frustrated sexual desire for 007. As to be expected, both sequences are kept very short in the economy of the narration and the artificial nature of that virtual reality is immediately revealed:⁹ there can be absolutely no doubt about reality in the righteous universe of 007 for it would surely endanger the welfare of the free world. Hence, to equate the *adventures* of James Bond with Science Fiction, as it has been done in some instances,¹⁰ is to deny the intrinsic characteristics to the genre, which is then reduced to its most obvious paradigms, such as spaceships and talking computers. *Moonraker* may happen in space and include all the gimmicks of the Space Opera; however, it remains a James Bond adventure, which does not question at any moment neither the true nature of reality, nor the accuracy of our epistemological tools.

If the genres of Fantasy and Space Opera—and that of spy films for that matter—tend to cater to our escapist tendencies and do not generally attempt to raise ontological questions, Science Fiction, on the contrary, has exhibited from the very start a definite affinity for the great philosophical issues, such as the nature of reality and the limits of our perception. From Jules Verne’s strangely prophetic scientific narrations to Phillip K. Dick’s dystopian novels, Science Fiction, as the Fantastic, is a genre centered around a serious reflexion regarding our reality rather than upon sheer entertaining qualities; in other words, the entertainment that is provided by Science Fiction resides in its capacity to stimulate some intellectual reflexion regarding our world rather than in its purely distracting features. Science Fiction, rather than separating us from reality as do Fantasy or Space Opera, forces us to consider it under a different light, as any scholarly worthy, “high culture” artifact would. The ambiguous academic status of Science Fiction is in itself indicative of a certain inconsistency within the selective process and amply justifies our intent, for if Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* or George Orwell’s *1984* are generally considered part of “high culture,” equally significant dystopian narrations such as Phillip K. Dick’s *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* or Stanislas Lem’s *Manuscript Found in a Bathtub* are confined to the status of minor works belonging to a popular genre.

Contemporary Science Fiction, which we may call postmodern more for its affinities with the radical skepticism that characterizes most post-structuralist theory rather than for chronological reasons, tends to shy away from its usual

narrative paradigms, most likely because they have become laden with connotations associated with Space Opera: spaceships or aliens have been re-organized, not to say recycled, into a traditional narrative syntagm very akin to the Epic and the Marvelous which has little or nothing to do with the original intent of Science Fiction, for the genre has always been more about questioning reality in a speculative or prospective manner rather than telling stories about adventures in space and heroic battles against evil aliens.¹¹

The doubts regarding the true nature of reality as we perceive it is not by any means a new theme in Science Fiction, and we can find it, for instance, as early as 1940 in Bioy Casares' *Morel's Invention*, which tells the story of a fugitive reaching an island populated by holographic beings who re-create the same scene over and over. The protagonist will eventually chose to join the holographic world which, in spite of its repetitiousness, offers an instant of perfect harmony that would be impossible to live in the real world. *Morel's Invention* thus introduces an important ontological issue by opposing reality to a construct of reality and allowing the protagonist to choose the construct over the real thing; the value of the objective world is challenged by technological creation and artificiality triumphs over nature. By the same token, the very existence of a possible divine presence is implicitly undermined: Morel was a man who created a world, however simple and rudimentary it may seem, which is in actuality preferable to the natural one. Morel is therefore a more successful creator than the elusive divine entity behind a more elusive yet intelligent design. In the logic of the story, and as far as the narrator is concerned, Morel is the smart one, not God.

We find development of the same theme in Phillip K. Dick's, *Time Out of Joint* (1959) and in Daniel Galouye's, *Simulacron 3* (1964) which can safely be considered as two great precursors of postmodern Science Fiction, for they share a great deal of similarities with the narrative composition of *The Matrix* and are thematically centered around the falseness of perceived reality. In both novels, the protagonists slowly discover that they are living in a constructed reality, and that everything they believe to be true is in fact a mere fabrication designed to exploit them. *Time Out Of Joint* and *Simulacron 3* can therefore be read as metaphors of some of the most provocative post-structuralist propositions, for both tell the story of a consciousness living an illusion while believing it is real, prisoner of the simulacra, as described by Baudrillard, and of his own epistemological constructions, as suggested by Derrida and his associates. The protagonists of both novels eventually learn the truth; however, the revelation is the result of an accident rather than the consequences of an epistemological quest. There is no real hierarchy between the real and the unreal from the point of view of their credibility, and nothing guarantees that what is presented as real is not in itself a construction. *Simulacron 3* further presses the issue by presenting two different levels of simulated reality—that is, two levels of false consciousness based upon an artificial construct—hence rendering the concept of reality more slippery than ever.

Significantly enough, the second and most commercially viable cinematographic adaptation of *Simulacron 3*, Josef Rusnak's *The Thirteenth Floor*, was released the same year as *The Matrix* and responded to the same thematic tendency: the possibility of creating a virtual reality as convincing as the real one. The ontological question arises during the famous scene where Cypher is negotiating his treason with agent Smith, and opposes two conceptions of reality: the Truth and the Matrix, and just as the protagonist of Morel's *Invention*, who chooses the illusion over reality, Cypher opts for the Matrix against the Truth. The condition Cypher poses to the agent Smith—"I don't wanna remember anything"—is epistemologically problematic for it allows for a logical shift with no clear solution: if the Matrix can replace the Truth, it implies that the Matrix and the Truth are interchangeable, therefore the Truth itself has to be a construction. This is what has become fashionable in postmodern rhetoric to refer to as an *aporia*: that is, a logical *impasse*.

Another episode from *The Matrix* illustrates the epistemological doubt regarding the nature of reality and the reliability of human perception and is all the more significant that it happens aboard Morpheus' ship, the Nebuchadnezzar, i.e., in the real world rather than in the virtual environment of the Matrix. During a meal, Mouse, the programmer, speculates about the mechanism of taste and concludes that our perception of food is mostly based upon a conventional relationship between words and aliments. Reality, then, becomes as much a question of conventions outside the Matrix, as well as inside, and individual perception is ignored in order to structure a collective epistemology: a set of conventions that regulate and limit our cultural understanding of the environment. Even aboard the freedom fighters' ship, reality remains a problematic notion that cannot be fully apprehended by human perception but rather reduced to a set of linguistic propositions, very much along the lines of Wittgenstein's conception of the insurmountable limits of human understanding expressed in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* and of the impossibility of metaphysical discourse pointed out in *Philosophical Investigations*.¹² This short dialog, seemingly inconspicuous when compared to the weight of Neo's interactions with Morpheus or with the Oracle, is in actuality more epistemologically significant for it presents an essential doubt regarding our perception of reality and the function of language and offers no possible resolution. Whereas Morpheus' and the Oracle's discourse, just as that of Trinity, are impregnated with metaphysical certainties that provide some type of direction, which will be proven correct as the story unfolds—Morpheus "feels" that Neo is "The One" and the Oracle, as the vessel of a higher, comprehensive Truth, is in charge of verifying the Hero's ontological integrity. Mouse's meditation upon the disturbingly aleatory relationship between signifier, signified, and referent takes place outside of the Matrix, in the real world and in a highly identifiable situation, that of a meal; his interrogation is not directly related to the narrative syntagma and has no real incidence upon its development, for it is a proposition that cannot lead anywhere, yet another

aporia, and naturally, it doesn't benefit from any type of collective epistemological support: quite to the contrary, since Mouse's crewmates do not respond to his inquiry, but rather discard it in a condescending manner. By questioning the effectiveness of language as the privileged vehicle to relate our consciousness to the reality that surrounds us, Mouse's reflexion echoes the concerns of French philosopher Brice Parain, who suspected language to be "a loose lever" (*Une manette qui branle*), unable to precisely convey the true intent of the speaker, and consequently, an unreliable tool to know and express the truth. The narrative treatment of the character suggests the despair of the unsolvable, for Mouse is the youngest and most immature member of the crew, and his demeanor appears clumsy and insecure. He clearly occupies the Omega position in the power structure, and it is taken for granted in the logic of the narration that the opinions of a fidgety, barely out of adolescence nerd will have little bearing upon the resolution of the conflict. His personality is in total accordance with his name, the connotations of which can be opposed not only to those of the all-mighty Oracle, but to those of his shipmates as well—Tank, Switch, Dozer, Cypher, and of course, Morpheus and Trinity—and onomastically underlines the powerlessness of the character. In spite of being the programmer, Mouse has a very reduced active role in the narration, for he represents a problematic point of view that clashes with the metaphysical conceptions put forward by Morpheus and shared by the rest of the crew. Naturally, he will be the first to die after Cypher betrays his friends.

The Matrix thus questions the nature of reality and the validity of our perception on two levels: directly, by establishing the concept of a constructed reality as one term of the narrative conflict, and indirectly, through apparently innocuous comments concerning the desire for complete memory loss or the arbitrary phenomenological reception of "Tasty Weet" in relation to language, which can be related to the uncertainties regarding language and epistemology expressed by thinkers such as Wittgenstein or Parain. However, whereas Mouse's considerations are most destabilizing, for they suggest the possibility of a linguistic matrix at work within our consciousness, a notion that is very close to the trendy postmodern concept of "the prison-house of language," and hence points to the probable similarities between the Matrix and what we consider to be our reality, the dominating narrative syntagma, rather than exploring the ambiguity created by a dual reality, thrives to resolve the conflict in a metaphysical manner. In this sense, *The Matrix* is self-contradictory for it clearly presents a problematic view of our relationship to reality but shies away from its epistemological consequences, favoring an archaic resolution to a fundamental philosophical issue. Rather than confronting the distressing possibility that any structure of knowledge might be the product of an exploitative matrix, the narration introduces a savior, Neo, who is miraculously able to transcend the rules of the Matrix in the name of the Truth just as any saint transcends those of the natural world in the name of the Divine, and who re-establishes a traditional, religiously infused order that automatically

eliminates the disturbing questioning about the nature of our reality and our limited means to apprehend it. The characters of Cypher or Mouse implicitly suggest the presence of a deeper epistemological debate at the core of the narration, however—the earlier being a traitor and the latter a twitchy teenager with a reduced life expectancy—the problematic notions that they convey through their respective views of the Truth are stifled by the metaphysical positioning of the main characters, namely Morpheus (the Father), Neo (the Son), and the Oracle (the Holy Spirit), who compose a triumphing Trinity, divine enough to defeat the Matrix, thus removing any of the doubts concerning the validity of our conception of reality put forward by either a traitor—Cypher—or a nerd—Mouse. The presence of a main character named “Trinity” throughout the narration reinforces the strong religious connotations of *The Matrix*’s plot resolution¹³ and creates a semiotic correlation between one specific element and the overall intent: not only is Trinity the first member of the free humans to appear in the narration, thus becoming the initial agent of the Real by opposition to the artificiality of the Matrix, but she is as well a symbolic messenger of the Oracle for she is part of the prophecy: the Oracle has predicted that Trinity will fall in love with “the One,” hence the latter is part of a prophecy that comes true as a conclusion to the narrative syntagma, in the purest Epic tradition. If the dominant theme of *The Matrix* is resolutely postmodern for it implies the possibility of substituting reality by a constructed simulacra, its treatment, on the contrary, follows a very conservative agenda that leaves no room for ambiguity; Truth does exist, as well as the Savior, and those who seem to doubt reality, as Mouse, or to reject it altogether, as Cypher, are duly punished by the logics of the narration.

The Matrix, which could be considered perhaps as the epitome of commercially successful popular postmodern Science Fiction, is highly illustrative of the two main, often if not always, opposing forces that drive most of the artifacts produced by popular culture: artistic purpose on the one hand and commercial imperative on the other. Although *The Matrix* places an issue with serious epistemological ramifications at the core of its narrative universe, i.e. the concept of reality as a construct, its diegetic organization corresponds to one of the most ancient structures of story telling. Thus, postmodern concerns are flushed away by religiously oriented epic paradigms, more susceptible to reach a wider audience than the disturbing aporias suggested by the theme itself, and the film leaves the realm of Science Fiction to enter that of “techno-space opera.” Its two sequels, *The Matrix Reloaded* and *The Matrix Revolutions*, accentuate this generic shift by downplaying all epistemological concerns regarding the nature of reality and the reliability of our understanding in order to favor the development of a simple binary conflict between Good and Evil, closer to *Star Wars*, *Lord of the Rings*, or even to *Harry Potter* than to true Science Fiction.

In spite of its shortcomings, it remains undeniable that *The Matrix* touches upon questions of a philosophical nature¹⁴ and therefore does no longer correspond to the preconceived notion of a product for popular consumption,

which is usually deemed to privilege sheer escapism over meaning, and whose cultural significance is more sociological than artistic. The success of *Blade Runner* or of *The Matrix*, as well as the cult status of films such as David Cronenberg's *eXistenZ* or Alex Proya's *Dark City* indicate that the recipient of popular cultural artifacts cannot be conceived anymore as a monolithic entity in search of mindless entertainment, for it has become receptive to issues that were traditionally the domain of a higher cultural level. Through the exploration of fundamental ontological issues, postmodern Science Fiction, whether written or filmed, shows that our traditional, canonically sanctified cultural dichotomy has become obsolete: when we are expressing our doubts regarding our phenomenological consciousness and our relationship to the Real, there is no more "high" and "low" culture, but only Culture.

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Notes

¹ It remains, for instance, debatable whether *Avatar* actually deserved the universal attention it received in terms of cultural significance, and we are indeed entitled to wonder what will actually remain of the narrative referent once the special effects become outdated.

² 19th Century French Writers Guy de Maupassant and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle are but two among the most illustrative examples of popular writers turned canonical.

³ See, for instance, the abundant scholarly bibliography devoted to the Washosky brothers' *Matrix*.

⁴ See the famous hoax perpetrated by Alan Sokal, who succeeded in publishing an utterly absurd essay entitled "Transgressing the Boundaries: Towards a Transformational Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity" in the prestigious, supposedly refereed journal, *Social Text*; see also the anthology *Theory's Empire*, which collects 49 essays dedicated to denounce the tragic consequences of postmodern theory upon the fields of Literary and Cultural Studies.

⁵ Said element or event must be unexplainable rather than unexplained, the latter corresponding to the structure of the traditional detective story as established through the works of Conan Doyle or Agatha Christie: the enigma presented in a detective narration is merely unexplained, and for a limited time only since the acting detective will eventually explain it; the Fantastic, on the contrary, presents the unexplainable for, regardless of the protagonist's success in surviving the supernatural threat, the epistemological questions raised by the sudden appearance of an irrational phenomenon remain without satisfactory solution.

⁶ We can easily distinguish the Fantastic from Science Fiction, for the narrative universe of the earlier corresponds to our reality with one or several added supernatural phenomenon/a, while that of Science Fiction presents an different reality that may be futuristic or grounded upon an alternate course of history, such as Phillip K. Dick's *The Man in the High Castle*, which tells the story of a 20th Century where allies have lost the war and the Nazis have triumphed.

⁷ In order to bypass the impositions of rigorous critical language, many postmodern critics have adopted a lyrical, would-be artistic tone, which allows for a much greater

flexibility in terms of semiotic content, without, however, having to comply with the exigencies of real artistic writing. (For a discussion on the excesses of postmodern stylistic drifting, see Stephanie Meyer's "Bad Writing" in *Theory' Empire*).

⁸ The main exception would be "The Menagerie," the only story of the original Star Trek series to have been released in two episodes, and which deals openly with the possibility of substituting reality with illusion. The concept of substitute reality was introduced in order to recycle the previously unreleased pilot of the series, and so the story naturally plays out the notion of constructed reality, albeit in a rather conservative manner: there is a clear binary opposition between reality and illusion, and although the latter might be preferable to the earlier, as in the case of Captain Pike who is confined to a wheelchair in the real world but recovers his physical integrity when living the illusion created by the Talosians, there is no possible confusion between what is real and what is not.

⁹ In the highly structured Bond's cinematographic syntagma, neither the death of Ms. Moneypenny, which we witness during Bond's training session, nor her seduction are admissible.

¹⁰ See Eco's "Narrative Structures in Ian Fleming's James Bond" in *The Role of the Reader*.

¹¹ These notions are further developed in Ángel Moreno's *Teoría de la literatura de ciencia ficción*.

¹² The last proposition of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* recommends silence for we cannot attempt to say what cannot be said, while his *Philosophical Investigations* challenges the accepted notion that every word corresponds to an element of the real; in the final analysis, it appears that most philosophical inquiries are at risk of constructing apparently rational syllogisms based upon mere "language games" without real referent.

¹³ Regarding the diversity of the religious reading applied to *The Matrix*, see Fontana ("Finding God in *The Matrix*") and Ford ("Buddhism, Mythology, and *The Matrix*").

¹⁴ See the abundant bibliography dedicated to the different philosophical readings of the film.

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The Doubling of Death: Human, Animal, the Real, and the Irreal in the Films of Michael Haneke

Michael Haneke's film *Caché* (2005) plods along slowly. The mood is tense and the tone is somber, but very little actually happens. Until, without warning, everything changes one hour and twenty-seven minutes into the movie when French television personality Georges Laurent, played by Daniel Auteuil, arrives at the apartment of an Algerian man, Majid,(played by Maurice Bénichou, whose parents used to work for Georges' parents when both men were little boys. Majid tells Georges that he wants him to be present for something, at which point the man pulls out a straight razor and slashes his own neck, immediately collapsing on the floor. The blood splatters across the door and wall. Georges stands immobilized, the camera still and unmoving for more than a full minute. And then life goes on.

One of the hallmarks of Haneke's films is a shocking and unexpected violence. It is the sort of violence that hangs with us long after we watch the film precisely because it appears so "real." Yet, what is the difference between artistic violence and "real" violence? Does the audience's assumption that the death they see in films is fake give them license to enjoy that violence? Or is something much more complex at work, something that makes Haneke's films particularly interesting and particularly disturbing?

Of course, the human actors in these films are not actually killed. Haneke is European, moody, and avant-garde, but he still hasn't made a true snuff film—at least not yet. The question of what constitutes real violence and real death is something that must concern us, but there is, in fact, one obvious way in which there are elements of so-called real death on-screen, particularly in terms of the nonhuman actors.

We often read during the credits of movies made in the United States that "no animals were harmed during the making of this film;" in a Haneke film, however, we never receive this assurance because the animals who die—pigs, fish, chickens, and so on—are real and their deaths are real. Haneke's exotic fish, for instance, truly suffocate—these fish whose aquarium is smashed by a family destroying every object in their home in the film *The Seventh Continent* (1989). The death of the fish, like the death of the inanimate objects destroyed in the film, as well as the deaths of the human characters, is shot calmly and without melodrama. Even in *Benny's Video* (1992), where Benny, a young teenage boy, watches the graphic slaughter of a pig over and over on videotape, there is a sense that death has become removed from us though technology: the stoic eye of Haneke's camera—languid, calm, and unrushed to judgment or to the next scene—appears to be without moral bias.

This is, of course, not the case. Morality is never something that is added on to bare experience, but instead is always already there, suffusing the world and our experience of the world at every step. Given the complexities of the way in which Haneke manipulates this fact, it is, perhaps, best to start thinking about the way in which we conceptualize cinematic violence and death in general with the death of animals specifically.

Do we feel differently about nonhuman animal deaths, cinematic or otherwise, compared to the deaths of humans? Though some viewers are undoubtedly vegetarians, many in the films' audience eat the sorts of animals Haneke has killed; and, like it or not, we all participate in the institutions of modern life that make possible the killing and torturing of animals every day. Perhaps what bothers us is that, strictly speaking, we know that the death of animals is unnecessary. This is true both in day-to-day life (for none of us truly needs to eat meat to live), and it is true in cinema (for no animal truly needs to die just to entertain us). But perhaps it is true in different ways. In *Benny's Video*, the pig dies, presumably, to become dinner. For many viewers, such a death is likely more understandable and thus more acceptable than the deaths of other animals on film that take place for no apparent reason other than aesthetics (as is the case, apparently, with the fish in *The Seventh Continent*). Haneke once observed in an interview that audience members objected strongly to the killing of the fish, presumably because people could not see the reason for such "unnecessary" suffering on-screen. These are, after all, beautiful and expensive fish meant for decoration or pleasure; it is in living that they are useful to us—as opposed to the pig who is more useful as a consumable object and not as a pet.

Perhaps we do not wish to think of any animal suffering; perhaps we do not wish to think of ourselves measuring animals merely by their use-value. But Haneke's camera forces such thinking, lingering on the suffering of each being to whom violence is being done. The unmoving camera, as always, does not flinch or cut away from the desperately squealing pig, the headless rooster flapping helplessly in his death throes (*Caché*), the laboring gills of the fish as they slowly suffocate on the living room floor. The apparent reasons these animals die are different, and their deaths mean something different for each film, but do we not think that their suffering is the same? And do we not admit that the end result is necessarily the same as well?

Does art have a license to kill—especially when the killing fulfills merely aesthetic ends? In terms of humans, there are no truly "bad guys" in Haneke's films; and those who die are often main characters. It is not as if these humans are being killed off in the name of justice. Such cinematic human deaths are also, in the simplest sense of the word, unnecessary—the characters are not terminally ill, nor are they guilty of any crime. Those who are killed are killed seemingly without reason, and those who do the killing offer no answers.

Of course, Haneke cannot legally kill human actors on-screen—it is doubtful anyone would sign up for such a role. Therefore their deaths, however realistic, are fake. But is there actually a distinction between the real death of a

character and the fake death of an actor? If Haneke could find some human willing to die on-screen, how would our experience of seeing the film be different? Phenomenologically, this is a complicated question. A real actor would die, but the character would also be dead—the same kind of dead—in either case; and assuming that the audience does not know one way or the other, the movie-going experience would remain the same. If, however, it were announced beforehand that the actor actually died while making the film, we would have a completely different experience, likely being unable to separate the death of the actor from the death of the character. Interestingly, we would be “taken out” of the experience, moving from an act of direct perception to one of imagination as well such that the imagination would require us to imagine reality.

When Hamlet stabs Polonius in Act III, scene IV of Shakespeare’s Hamlet, we do not pull out a cell phone and dial 911. Such a deranged and panicked theatergoer would not be having an experience of the play, Hamlet. However, if that theatergoer does not care at all—does not feel a jump, a start, a momentary wish to do something and a lingering feeling of trepidation and doom after the stabbing—then the play has not been doing its job as art. Having the right balance of emotional investment and sense of the fictional means that we can take the action to be real, where “real” indicates something other than what could be settled by an appeal to a correspondence theory of truth.

Suppose Haneke filmed and then asked us to watch a human dying. Would we find here the first doubling of death? In the story, on paper, and on-screen, that character ceases once and for all to exist, and so too, does the actor. They die together, though separately. In the case of nonhuman animals, however, it is far more complicated. The fish, the chicken, and the pig play themselves—they are both acting and not acting. They likely have no conscious, trained, or intentional role in the film and so their deaths are as characters, unintentional actors, as well as real animals simultaneously. In the context of the films themselves, all of the deaths are final, regardless of whether an actor leaves the soundstage that day intact or not. The actor’s life is not at stake except in the case of animals. Which is, perhaps, why viewers object more to the deaths of the animals. Their deaths appear to extend out from the film into real life, and for what reason? Juxtaposed with the deaths of the fictional characters with which they share the screen, how do such deaths talk to each other? What do they say to the audience?

In an act of imagination, human death would be different. If we were to see, say, Juliette Binoche actually die on-screen in *Caché* we would no longer think, “Oh, that character is dead.” We would also think, “Oh, Juliette Binoche is dead.” This realization would take the viewer away from the movie and into the implications of the apparent real death—the death of the actress looming larger than the death of a make-believe character. But how do we consider the death of the rooster in that same movie? Do we mourn at all, and if we do, what are we mourning? How far from the film this animal death takes us is typically a

function of whether or not we wonder if what we are watching is real or somehow staged. But there is a deeper sense in which the animal's non-being is at stake. When an animal is slaughtered on-screen, it is, in some sense, merely the character that is killed, for animals are thought not to possess a real identity in the world.

Think, for instance, of Lassie, a dog that exists as a character but also in life as a real dog—or a set of real dogs—who “play” Lassie on-screen. We might identify far more with the death of such a beloved animal if Haneke were to have her shot in one of his films, but we might not really think of the actual dog who would die if Lassie were actually to die on-screen. Lassie *per se* would still be a dog available to us in the movies (as an aesthetic creation), and it would be a character we would mourn. We might be outraged that an actual animal, as with Haneke’s animals in general, was killed for the sake of a film, but consider how different our reaction would be to this death compared to the death of Juliette Binoche on- and off-screen. Lassie does not exist off-screen—“Lassie” is many dogs over many years, each nameless and replaceable—but Binoche supposedly does exist off-screen. Binoche, while being many women in many films, is, we think, one woman in reality (whatever that means), and it is that identity that would spark a different kind of outrage than that which is aroused by an anonymous animal’s death.

Those of us who take issue with the realness of animal deaths question their necessity on- and off-screen, but we do not necessarily question the necessity of cinematic human deaths, at least not in the same way. Whether or not we think the human characters had to die, we all understand on some level the fact that they need to die for the film to be as it is—the film that Haneke intended to make. We may not like it, we may think it is stupid, we may be upset that the films are so violent and our kids may be watching them and getting frightening ideas, but we do not question the fundamental necessity of the characters’ deaths to achieve the filmmaker’s goal—in other words, we allow him the authority to do as he wishes with the characters, whether we like or enjoy the narrative or not, because it seems merely a question of aesthetics and not morality. The director has creative freedom. But we do question the animal deaths and we do debate their necessity in the creation of Haneke’s “art”: why can’t he just use special effects, as most films do, to simulate the violence? What is to be gained with this murderous waste?

Heidegger, of course, maintains that nonhuman animals cannot die. Animals, he explains, merely perish. As poor-in-world, animals and animal-being are distanced from Dasein, that particular manner of human being that supposedly marks us, individualizes us, and situates us in the world as something unique. For Heidegger, the mineness of my own being is inescapable. No one can die for me—my death is radically mine—and thus no one can live for me either. But animals, creatures who supposedly are not world-forming and are separated from logos by a chasm that cannot be crossed, have no individual

deaths, no death at all, really, of which to speak. Animal actors will never find their deaths singled out, let alone doubled by art.

It is perhaps not an accident, historical or otherwise, that one of the very first films ever made was of the death of an animal. In 1903, Thomas Edison, showing off both his filmmaking advancements and his mastery over electricity, famously electrocuted an elephant named Topsy, filming the slaughter in order to play the short movie for audiences across the country. The one-minute film, *Electrocuting an Elephant* (1903), was meant to help persuade the public of the dangers of Nikola Tesla's AC electricity, the type of electricity competing with Edison's own proposed DC plan for the nation. Throughout the late 1800s all across New Jersey, Edison had electrocuted countless dogs and cats—hundreds of animals, in fact—using AC electricity, hoping to sabotage the Westinghouse Company which stood as AC's most outspoken proponent and Edison's biggest competitor. In the short film showcasing Topsy-the-elephant's death, we see—in long shot for the most part, though there are moments of excruciating close-up—the animal actually being executed. Haneke, in many respects, lets his camera work in such a documentarian fashion. One must wonder about the politics here as well.

Indeed, what precisely marks animal death as special on film is the animal's assumed inability to die. From Descartes on, animals have been taken to be machines, and so what better way to present animality to us than through the technological gauze of the camera? As Akira Lippit has argued, the disclaimer that “‘No animal was harmed in the making of this film’ serves as a form of erasure that brings the death of the animal back into the ethical folds of the human world. But the disclaimer—a disavowal of animal death—never resolves the crisis, only defers it.” It is filmmaking itself that provides anima, animation, animality to that which was a lifeless picture and mere static representation. The still camera makes of things dead objects; the filmmaker’s camera puts them into action, allows them movement, and animates. Is the animal thus reanimated on film or animated truly for the first time by film? If an image points toward the way in which anything can be made to die, to be still, and not merely to perish, we might say that there is a necessary “animalation” that takes place in cinema. Haneke’s work is thus ontologically as well as ethically disturbing, doubling the stakes even as it doubles the possibility of death.

What, then, of the death of humans—what of the same sort of confusion and unresolved questions about life and what moves us, what animalates us? Before it is possible to respond to the question of a violent human death, we must first ask about Haneke’s relationship to human violence in general.

For the film *Code Unknown* (2000), Juliette Binoche was asked to slap a child. Haneke demanded that the slap be real for fear that it otherwise might look fake and thus pull the viewer out of the fictional moment on film. The nonfictional, that is, is put in service of the fictional. Binoche—the actress, not the character (whatever that means)—recalls not only how difficult it was for her to enact this real violence on a real child, but how impossible it was for

Haneke to watch the scene being filmed. "It was very hard to slap the little boy," explains Binoche. "Michael didn't want to involve himself too closely. He told me, 'It's O.K.' But, I could see in the little boy's eyes that it was a kind of humiliation. I asked [the boy] to slap me first, but he wouldn't."

We might be tempted to say that this is a special case because it involves violence being enacted on an innocent child. There is something in most of us that recoils when a child is the subject of violence. And yet, this is very telling. If we avert our eyes and condemn acts of violence against innocent children, are we secretly admitting that acts of violence against adults are in general more acceptable because adults are inherently less innocent? This would seem to commit us to the belief that some acts of violence are not as bad as others because the person to whom the violence is directed is guilty of at least something.

If it is not a question of innocence, then perhaps it is a question of power. Perhaps, that is, we think of the child as powerless and vulnerable. And thus violence directed at children—and, for that matter, animals—would be doubly bad because they cannot fight back. Haneke seems to be arguing for this when he tells us:

You can show all the shortcomings of a society through its children, because they are always on the bottom rung. So are animals. They are those who can't defend themselves. They are predestined victims....Once I bawled out a lady in a train. She was with her child, who was a bit stressed, and she took him out of the compartment and hit him, because she didn't dare to do it inside. And even though I had no right to do so, I went and bawled her out, because that is something I just cannot stand.

There are four things to note in passing here. First is the identification of children and animals. If the boundary between humans and other animals is to be questioned, perhaps this is the spot to begin picking at Haneke: children and animals, he wants to argue, have much in common. Second, there is the notion that the whole of society can be judged by the way in which it treats its lowest members. Such an ethic—or at least a descriptive claim that is on the way toward an ethic—is not new. We find it in Buddhism, Christianity, and dozens of other cultural moral schemas. But perhaps there is something telling about the assumption of a hierarchy at the very start. Third, we would be wise to note that Haneke is most upset by violence against children and animals because these individuals cannot fight back. That is, they cannot meet violence with more violence, as if somehow violence is not quite as bad if the victim is capable of being violent in return. Here we are tempted to think that what might be offending Haneke is not the immorality of violence, but a disrespect of violence itself. In other words, if the child or the pig or the fish could fight back—could bring more violence to the table—then it would not be so bad. But they are too weak. The morally bad part becomes, in effect, the stopping of the cycle of violence. This should trouble us. An eye for an eye for an eye for an eye etcetera thus becomes less bad than simply poking out a child's eye and having it stop

there. We might be wise to keep in mind, then, that there could be an underlying promotion of violence in finding violence against animals and children overly-abhorrent. Fourth, and finally, Haneke's choice to conclude his remarks with a reference to a real incident from his own real life involving a real woman and a real act of violence against a real child is interesting. He slips from an analysis of what he is doing on film to a recounting of what he once did in life, as if the latter should help explain the former, always and again standing in service to it. He offers up what amounts to an apology for having Juliette Binoche slap a child on film by evening out the cosmic scale of justice and taking to task a real woman who slapped her real child off camera. Here, Haneke is careful to tell us that he did not enact violence against the woman—other than the vocal and emotional violence of yelling at her. Indeed, perhaps it is important that it is a “lady” and not a “gentleman” in Haneke’s story. Perhaps he means to say that women, too, are like children and animals.

We tread lightly inside the mind of Michael Haneke, wanting to avoid a purely psychoanalytic reading of his work. But we cannot help but note how many times he has said in interviews that his mother was more like an angel than a human, how often he proclaims his undying love for his mother, how emotionally he speaks of his mother’s overwhelming physical and otherworldly beauty. Haneke’s father is not to be found here—as was the case in the young Haneke’s real life as well. “I grew up with three women,” the filmmaker explains. “my grandmother, my mother, and my aunt. It was great....I had a very spoiled childhood. I didn’t have to fight with a man....I was never beaten.” The real threat of violence is, for Haneke, the threat of the possible appearance of the male. When Haneke thinks of something other than animal, child, or woman, he thinks of death and violence. Indeed, so great is this fear of possible impending disruption and violence that Haneke—both the man and the man-who-is-filmmaker—will happily make a preemptive strike against the potentially-violent male, thus becoming the abuser himself, thus starting the cycle of violence himself, thus becoming the violent male. Consider: one of the few men in Haneke’s early life was his uncle, someone Haneke describes as a “huge man.” “There was a moment with my uncle,” the filmmaker confesses, “[when] I thought he was going to hit me, so I pushed him [first]...and he fell over.”

After leaving the safety of his female-populated home, Haneke went off to the university in Vienna. He enrolled to study theatre, but after one semester he switched to philosophy. He kept up with the philosophy major for a time, but ultimately found it unsatisfying. Men—potentially violent men—are, as usual, all around in philosophy. As Haneke recalls it, “[I] met a distinguished Hegelian....I thought he would explain the world to me, but I [came to understand] it’s not the case.” Before real damage could be done, Haneke intellectually pushed Hegel and the Hegelian over and turned to filmmaking.

There is a quality to the deaths portrayed in Haneke’s films that is uncanny. Most of the deaths are unexplained and unexpected. Even in the case of *The Seventh Continent*, which is based on a true story (whatever that means), the

deaths, more clearly foreshadowed than in much of Haneke's other work, still retain a sense of mystery: why do the members of this family commit a sort of group suicide? Why does the man cut his throat in *Caché*? Why does Benny kill the girl in Benny's Video? Why are most of the children in *The White Ribbon* (2009) apparently homicidal? Typically there is absolutely no explanation attempted; but even when the characters explain their actions, or the intent of actions may be inferred, no matter how skillfully the explanation is stitched together by the audience, the deaths are still closed to us—perhaps because we are still necessarily alive.

These are not horror films in the normal sense of the term. These are not horror films unless we see all of life as already horrific. If we try to ask why the violent people are acting the way they are acting, we will never get an answer out of Haneke. And this is, perhaps, because to ask such a question is to imply that we don't already have the answer. That is, if we ask "How could those boys in *Funny Games* (1997) sadistically torture that family and kill the family members off one by one?" we are saying that we are not like that, that we cannot imagine how someone could do that because that sort of action is so completely alien to who we are. But this, argues Haneke, is a bit of bad faith. The truth to which he is pointing is that we are all capable of such things. We each think that we follow truth and beauty in service of peace, but this blinds us to the violence we enact in the course of such pursuits. Haneke explains:

In the name of a beautiful idea you can become a murderer....There is no crime I couldn't have committed....It's so easy to say "Oh no I would never do that," but that's dishonest. We are capable of everything....It's so easy to be 'human' when you come from a privileged background....The only reason that I couldn't have been a Nazi is that I can't stand crowds.

Perhaps. But like the characters in Haneke's films who survive, we are left with the consequences and attempts at explanations of violence which, coming before and after the acts themselves, still do not reveal what goes on in that space in between. The camera is there, unmoving, giving us the details. We hear and see death, we watch it happen, but still in the most vital sense we are not there. We are, and can only be, viewers. Even Benny cannot know what it is like to die, no matter how many times he watches his video of a pig dying, no matter if he kills his girlfriend, experiences that dying firsthand, and repeatedly watches her death on video as well. He will, indeed, get to "see what it is like," but he will never know what it is like until he himself dies. And, to be sure, he (and we) will not know what death is like even at that point, for death is never an experience, never something that takes place for the subject, never something that we can pass through, reflect on, and then can say "So, that was death." Our own death is an impossible possibility. It is nothing and yet the ground of everything. Death is only experienced as the death of the Other.

We observe Benny as he does many things—goes to school, watches videos, opens and eats a container of yogurt, makes pizza with his friend, shoots a girl and watches her die—but we don't come any closer to the actual

knowledge of why he does any of these things. The same holds true for the family members in *The Seventh Continent*—we see, in exquisitely minute detail, how they manipulate and manage the objects around them. We know what they eat, where they work, what they wear, how they draw, how they speak to one another—but we still do not know why they die, even as we watch how they do it, even as we hear the husband’s voice explain, calmly and rationally, the “reasons” behind their deaths. All we know is that one moment there is a whole family there. Then they poison their daughter. And she is dead. Soon, the parents kill themselves as well. And they are dead. And for us, life goes on.

The audience can see and respond, can feel and think, but cannot die with the characters on-screen. And that blank space between the actor and the observer is where the experience of death happens. It is a space we cannot access, and it is the place wherein our responses to Haneke’s deaths are manufactured—our fear, or disgust, or confusion, or apathy, or rage, or anger, or sadness, all of our responses to death off-screen as well.

The suicide in *Caché* is one of Haneke’s most elliptical deaths. We simply don’t have enough information about the character even to begin to grasp why he does what he does. Is his life, as his son asserts, miserable because of what Daniel Auteuil’s character did to him so many years ago? Since it is the case that we cannot understand, we are thus asked to stand with the indirect murderer who cannot take responsibility for his actions, who can only see from inside a position of privilege. Watching this man cut his throat—watching him live one moment and in the next, suddenly and without warning, not live—is most like watching the pig or the chicken or the fish; there is a heavy sense of distance, an unknowableness that accompanies all death, but these in particular. We do not know what pigs, chicken, and fish think when they die. Because we do not have enough knowledge, our feelings remain abstract to varying degrees. It is terrible to watch a girl suffer as she is shot repeatedly, as it is terrible to watch a family’s despair as they take their lives one by one, but is it terrible because we know death itself is terrible or because we can’t imagine if it truly is or isn’t?

Haneke’s films revolve visually around objects—we get varied close-ups of ordinary items (cereal bowls, yogurt cups, coffee pots, and so on) where the object is the focus, and the manipulator (the hand pouring the coffee, the arm delivering the cereal to the off-screen mouth) is on the periphery, visual only in part while the inanimate object enjoys center stage. The camera, as always, does not move, does not get distracted by voices off-screen, does not turn to give us visual cues from the actors: we stay, as we do in any Haneke shot, squarely focused in front of us. Haneke’s camera is not an animate camera, it is not a camera that moves to help us or distract us. If a woman is ironing on-screen then we will watch her iron, and that action is made just as important as the more subtle, emotional action taking place within the person performing the action. This kind of emphasis on the object seems to point to the idea that what we know comes first from what we do—we become interested, as Haneke himself says, in people and in actions through the objects that invite or submit to

manipulation. And if we are not doing the things we see—if we are not pouring the coffee, eating the cereal, or shooting the gun—then how can we make a connection? We have driven cars, we have gone shopping, we have ironed, but not one of us has died. Haneke thus gets us into the visual habit of supplying the emotional content of a scene by projecting ourselves doing the mundane tasks required by life—we imagine ourselves as the double of the characters—and then he hits us with death and asks the viewer: can you imagine this? All we can say is: no. We cannot imagine death as anything more than a specter, the ghost of death, the possible impossibility and yet necessity of our own eventual non-being. And this is, perhaps, why we turn to art.

This is what happens when we go from a family eating a lavish supper to a family engaged in the destruction of their home and of themselves. We see them flushing their life savings down the toilet, and we learn that Hanake actually used real money to film this scene: real money is being used up and flushed away, all in the name of art; all in the name of making a point? And yet isn't this always the nature of art? We watch the family destroy everything around them in unimaginable acts of violence, and we say that we feel lost in this movie. But where do we get lost and what happens when we realize we are lost—when we realize that we have been left behind in the narrative but are still somehow involved, participating by watching? We have passed by the safety of the last scene we understand—opening a bottle of wine, or answering a telephone—and are plunged into the horror and alienation of a scene we cannot understand, a scene that is presented with an identical clarity and detachment as those preceding it, but the content of which goes from ordinary to extraordinary. The irony, of course, is that death is ordinary, and it is happening while we iron, or brush our teeth, or draw a picture, or make a film. After all, if you eat a chicken sandwich, you taste death.

But why, then, do we feel differently about a man slashing his throat than we do about a family going through a car wash? And if death is beyond us, if we cannot connect to it or grasp it the way we can the handle of a cup, then can we truly grasp the image of a wife talking to her husband, or a woman making pancakes, or a man simply sitting in a chair? What makes us think that the rest of life, the little things, the things that precede death, are truly any more understandable?

What Haneke ultimately does is make real life irreal. Violent deaths saturate his films, making us question our knowledge of every scene we thought was simple. As the films move along and we absorb their unusual rhythm—the long, stable shots; the amplified sound; the emphasis on absolutely “authentic” gestures, expressions, and language—we have a growing sense of unease as the simple seems to move away from us even as we get closer to it. We are not used to such deliberation in film or in real life. We don’t consider the breakfast bowl all that carefully in our lives, but by having it pushed in our faces on film, it gains new importance. And in that elevation, that refined and unmoving final focus, it is pulled away from us and from what we know. These films are not

meant to make us identify with them even as they make life so readily identifiable—they are filled with ordinary things that become, somehow, transformed. They fetishize life itself. Perhaps, this is the source of the terrible feeling we get: that beneath the facts and the stark realities, there is something that is, indeed, hidden—and we can never touch it, never know it, never grasp its significance. But Haneke does not reduce death—or life—to meaninglessness or to meaningless violence. He simply implies that the meaning is necessarily unknown. Plato's artistic account of the death of Socrates gives us a final epitaph.

Prepared to die, to take the poison, and become a martyr for Athens, Socrates is philosophizing about the meaning of it all. Like Haneke, Plato (the creative artist) is giving us something in-between a documentary and a work of fiction as he writes *The Phaedo*. The real Socrates (whatever that means) really drank the hemlock (whatever that means). And the Socrates we meet in Plato's dialogues is thus something of a double. Historical and a work of art; philosophical and dramatic; man and character. Plato's camera stays still and stable, never pointing away from the commonplace that is so fantastical. Socrates announces: “[T]he one aim of those who practice philosophy in the proper manner is to practice for dying and death.” Later, taking account of his final mundane obligations before death, Socrates turns to Crito and tells him “I owe a cock to Asclepius; don't forget to pay the debt.” The death of Socrates and the death of the cock soon both take place—off-screen.

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Notes

¹To be clear, however, it is not *imagination* that is engaged when one is viewing art. Phenomenologically, if this were the case, then the object of consciousness in art would not be the play, movie, painting, etc. *per se* but instead would be some imaginary, projected object beyond direct perception. Rather, in art there is a fundamental act of perception, but the way in which perception functions in the sense of the aesthetic needs further explication. This is what is at stake when we say that no one needs to call 911 for Polonius, but one must still feel the horror of the death *as if it were actual*. In the theater, there is a categoriality at work that allows the action to be taken as real and not-real at the same time.

²See, e.g., Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, translated by Edward Robinson & John Macquarrie (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962): 240–1, 246–7.

³Akira Mizuta Lippit, “The Death of An Animal,” *Film Quarterly*, v. 56, no. 1 (Fall 2002): 9–22.

⁴Anthony Lane, “Happy Haneke: Michael Haneke and His Movies,” *The New Yorker* (5 October 2009): 63.

⁵Anthony Lane, “Happy Haneke: Michael Haneke and His Movies,” *The New Yorker* (5 October 2009): 63.

⁶Anthony Lane, “Happy Haneke: Michael Haneke and His Movies,” *The New Yorker* (5 October 2009): 63.

⁷ Anthony Lane, “Happy Haneke: Michael Haneke and His Movies,” *The New Yorker* (5 October 2009): 64.

⁸ Anthony Lane, “Happy Haneke: Michael Haneke and His Movies,” *The New Yorker* (5 October 2009): 63.

⁹ Anthony Lane, “Happy Haneke: Michael Haneke and His Movies,” *The New Yorker* (5 October 2009): 64.

¹⁰ Anthony Lane, “Happy Haneke: Michael Haneke and His Movies,” *The New Yorker* (5 October 2009): 66.

¹¹ Plato, “Phaedo,” *Five Dialogues*, translated by G.M.A. Grube (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1981): 64.

¹² I would like to acknowledge and thank Maryse Meijer and Danielle Meijer for their help, consultation, and inspiration in the preparation of this essay.

Of Baudelaire and Holmes: Ennui in Contemporary Culture

What caught my attention was the TV commercial: Robert Downey, Jr., hair out of place, naked to the waist, fists clenched. I stopped what I was doing and watched the ad unfold. I didn't need to see the entire movie to realize, on the basis of a fragment from one of the scenes, what director Guy Ritchie had done with Sherlock Holmes. He had made a movie, titled *Sherlock Holmes*, that represented one more small but inevitable step in what Harold Bloom referred to years ago as "the closing of the American mind." Yes, I did see the movie in which the usually sedentary Holmes becomes an action figure whose ferocity and fighting ability make him a match for Spartacus and Beowulf. Of course, Ritchie is simply following a formula: take out the cerebral stuff and go with the action. What is it, I wondered, that accounts for this phenomenon: turning literary figures into action heroes in movies that sacrifice plot for spectacle? The answer would have to go beyond the audience's desire to be entertained and touch upon certain underlying factors—social, psychological, spiritual—that might help explain America's addiction to everything from reality TV shows, in which participants are often required to do and eat disgusting things, to online gambling and pornography, to films like the recent *Sherlock Holmes*. Is there, I wondered, some kind of sickness at work here?

In Ritchie's film, the plot involves a conflict between Sherlock Holmes and Lord Underwood, a satanic figure working in the employ of the infamous Professor Moriarty, whom we never really see in the film. In the opinions of Guy Ritchie and actors Robert Downey, Jr., and Jude Law, the film returns us to the real Holmes that Sir Arthur Conan Doyle intended. Of course, the film does no such thing. What Ritchie does give us, in place of a story in which the world's greatest detective has figured out the crime even before his client leaves the room, is a film so packed with thrills that, at times, the underlying structure seems ready to crack. In place of the real Holmes, Ritchie has given us a protagonist who is as good with his fists as he is with his mind. Consider the expertly choreographed pit-fighting scene into which Ritchie has incorporated elements that, to the viewer, allude to images in his or her own mental landscape. Naked from the waist up, Holmes is in a pit facing a larger opponent. After seeing Irene Adler among the spectators, Holmes announces that he quits, and it is just as he turns his back to leave the pit that his opponent, not satisfied with this easy victory, strikes Holmes from behind. Something in Holmes' brain suddenly kicks in, and Holmes quickly determines, in specific step-by-step detail, how he is going to destroy his opponent. After this calculation, England's greatest detective totally incapacitates his adversary, exactly as planned.

The equivalent of this scene in our own world is cage fighting—two males, with little to protect their fists, engage in an almost no-holds-barred fight; this

very parallel would contribute to the film's popularity. Further, Holmes has been reduced to a fighting machine with the uncanny, even inhuman ability to mentally compute how he is going to destroy his opponent before actually doing so. The most probable source for this addition to the character of the new Holmes is likely a computer-game hero who (I suspect there are numbers of them) mentally calculates destroying his opponent before actually doing so. To give Ritchie a bit of credit here, he may also have in mind the convention according to which the ancient epic hero announces how he is going to destroy his opponent before actually doing so. Beyond this, Holmes-the-fighting-machine is shed of those elements that once established him as a somewhat snobbish member of the British upper-class—an obvious attempt on Ritchie's part to remove any social barriers separating protagonist from audience. Carrying on in the back room of a beer hall, Holmes has becomes a bare-fisted brawler whose brilliant barbarity would make him the envy of any self-respecting cage fighter.

A deconstruction of the entire film reveals at least two things. First, the film's story is roughly constructed according to the guidelines applied in discussing most any short story: exposition, complication, climax, and denouement. Secondly, it is not the conflict between Holmes and Blackwood that moves the film forward. What moves this film forward is spectacle after spectacle: Holmes and Watson fighting off Blackwood's thugs in order to rescue the first female victim; Holmes' crawling around his flat in a drug and/or alcohol-induced stupor; Watson's fiancée throwing wine into the face of a Holmes who lacks the sensitivity of his original; Holmes waking up to find himself nude and handcuffed to the bed, his private parts covered by a pillow; Holmes' beating his opponent senseless in the pit-fighting scene; and Holmes' finally defeating the villainous Blackwood while fighting on the steel girders of the new London bridge.

To be fair, we must commend Guy Ritchie for keeping some elements from Doyle's detective fiction. For instance, the bunch from Scotland Yard remain somewhat inept—or, at the very least, very dependent upon the super-sleuth to solve their most difficult cases. Again, by the film's end, Holmes has completely disproved the supernatural. (Recall, for an instant, Doyle's *The Hound of the Baskervilles* in which Holmes disproves all supernatural explanations as he solves a bizarre case.) In Ritchie's version, Holmes uses his intellectual powers to prove that a very natural explanation exists to account for Blackwood's fulfillment of his promise that, on the third day following his execution, he would rise from the dead and reveal himself as the supernatural equivalent of Jesus Christ. Other similarities linking the film with Doyle's original are minor but somewhat significant: Holmes' use of drugs; Holmes' unending fascination with science; the presence of Mrs. Hudson; the late nineteenth century London setting; a bored and depressed Holmes firing bullets in the wall of his flat; and the presence of Irene Adler, who is reduced from a villainous female who is more than a match for Holmes to a helpless heroine whom Holmes must rescue.

from the deadly clutches of the nefarious Lord Blackwood. In other words, Ritchie attempts to create the illusion that the viewer is seeing the real Holmes, and perhaps he succeeds.

In truth, Guy Ritchie's Sherlock Holmes bears only a surface resemblance to Doyle's vision of the world's greatest detective. What Ritchie has done is obvious—the new Holmes is an action figure—and this deserves little further comment. What is more pressing is this: what is it within the fabric of popular culture that accounts for the phenomenal popularity of a work that grossly misrepresents the world's greatest detective? How do we explain the reduction of Sherlock Holmes to the level of an action hero? What accounts for the film's reliance upon spectacle, from beginning to end?

I accidentally arrived at an answer several years ago. I was preparing lecture notes for *Madame Bovary* when I came across French Symbolist Charles Baudelaire's comments about a mid-nineteenth century French society that had apparently lost its ability to appreciate the aesthetic and spiritual truths offered in great literature. (Recall that Flaubert and Baudelaire had been accused of violating public decency, Flaubert for *Madame Bovary* and Baudelaire for *Flowers of Evil*.) Praising the French legal system for not punishing Flaubert, Baudelaire commented, "This striking concern for Beauty, coming from men whose faculties are primarily called upon to serve the Rightful and True, is a very moving symptom, especially if one compares it with the burning appetites of a society that has entirely forsworn all spiritual love and, forgetting its ancient entrails, now only cares for its visceral organs" (337). Apparently, someone in the courts found merit in *Madame Bovary*, likely reducing it to a didactic novel condemning promiscuous women. Baudelaire and his *Flowers of Evil*, of course, did not fare so well: he and his publisher were charged with offending public morals and subsequently fined.

Understandably, Baudelaire was outraged by the public's reaction to his and Flaubert's masterpieces, attributing this popular response to the rise of materialism in French society:

For many years, the interest which the public is willing to devote to matters of the spirit has considerably diminished . . . The last years of Louis-Philippe's reign saw the final outburst of a spirit still willing to be stimulated by the display of imaginative powers; the new novelist, however, is confronted with a completely worn-out public or, worse even, a stupefied and greedy audience, whose only hatred is for fiction, and only love for material possessions (338).

While he had the reception of Flaubert's novel in mind, Baudelaire was also targeting a specific cultural phenomenon known as ennui: a pathological boredom that afflicts materialistic societies, dulls spiritual and aesthetic sensibilities, and lowers the reading audience to a "stupefied and greedy" level.

Consider, for instance, his poem "To the Reader" which he wrote in hopes of alerting his reader to a culturally-imposed boredom that assumed demonic dimensions, which, within the larger scope of his works, he attributes to the rise

in materialism (See Appendix A for entire poem). He begins by addressing the reading audience:

Infatuation, sadism, lust, avarice
possess our souls and drain the body's force;
we spoonfeed our adorable remorse,
like whores or beggars nourishing their lice....

In this opening, Baudelaire establishes the analogy that holds together his poem: boredom, or ennui, is like being possessed by demons, and it manifests itself in “[i]nfatuation,” “sadism,” “lust,” and “avarice.” Every stanza following the first, in fact, simply expands upon the analogy: “The devil... hissed/ old smut and folksongs” (9-10); “Each day his flattery makes us eat a toad,/ and each step forward is a step to Hell”(13-14); and “Gangs of demons are boozing in our brain”(17). At the poem’s end the poet confesses that he shares with the reader a boredom that has a demonic character: “This obscene/ beast chain-smokes yawning from the guillotine--/you—hypocrite Reader—my double—my brother!”(34-36).

It’s difficult to say what Baudelaire specifically had in mind: possibly the public’s preference for sensational events, such as rape, poisoning, murder, fires, and cases of demonic possession over the works intended as pure art. One thing is clear, however, from a reading of Baudelaire’s works, and that is that this demonic phenomenon, the almost unbearable boredom that Baudelaire himself shared with the reading public, has much to do with the rise of a money society and the failure of his own audience to ever grasp the existence of the Symbolist’s “transcendent absolute” (6). Indeed, if Baudelaire is right, it is surely this spiritually and intellectually numbing ennui, culturally-induced, that accounts for our own addiction to reality TV shows that glorify the very worst elements of human nature, to incredibly violent video games in which we, as participants, assume the role of an action hero, and to movies that move from spectacle to spectacle to such an extent that the storyline is lost.

Interestingly, boredom has long been associated with materialism and the demonic. The writer of Ecclesiastes, for instance, proclaims that life is without meaning as he suffers from a boredom that has resulted from an incredibly prosperous life in which his every desire has been fulfilled. Is Solomon’s boredom demonic? Within the framework of the Bible, it would not be entirely incorrect to say so. Again, theologians from the Middle Ages considered boredom not only a sin but something demonic. According to sociologist Jan-Erik Mansikka, Professor of Education at the University of Helsinki, “The modern conception of boredom has an antecedent in the medieval concept of acedia, as one of the ‘seven deadly sins’ in the Christian tradition” (256). Mansikka adds that “Thomas Aquinas perceived acedia as consisting of a certain kind of joylessness...and a lack of interest in spiritual goods” (256). In short, Aquinas and other Medieval theologians were right in line with Charles Baudelaire in considering acedia—or ennui—a condition representing a severe spiritual disorder. “In this tradition human beings are doomed to a certain form

of boredom and alienation without a life in God. The impulse to suppress boredom, to seek some instant or immediate pleasure, is from this point of view a consequence of our fallen condition . . . "(256). Indeed, to some in the early Christian church, this demonic ennui, a "terrible scourge of the soul" (Kuhn 71), was regarded as the harbinger of the far greater evil of tristitia, the total evil that consumed the believer's soul (Kuhn 48).

It's in 19th century and early 20th centuries, however, that ennui gains the most attention. One can make the case that Emma Bovary is afflicted by an ennui that ultimately leads to psychosis and suicide. As another example, having come into a substantial inheritance, Dostoevsky's Underground Man is afflicted by a form of ennui—he refers to it as "inertia"—that has become for him a sort of paralysis (1310). To Dostoevsky this paralysis is a response to a series of ideologies, only one of which is materialism, that had their origin in Western Europe and that, in later works, he considered demonic. The point is made in Dostoevsky's *The Possessed*, recently retranslated as *Demons*. In the introduction to this translation, Richard Pevear comments, "The demons...are ideas, that legion of isms that came to Russia from the West: idealism, rationalism, empiricism, materialism, utilitarianism, positivism, socialism, anarchism, nihilism, and underlying them all, atheism" (xvii). Dostoevsky's perspective is made clear by the novel's epigraph, which is taken from the story in which Jesus casts a legion of demons out of a crazed man and into a herd of swine. At one point in *The Possessed*, the main characters, all aristocrats and most affected by the influx of the "isms," relieve their own constant boredom by resorting to spectacle: while they are traveling in the countryside, one of the women expresses a desire to see the body of a young man who has recently committed suicide (325-328). Again, in Tolstoy's "The Death of Ivan Ilyich," for the first time in his life, Ivan experiences boredom, or ennui, here a terrible form of depression after he is denied a desired promotion in a materialist society resembles our own (433).

However, it is the German philosophers Martin Heidegger and Georg Simmel that offer us the most insight into the boredom that may lie at the basis of the appeal of everything from *The Real Housewives of New Jersey* to Guy Ritchie's *Sherlock Holmes*. Heidegger saw boredom/ennui as an undeniable part of the human experience and of the modern age. He observed:

Genuine boredom has not yet arrived if we are merely bored with this book or that movie, with this job or that idle moment. Genuine boredom occurs when one's whole world is boring. Then abysmal boredom, like a muffling fog, drifts where it will in the depths of our openness, sucking everything and everyone, and ourselves along with them, into a numbing sameness. This kind of boredom reveals what-is in terms of a whole. (Sheehan)

The boredom of which he speaks is at the heart of the human condition. According to Heidegger, it is often out of profound boredom that one experiences the dread of the annihilation of one's own being that death must bring. This dread, born of the realization that death is finality, is joined in

Heidegger's mind with the illumination that one's life is without that sense of order and meaning that, spiritually and psychologically, sustained one in previous centuries. Heidegger's observations about boredom may not seem immediately relevant to this discussion, and, as he points out, they certainly do not apply to "stupid people." But a reading of Heidegger does raise the notion, one that current researchers have picked up on and, most importantly, one that Reinhard Kuhn focuses on in his classic *The Demon of Noon tide: Ennui in Western Literature*, that it is this dread, a by-product of ennui, that underlies the craving for spectacle and sensation that seems to characterize a modern age shaped by industrialization, rationalism, and scientism. Kuhn reinforces Mansikka and Heidegger's observations when he points out that "ennui...presupposes an encounter with nothingness, [and] the affirmation of being is the attitude most inimical to it" (67).

In a recent article, Shelly Fahlman, Professor of Psychology at York University in Toronto, reinforces Heidegger's theories concerning the emergence in our own culture of something akin to existential boredom; that is, without being fully aware of it, many today live in an "existential vacuum" (308-309). Fahlman comments, "Although diverse in their thinking, many existential theorists posit that lacking a sense of life meaning is at the forefront of human suffering, and that experiences of boredom and negative affect are central components of this lack of purpose or meaning" (309). She refers to the work of Austrian psychiatrist and Holocaust survivor Victor Frankl to reinforce her position: "Frankl...emphasizes the fundamental importance of having of a sense of meaning in one's life. Indeed, for him, the quest to find and fulfill a sense of meaning is the essence of man's motivation, a basic striving that he calls the 'will to meaning'" (309). Fahlman goes on to explain: "According to Frankl...the conditions of modern society have left many individuals with a feeling of meaninglessness—an affliction he refers to as an existential vacuum" (309). The existentialism Frankl and Fahlman have in mind is not necessarily one born of a conscious decision. Rather, it occurs when "individuals are said to 'lack the awareness of a meaning worth living for.' They are haunted by the experience of their inner emptiness, a void within themselves" (Fahlman 309). In short, this existentialism is as culturally-induced as the constant need for thrills that fill up the empty spaces in the mind and soul and that draw viewers to films like Guy Ritchie's *Sherlock Holmes*.

This void, this "existential vacuum," may very well be the unacknowledged spiritual condition of our own popular culture, which has been shaped and reshaped by the industrial and technological revolutions, one consequence of which has been to provide the individual with the means by which to satisfy, immediately, the need for boredom-relieving adventures. Whether those adventures come in the form of climbing a mountain, going on cruises, playing wildly and wickedly imaginative video games, attending cage-fighting matches, or watching movies that move from incredible spectacle to incredible spectacle does not really seem to matter. What matters is being lifted out of this profound

existential boredom again and again and again—in this case by reality TV shows, video games, and action movies that sacrifice plot for spectacle and that simply feed the craving for ever more spectacular spectacle. This is a deep boredom that affects one physically, mentally, and spiritually and that resembles “endogenous” depression, a condition associated with ennui that requires no external stimuli (Kuhn 12). Thus, no longer able to appreciate the almost purely cerebral appeal of the original Holmes, no longer able to grasp the truths of Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary* or Dostoevsky’s *The Possessed*, no longer able to experience even a sense of the French symbolists’ “transcendent absolute,” no longer able even to follow a complex script or plot, this culture finds refuge in entertainment in which our traditional heroes are transformed into action heroes that are in reality replications of characters from other movies and games that offer the viewing or reading audience the simplest of plots. As we become involved in the “virtual reality” of these productions, the boredom generated by our own fast-paced industrial and technological based culture, the demonic ennui that becomes a by-product of the over-stimulation provided by both industrialization and the new technology, finds only temporary relief.

The most interesting treatment of this culturally-induced ennui is provided by Kenneth Aho, a professor at Florida Gulf Coast University. Aho’s observations are predicated upon the theories of philosopher and sociologist Georges Simmel. He concurs with Simmel’s observation that one of the side-effects of a money-based culture is a “flattening” out (178), which results in the loss of one’s ability to distinguish quality in a product, or to distinguish a good piece of art from a bad one, and the general perception that things of the same approximate monetary value assume the same aesthetic worth. Thus, in Baudelaire’s own society, a novel that depends upon bloody spectacle and demonic possession takes on the same value as the writings of Stendhal or Flaubert. More immediately, the movie *Avatar* assumes in the public eye an equivalent or greater aesthetic value than, say, *Winter’s Bone*. Within the context of our own money-based society, Robert Downey, Jr.’s version of Sherlock Holmes is equivalent in value to or greater than, say, Basil Rathbone’s or any other actor’s version of the same character. In our money-based society, the price we pay to experience the seemingly unending series of thrills becomes therefore equivalent in price to and likely of greater “aesthetic” value than, say, *The King’s Speech*, which relies for its effect upon character development.

Beyond this, Aho makes the point that industrialization, the rise of the metropolis, the re-emergence of rationalization, and the money economy—coupled with the technological revolution—have created an environment in which the individual is so frequently bombarded with stimulation that he or she risks lapsing into a kind of permanent exhaustion that ultimately manifests itself in an indifference that serves as boundary protecting the metropolitan individual from this over-stimulation (451). In other words, boredom becomes a defense mechanism. Interestingly, Aho links this phenomenon of being over-stimulated and bored-to-death to the current pandemic of ADHD cases, suggesting that the

particular form of ennui that we witness today and the stimulation that we seek have affected cognitive abilities (451; Cox 123). To Aho, and to Reinhart Kuhn of *The Demon of Noon tide: Ennui in Western Literature*, it's also obvious that the spiritual and psychological dimensions are affected. Interestingly, the terms Aho uses to describe the soul of this hyper-stimulated, technology-based culture take us back to the views of the medieval church and to Baudelaire's famous poem. He writes that in our over-stimulated culture "[A] demonic tiredness or stupor" (448) precedes a "disengaged indifference" (451) that protects us from numbing hyper-stimulation. Echoing both Baudelaire and Dostoevsky, Aho also suggests that ennui is responsible for "[a] culture that fosters increasingly bizarre behavior and nihilist attitudes" (453). In fact, to Aho, it is the existence of "extreme aesthesia"—a kind of disease—that characterizes a culture afflicted by a deep and pervasive boredom. He observes "The mood[—the impression of a culturally induced ennui—] can be recognized when there is a pervasive cultural craving for immediate amusement, risk, and peak sensations, a momentary aesthesia that briefly pulls us out of the emptiness and indifference of our everyday lives" (447).

Focusing upon this cultural "thrill seeking," Aho adds, "The adventure represents a momentary aesthesia, an intense feeling or sensation that is 'torn off' from the mundane stream of life experiences." He uses the story of "Johannes the Seducer" by Soren Kierkegarrd as an example: "For Johannes, the spell of boredom is broken only by means of gratifying certain short-term pleasures" (456). Thus, even to the very bright student, Doyle's Sherlock Holmes may ultimately fail to provide the stimulation sought by a reader in the grips of this malady. Indeed, one noticeable side-effect of cultural over-stimulation and the resultant aesthesia may be that such works now verge on becoming intellectually inaccessible, particularly to our students whose attention span and possibly their ability to think critically may have been significantly affected.

A culture afflicted by a numbing ennui that can find relief only in bursts of adrenalin-inducing spectacle and in behaviors generally associated with the demonic is a culture in the midst of a very serious spiritual and psychological crisis. But is ennui really demonic, as Reinhart Kuhn suggests in his 1976 study, *The Demon of Noon tide: Ennui in Western Literature?* Isn't it, as Baudelaire affirms, more of an effect? If so, then who or what is responsible for a boredom that finds relief in the thrills experienced in the virtual reality of computers, TV, and movies? Ultimately, blame rests less with technological devices that occupy our minds and souls than with those who use these devices to enslave and stupefy. In support of this, Espen Hammer, Professor of Philosophy from the University of Essex, asserts that "what Heidegger calls 'total boredom' has become 'the hidden goal' toward which the modern, techno-scientific epoch is aiming"(277). Who then are the devils that afflict us? Who are they indeed if not those who reap tremendous profits by sponsoring TV shows and movies that foster grotesque and bizarre behavior that turn great literary figures into action

heroes and diminish the importance of reading and intellect, and that encourage the creation of games, TV shows, and movies that bombard us with mind-and-soul numbing spectacle after spectacle? I am sure that Baudelaire would agree.

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The Crime Fiction of Leigh Brackett

Leigh Brackett is best remembered as a science fiction writer and Hollywood screenwriter: she contributed regularly to golden-age science-fiction pulps and later to the paperback houses, and she worked on the scripts of many famous films, including *The Big Sleep*, *Rio Bravo*, *The Long Goodbye*, and *The Empire Strikes Back*. Less commonly known is that she also wrote original crime fiction. In the 1940s, she published a series of short stories in crime pulps such as *New Detective Magazine*, *Thrilling Detective*, and *Flynn's Detective Fiction*, and her first novel—*No Good from a Corpse* (1944)—was a detective story. She published several more crime stories (including two novels) in the following decade, and crime and detection plots frequently appeared in her science-fiction writing. She was influenced by the hard-boiled school of crime writing, and her own crime fiction is often implicitly appraised in terms of its fidelity to the hard-boiled model. For example, it is sometimes noted that her crime writing “stands up to anything her male contemporaries dreamed up” (Hamilton 13), while it is at other times noted that she never “cracked Black Mask” (Smith). This approach to Brackett’s crime fiction may ultimately be limiting. While Brackett greatly admired hard-boiled crime writers such as Raymond Chandler, Dashiell Hammett, and James M. Cain (Carr 39, Briney 259), her own crime fiction is not bound by this influence. Certain recurring features of her stories deviate from hard-boiled conventions and suggest narrative priorities different from those of her predecessors.

The hard-boiled influence is perhaps most evident in Brackett’s 1944 detective novel *No Good from a Corpse*, whose protagonist, Edmond Clive, is a tough, hard-drinking private eye in a rainy Los Angeles brimming with violence and corruption. “Don’t trust anything,” he coolly advises a young admirer. His investigations lead him into dangerous, atmospherically-drawn confrontations:

The bullet hit the rotten step and kept going. The gun fell out of Beauvais’s hand almost onto the hole. The mist snared the noise of the shot, wrapped it up, and threw it away far out in the empty night. Clive kicked the gun off toward the canal and dropped back down the stairs. ‘Hold it,’ he said. ‘Just take it easy’ (131).

Shortly after its original publication, *No Good from a Corpse* famously found its way into the hands of director Howard Hawks, and Hawks hired Brackett to work with William Faulkner on the screenplay for the 1946 film adaption of Raymond Chandler’s *The Big Sleep*. Hawks is said to have been surprised upon learning that “Mr. Brackett” was a woman (Macklin 220), but Brackett proved herself to be a highly adept crafter of the kind of “tough” story that had risen to popularity first in the pulp magazines and then in popular cinema. On the basis of such writing, Brackett has frequently been anthologized as one of the hard-boiled genre’s earliest female practitioners.

John Cawelti's 1976 study of "formula stories" remains one of the most ambitious attempts to identify and describe common patterns that structure diverse categories of popular fiction, including the hard-boiled detective story. Cawelti organizes a wide variety of detective heroes into the category of "hard-boiled" partly on the basis of certain recurring character traits and plot elements, among them the detective's wise-cracking style, his personal commitment to the pursuit of justice, and the physical hazards of his investigation. Cawelti identifies the latter as one of the hard-boiled detective's most significant differences from his classical counterpart, but he also notes that the hard-boiled detective does not sustain the kind of wounds that might "spoil his function as a fantasy hero" (161).

The nature of the hard-boiled detective-hero's appeal was well understood by the writers themselves. Dashiell Hammett, in his introduction to the 1934 Modern Library edition of *The Maltese Falcon*, described Sam Spade as a "dream man [...] able to take care of himself in any situation, able to get the best of anybody he comes in contact with" (105), and Chandler drew his own hard-boiled detective as a kind of urban knight errant, a "man of honor," but one who will take "no man's insolence without a due and dispassionate revenge" (18).

Tony Hilfer comments on this basic invulnerability of the hard-boiled detective in his 1990 study, *The Crime Novel: A Deviant Genre*, in which he identifies hard-boiled traits—an "alienated posture," emotional detachment, "sardonic knowingness"—as markers of individual "control" (8-9). The appalling physical abuse to which the hard-boiled detective is sometimes subjected actually serves to underscore this control, to demonstrate that the detective "can take it" (33). Even when plunged into a world of violence, he exhibits a large degree of insulation from terror, hope, agony, and sorrow.

Brackett was a great admirer of Chandler and Hammett, adopting the hard-boiled mode in much of her writing, and populating her stories with jaded tough-guy investigators, but her protagonists do not exhibit the same degree of psychological insulation as their predecessors, and the violence to which they are subjected is of such greater frequency and severity as to be different in kind. For example, the protagonist in Brackett's 1944 story, "I Feel Bad Killing You" is an ex-police detective investigating his own brother's murder, and his investigation is greatly impeded by his paralyzing fear of fire. This fear dates back to an episode in which he was tortured by gangsters—the same gangsters who now mockingly threaten him with matches, causing him to tremble and scream. He ultimately prevails, but he spends a good part of the story terror-stricken, physically bound, or unconscious. In Brackett's 1957, "So Pale, So Cold, So Fair," the protagonist, an investigative journalist, has developed the nervous compulsive habit of fingering the scars on his face—scars resulting from a brutal beating at the hands of racketeers who objected to his reporting.

To the extent that these stories do not succeed with readers, it may be that they set up expectations with their hard-boiled investigators that are then disappointed when these protagonists are, in spite of ultimate success, depicted

in past or present states of physical and psychological incapacitation. Thus an Amazon.com reviewer of a 1999 collection of Brackett's crime fiction begins by identifying himself as an enthusiast of early hard-boiled crime fiction, and of Chandler especially, but complains that "Brackett's heroes [...] seem never to be in control of a situation in the way Marlowe or Spade or the Continental Op or even Hammer were" (Doghouse King "eddie_denman").

Across her fiction, Brackett seems to have delighted in hurtling her tough-guy heroes into fantastically horrible situations—situations that strip away insulating defenses. Her science fiction, especially, afforded her with a wide variety of means by which to ratchet up the awfulness of the torments her tough protagonists might endure. In her 1953 novel, *The Big Jump*, a Bogartesque protagonist investigating his childhood friend's disappearance during a space mission is confronted with radioactive forces that sap men's minds and souls. In *The Sword of Rhiannon*, an archaeologist-turned-mercenary, while treasure hunting on Mars, falls through a hole in the space-time continuum and into the Martian past, where he is compelled into hard labor on an early Martian slave ship, and later has his body taken over by an ancient god. In "Beast Jewel of Mars," deep-space pilot Burk Winters is reverted to an earlier evolutionary state, forced (albeit temporarily) to pursue his investigation of his girlfriend's disappearance with an ape-like consciousness.

In a 1944 essay for Writer's Digest, Brackett identified as an important source of character vitality, the confrontation with "the realities of pain and hunger and fear." Her topic was science fiction writing, but she could just as easily have been describing her crime fiction when she characterized her own stories' heroes as "hard" but "not invincible" (25). Brackett's primary commitment was to entertaining storytelling rather than to psychological realism; however, in service of the goal of writing engaging stories, she championed the drawing of characters as "genuine three-dimensional men and women" (25).

It is precisely this quality that some found to be lacking in the screen version of *The Big Sleep* that Brackett co-scripted with William Faulkner. This film became the occasion for a 1947 review essay by John Houseman, titled "Today's Hero," in which he expressed dislike for and impatience with the era's "tough" heroes and the absence from the "tough' movie" of "personal drama," and therefore of "personal solution or catharsis" (163). For Houseman, there was something "repugnant" (and revealing of problems in the broader culture) about the fatalistic detachment that served as the tough hero's source of cool self-possession.

Whether or not Brackett shared this view, it's worth noting that she saw her screenwriting as a kind of "journeyman" labor quite distinct from her original fiction writing ("Leigh Brackett: Journeyman Plumber" 26). She populated her own crime stories with protagonists who ardently hope, hate, love, and fear. Often introduced as standard-issue tough-guy protagonists, they reveal themselves to possess traits—frailties, personal demons, etc.—that rupture their

veneer of cool and propel character transformation. Clive Edmond of *No Good from a Corpse* struggles to make his peace with past personal betrayals. The protagonists of “I Feel Bad Killing You,” “So Pale, So Cold, So Fair,” and *Stranger at Home* must overcome the psychological damage of past violent victimization in order to successfully pursue their investigations.

Years later, in praising Robert E. Howard’s fantasy novel *Sword Woman*, Brackett notes Howard’s “blow-by-blow” account of the protagonist’s character development, contrasting Howard’s Agnes with Catherine L. Moore’s Jirel of Joiry, in which “we never really know why or how she came to be a sword woman” (6). Brackett does not present this as a critique of Moore, but her comments do suggest that she found the distinction meaningful. It certainly seems to have informed her own writing, in which she endowed even her most thinly drawn heroes with back stories. For example, in her 1943 story “The Halfling,” murders in an interplanetary carnival are investigated by a fairly standard wise-cracking and self-interested protagonist, but Brackett opens the story with him reflecting on his boyhood pleasures and dreams, now lost. Similarly, the Chandleresque detective hero of *No Good from a Corpse* has his toughness perforated by elegiacal interludes in which we learn about him before the onset of cynicism, as an innocent “boy in overalls who had not seen anything yet but the brightness and the cleanliness and the soaring gulls” (128).

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Y Si, Yo Creo: Thought, Belief, and the Search for At-one-ment in Darren Aronofsky's *The Fountain*

Darren Aronofsky's underrated 2006 film *The Fountain* explores a tripartite narrative comprised of text and metatext. The film's main narrative thread concerns Tommy (Hugh Jackman) and Izzi Creo (Rachel Weisz), a married couple facing the death of Izzi from progressive brain cancer. However, spiraling off from that main thread are two other narratives. The first projects Tommy out into a very distant future, one in which he has found the key to extending life by consuming the bark of a tree with which he is traveling. He seeks rebirth for himself and Izzi by traveling to the heart of Xibalba, imagined in the film as a nebula, but existing in ancient Mayan mythology as the underworld. The tree is understood to be the Tree of Life, biblical bestower of immortality and a reincarnated form of the long-dead Izzi. The second narrative serves as metatext, a novel written by Izzi that imagines the couple as Tòmas, a Conquistador, and Queen Isabella of Spain. She deliberately leaves the book unfinished, leaving this task to Tommy. Enfolding this three-part story structure are Izzi and Tommy themselves, whose names represent the two conflicting worldviews that must find reconciliation within the film's narratives. Izzi believes—her name itself sounds like a homophone for the Spanish “y si creo,” properly written as “y si yo creo”—that death is both necessary and a stepping stone leading to “the road to awe,” as she asserts in the film. Tommy’s name holds the other meaning of “creer,” the infinitive from which “creo” derives. While it does mean “to believe,” it also means “to think.” This is where he becomes both the thinker and the doubting Thomas. For him, death is a “disease” to be conquered and cured, physical immortality the prize to be attained. It is in regards to this point that the idea of atonement comes into play, not as it is commonly thought of as one making amends to another for a wrong done, but thought of instead as the word divided into its pieces. This leads to the idea of at-one-ment, of bringing together that which was once separated or divided. As the two negotiate mortality, Tommy must atone, moving away from his initial stance and away, even, from a Western, Judeo-Christian conception of mortality and the afterlife to join Izzi on a path to at-one-ment.

Lene Sjorup's research focuses on experiences of the divine as felt by men and by women. He describes men's experience of the divine, in terms of how they relate these to interviewers, as being told with the purpose “to rationalize, systematize, number, and interpret their experiences” (54). Tommy certainly tries to use his medical knowledge to defeat death, but his divine is a physical immortality that stems from both his fear of losing Izzi and of his own death. With regards to women's experiences of the divine, Sjorup argues that these

experiences often take the form of mystical encounters, feelings, and thoughts. He writes that his interviews, as well as other research, tend to find women “describ[ing] the divine in terms of interconnectedness and boundlessness, and in terms of subtle exchanges between the realms of the holy and the human, nature and cosmos” (52). This falls in line with Izzi’s role in the film, save that her ultimate purpose, and the film’s message, does not preach union with or understanding of the divine with regards to a god or goddess by any name. Cynthia Eller, writing about feminist debates over representations of women, says of the divine feminine, “Statuettes, paintings, calendar, and jewelry abound, and many small woman-owned-and-operated businesses cater to this ongoing hunger for female symbology” (24). In *The Fountain*, woman becomes both the source of knowledge and of life. Although the image of the tree does keep in line with conceptions of the Earth goddess, the film goes beyond this. The Tree, Izzi, leaves the Earth behind and ends in oblivion. She thus sets a sacred example to be followed, but one which resists commonly held assumptions about representation and meaning. She is the mother who holds a dying child and soothes it into whatever comes next, rather than the woman birthing new life into the world.

Aronofsky drew on ancient mythology, specifically stories of the World Tree in crafting his story. Of his inspiration for the film, Aronofsky states, “But I think one of the initial things was, ‘How come no one’s ever made a film about the Tree of Life?’ In Genesis, there’s two trees: the tree of knowledge and the tree of life. It’s something that’s been in human mythology forever. People wanting to live forever” (Murray). Indeed, the biblical story of the expulsion from the Garden of Eden emphasizes God’s concern that Adam and Eve would attempt, in the aftermath of having eaten from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, to also eat from the Tree of Life. This would render them immortal and thus undifferentiated from the deity who created them. In terms of mythic motif, the Genesis story can be seen as one of a number of stories designed to underscore that it is the fate of human beings to grow old, lose vitality, and succumb to death.²

Aronofsky also says of his development of the story, “For me, one of the big things was the fountain of youth which I thought was a really cool theme. It’s an old theme and one of the oldest stories that mankind has been telling. It’s in Genesis with the tree of life. It’s in Gilgamesh and Ponce de Leon searched for it” (Epstein). Whether envisioned in tree form or as a literal fountain of youth, the notion of a means by which to stave off death remains a fundamental dream of human culture. Aronofsky’s film deals specifically with a story of the World Tree as a vehicle for immortality, and he is correct in that no film in recent memory has really contended with the myth. Yet, current culture continues to fixate on finding the means to delay or prevent aging and death. The anti-aging industry brings in billions of dollars per year selling everything from products designed to hide the external effects of aging to supplements and treatments marketed as a means to prevent the onset of aging, thus delaying

death. Thoughts of quests to find the World Tree or the fountain of youth have given way to hopes that medical science might one day allow for humans to live greatly longer lives. Tommy represents this modern day conception of immortality. He is a skilled surgeon and medical researcher whose consistent mantra through the first part of the film is that “death is a disease.” This attitude reflects Tommy’s unwillingness to face the death of his beloved wife and his own. This becomes more evident later in the film, where Tommy has prolonged his own life by eating the flesh of the tree as the pair travel to Xibalba. Aronofsky invites his viewers to challenge their own level of acceptance of their mortality by reminding them that preoccupation with death has existed in mythic and symbolic form as a companion to human culture. In an interview with Michelle Fettters, Aronofsky addresses this last point, arguing, “We’ve become so preoccupied [as a society] with sustaining the physical that we often forget to nurture or take care of the spirit. That’s one of the central themes I wanted to tackle within the film: Does death make us human, and if we could live forever, would we lose our humanity in the doing so?” (www.moviefreak.com). This is the journey that will be undertaken by Tommy in the film. He has sacrificed everything—even time with his dying wife—to feed his belief that he can conquer death. In so doing, he risks losing his humanity.

In addition to utilizing the motif of the World tree, Aronofsky also uses elements of the Mayan underworld, most specifically with regards to Xibalba. Izzi describes Xibalba to Tommy as “a nebula wrapped around a dying star.” This image categorizes the relationship between Tommy and Izzi, first through his attempts to hold her to the physical world and then in their shared death. In the original Mayan, Xibalba roughly translates into “place of fear,” however, the movie makes it clear that the guardian is Tommy/Tomás’s own fear of death, and not a guardian intending to block the path to all, just to the unworthy or those who are unprepared. Similarly, Buddha comes to enlightenment beneath the Bodhi tree while being besieged and tempted by the demon Mara. Trevor Ling says of Mara, “Against those who are Enlightened, he is totally powerless, and all his attempts are folly. It is he who has been defeated when a disciple continues in meditation, or becomes fully enlightened” (urbandharma.org). In these examples, a guardian or barrier to knowledge exists, but only in relation to the worthiness and readiness of the person pursuing it. Both of these accounts are the complete opposite from the Book of Genesis, and the type of scenario repudiated by the film: the cherubim with the flaming sword permanently guards the gateway to the Tree of Life—there is no way past it. Of this image of the guarded Tree of Life, E.O. James asserts, “Therefore, the Tree of Life was guarded by a cherubim to prevent Adam putting forth his hand to secure immortal life by partaking of its fruit. If this interpretation is correct, in the earlier myth the tree had always been taboo, and it was not until divine knowledge had been acquired by partaking of the Tree of Knowledge in the midst of the garden, that he thereby obtained understanding of the mysteries of sex, childbirth, life and death. This made mankind procreative and raised it to a

quasi divine status" (243). The earlier myth here refers to the older Babylonian emanations of a tree of life. Here, it is clear that the Tree of Knowledge, among other things, provides for physical union between male and female—the crux of the film—and thus the film focuses on that union, one which is superior to and ultimately surpasses a union/reunion with the divine.

When Queen Isabella imagines recreating Eden with Tomás, this is a conception of immortality that bypasses Christianity as being too limiting, yet it is also not the pursuit of corporeal immortality that finally plays out in the film. Isabella and Tommy are obliterated when Xibalba finally dies, but in so doing they will "live forever"—but together, entwined as one, not in reunion with a Christian deity, but with one another. E.O. James argues, Adam "had been created a living soul by the Creator breathing into him the breath of life. Therefore, his descendants were not permanently excluded from His presence and revelations" (244). While this is true to some extent, this seems to make true reunion/atonement impossible, as the expulsion was specifically done out of fear that Adam and Eve would become god-like—so humans are the same but not the same as the divine, according to the Christian system. With its emphasis on Izzy and Tommy seeking acceptance of death and solace in one another, *The Fountain* argues that this is a far more meaningful existence.

The film opens with a line from Genesis written across the screen, "Therefore, the Lord God banished Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden and placed a flaming sword to protect the tree of life" (Genesis 3:24). This line becomes the central and conflicting image with that of the tree of life as guarded by the Maya in the film. That tree can ultimately be reached, presumably with the proper intention in one's heart. This proves a stark contrast to the permanent edict barring Adam and Eve and all of their descendants from ever gaining entrance back into the garden. Access to the Tree of Life is forever cut off. What essentially becomes the journey of Tommy Creo in all his incarnations—is a moving toward the acceptance of his own mortality fully and completely. It becomes, then, an important point that Tomás seems at first to succeed by getting past the Mayan guardian, but then greedily drinks of the tree's sap. He fails at this point, but the film ends with Tommy ultimately succeeding through his acceptance of death. Aronofsky focuses his film on the idea of knowledge as redemptive and this particular knowledge as being the source of freedom. The biblical story of Eden becomes limiting, and limits the Queen Isabella and Tomás in the film.

The film, as its plot does not unfold in chronological sequence, then focuses on Tomás as he makes one final push to reach the Tree of Life. He says simply to his men, "Let us finish it." Not only is this a theme resonant through the entire film and evocative of both Izzi's plea for Tommy to finish her book and Tommy and Izzi finally dying, it also calls to mind Jesus's final words as recorded in the Gospel of John, "It is finished" (John 19:30). This parallel reflects the film's dialogue with Christianity. The film puts forth no theories at all as to whether or not Tommy and Izzi go on to a form of heaven or are reincarnated, and thus

Tommy bears no resemblance to a Christ-figure who undergoes a resurrection. Instead, Tommy has to move from a sense of mission—that he must finish what he has set out to do—to acceptance that the end of the journey through death is the only ending that can be.

Tomás, as the above scene continues, asserts of Queen Isabella, “We are her salvation. And through her command we shall live forever. I will not die! Not here! Not now! Never!” His sentiment expands in the future setting of the film, where he, traveling alone now with the Tree of Life/Izzi promises her, “You’ll make it. I won’t let you die.” Tommy has had to eat of the bark of the tree to extend his own life during their journey and whether by virtue of that alone or that possibly the Tree is not truly immortal, the Tree of Life withers, near death, as they travel toward Xibalba. Aronofsky describes this section of the film, with Tommy traveling with the Tree toward Xibalba, “So we decided to create an environment where Tom and the Tree of Life lived in a balance” (www.seedmagazine.com). Interestingly and perhaps tellingly, it is not a balance in which both can survive and thrive—it is an environment with a limited time span, which belies the initial conception of the Tree of Life as both immortal and a granter of immortality. In the broadest sense, stories of the World Tree and other tales concerning the quest for immortality become limited by the mortality of their creators. While they may serve as explanations for why humans are mortal, or perhaps even as symbols of wishful-thinking in terms of the possibility that out there lies a path to immortality, they cannot grant that which they discuss. *The Fountain* considers physical immortality and concludes that it is both impossible and something that would cost humans more than they would gain. Aronofsky ponders, “The Tree of Life grows up, up, branches come out, has leaves, the leaves fall down, they go back into the earth, come back up through the tree, come on out, and there’s the leaves” (Capone). In the film, the Tree of Life, with its origins in Izzi, is thus also a Tree of Death since it reflects the fullness of human experience.

In all three settings of the film, Izzi remains a focal point for Tommy, both because of his love for her and his drive to save her life. In the specific case of Izzi’s novel about Tomás and Queen Isabella, in it, Tomás seeks the possibility for an earthly eternity with Isabella, a wish fulfillment perhaps on behalf of author Izzi, but a true quest on the part of Tommy. By forcing Tommy to finish the story, Izzi moves him to a place where he must set aside his fantasy of permanently cheating death to instead embrace the time they have shared and the certainty of death. These themes are further confirmed once Tomás enters the pyramid and meets its guardian, the Lord of Xibalba (Fernando Hernandez), who tells him both, “First Father sacrificed himself for the tree of life. Enter and join his fate” and then “Death is the road to awe.” Tommy’s sacrifice involves overcoming his ego, the “I think” translation of his last name, to trust in Izzi’s later repetition of the line that “death is the road to awe.”

Although Izzi provides the path of knowledge and enlightenment for Tommy, she does not exist as a superhuman figure completely impervious to her

imminent death. Indeed, her whole story of Queen Isabella feels a bit like wishful thinking about a world in which she and Tommy could remain together forever, both terrestrial and immortal. Izzi further concedes to Tommy, “I’m afraid” in response to her body’s decreased sensitivity to heat and cold, a sign that her brain tumor has progressed. But in the next moment, as this scene continues, she admits to having kept these physical changes private, “Because I feel different. Inside. I feel different. Every moment. Each one.” While Tommy and Izzi ultimately share together the experience of death, Izzi here reminds the audience of the fundamental difference between them at this point. Tommy’s logic, his tendency to try to think through the unthinkable, cannot follow her into her private experience of a dying body, and she cannot completely share it. She can only follow the journey, believing in its value and its rightness.

Tommy is repeatedly thwarted in his attempts to conquer death and cure Izzi. The film, in its present day Tommy and Izzi storyline, depicts Tommy and his fellow researchers trying to distill a cure from what is described as old growth timber samples. The viewer understands that this is another correlative to the Tree of Life. When one of the lab monkeys is treated with the bark, he experiences a resurgence back to youth. However, his tumor remains as it was. Tommy takes this as a failure and refuses to investigate the matter further. He receives notification that the treatment does eventually begin to shrink the monkey’s tumor, but this information reaches him only after Izzi dies. The film never states whether or not the monkey becomes immortal, but this seems unlikely given everything else that occurs. Instead, the monkey seemingly restored to life and some degree of youth exemplifies the idea that mortality can only be held off for so long. Tommy refuses to acknowledge any lesson in this, instead insisting that this evidence can be used to “Stop aging. Stop dying. Stop death.” Later, hundreds of years into the future, Tommy has staved off death by eating of the Tree, but it has not restored him to full youth. E.O. James describes the thematic and symbolic purpose behind the image of the World Tree: “Arising in the first instance in the urge of life these dynamic creative and rejuvenating functions have given expression to one of the most deeply laid strivings of mankind in the induction and impulsion of ever-renewing vitality, and the riddance and expulsion of barrenness, aridity and sterility” (245). *The Fountain* twists this somewhat in that the viewer plainly sees that the tree is dying *because* Tommy has been taking its bark and presumably also because it knows it is time to die. The tree’s new season—its new spring—comes with death.

The Grand Inquisitor (Stephen McHattie), villain of Izzi’s novel, is first seen onscreen flagellating himself. The head of the Spanish Inquisition is envisioned by Izzi as the chief nemesis of Queen Isabella who has declared her a heretic for seeking the Tree of Life. This theme of bodily punishment and denial surrounds his character. Anne Waters’s research deals with indigenous women and their role in terms of bridging the spiritual and the physical. Waters writes, “Native women continue to respect the earth as an indigenous manifestation of

what Jaimes Guerrero refers to as The Sacred Feminine Principle” (xii). These women “lead the way, through traditional women’s leadership and authority, to reclaiming the earth, humanity, and all our relations via an ecoethics of reciprocity” (xii). While the film does not focus on eco-criticism per se, the image of the sacred tree/Izzi as dying under Tommy’s constant taking of her bark underscores the idea of reciprocity. Ultimately, it is Izzi who guides Tommy, and thus the viewer, away from the physical and into the realm of the spiritual. The idea of women’s authority also proves interesting with regards to the film. The Grand Inquisitor, in Izzi’s novel, is incensed at Queen Isabella. While outwardly, he remarks that she is a blasphemer by looking for the Tree of Life, the implication is that he also resents a woman both governing alone—Izzi’s novel does not have Queen Isabella married to Ferdinand—and also interpreting scripture. This coincides with medieval prohibitions against women preaching or interpreting the Bible. Queen Isabella not only seeks immortality, but she utilizes the Book of Genesis as confirmation that the expedition into South America is not in vain.

In a later scene, where the Grand Inquisitor prepares to execute many of Queen Isabella’s followers after first torturing them, he tells them, “Our bodies are prisons for our souls. Our skin and blood are the iron bars of confinement. But fear not, all flesh decays. Death turns all to ash. And thus, death frees every soul.” He later continues, “The Day of Judgment is irrefutable. All life must be judged. All life is accountable.” Clearly, he speaks of judgment here in Christian terms, in that of heaven and hell. The film does not place its values in such constructions, acknowledging only that life and death are intertwined and both must be embraced fully. Silecio instead implies that, by murdering the Queen’s supporters, he in fact does them some great favor by “freeing” them from their bodies. He places no value on life, and indeed, places himself in a position of being able to dole out life and death, godlike, and thus he fails, the movie implies, to be human. Queen Isabella rationalizes her command that Tomás seek out the Tree of Life because it will “free all mankind from tyranny.” As Tomás prepares to set out on her quest, she gives him a ring and promises that on the successful completion of his mission, “And when you return, I shall be your Eve.” Queen Isabella’s misstep is to focus too heavily on earthly immortality, a step pointedly shared by Tommy.

Balance comes through experience life and death as they happen: to fight death means to live forever in frustration and in opposition to the human experience, to hasten death cheapens the joy and fragility of life. This overriding philosophy again sets the story as being especially Buddhist, where life and death exist as one process of being. One of the foundational tenets of Buddhism focuses on the idea of impermanence, and thus life as we conceive of it should not be clung to. Izzi embodies this view of thinking. In one scene, she describes to Tommy the Mayan creation story of First Father and his bodily sacrifice to create the world, which is subsequently formed from the parts of his body. She describes this sort of death as “an act of creation,” an idea that Tommy cannot

entertain, focused as he is on corporeal reality. Izzi instead represents what the film depicts as the right view of life and death: these two experiences of human life exist in harmony with one another, free from the dictates and tenets even of organized religion, most heavily Christianity and its teachings in the context of the film. Izzi sees instead a continuing movement of life and death, a cycle in which all things are essentially one. By the film's climax, as Izzi and Tommy face death, her words, "Together we will live forever" come to their fullest meaning. Where Queen Isabella once used similar words to describe a re-introduction of Eden and immortal human life and Tommy fought against mortality, Tommy and Izzi collapse into two (as opposed to all their iterations in the film), then finally into one. They will, no matter what awaits them after death, whether they will be reborn and know each other again or not, share the same essential foundation of being, of life and death.

Izzi, then, both in her bodily form and later in tree form, seeks to lead Tommy to this knowledge, to marry his thought and belief. She encourages him, at several points in the film, to "Finish it." While this most obviously refers to her book, which she deliberately leaves unfinished for him, the words possess larger ramifications. Tommy's answer is always a variation of "I don't know how it ends" to which Izzi replies with a variation of "You do. You will." She allows him time—in this case hundreds of years—to come to the fullness of knowledge, to come to a place where he can let go of his control, of his need to reason and think the world the way he best sees fit. Lillian (Ellen Burstyn), the head of Tommy's research unit and a friend to Izzi, says at her funeral that "She saw her fear, her hope, and her death as essential parts of life." This is what Izzi encourages with her admonitions that Tommy finish the book. All the disparate pieces haunting Tommy—the loss of Izzi, the fact that the tree is dying, his obsession with reaching Xibalba in the mistaken belief that this will provide physical immortality—must find at-one-ment. Tommy, late in the film and alone with the tree and manifestations of Izzi, finally breaks down, crying "Please! Please! I'm afraid." It is only at this point in the narrative that Tommy can begin to write the final chapter of the book, his story and perhaps humanity's.

He flashes back through his memories of life long ago with Izzi and finally smiles, understanding, "I'm going to die!" He now rewrites his story, going back to a day early in the film where Izzi tries to get him to enjoy the first snowfall. At that early stage, he declines, focused as he is on curing her cancer. As the story now rewrites itself, Tommy decides instead to be with Izzi, to live, for however long that option is available. It is only in the story, in Izzi's story, that one last vestige of wishful thinking takes place. Tomás finally reaches the Tree of Life and drinks its sap. His wounds are instantly healed and, with a combination of greed and wonder, he gulps greedily from it, tearing into it to get at more sap. Instead of gaining eternal life, plants and flowers erupt from his body, obliterating him. Tomás is now the way Izzi spoke of First Father: a part of every living thing. From this point, the film moves to Tommy and the tree/Izzi reaching Xibalba and being obliterated. Of Xibalba, Michel Graulich

comments, “One cannot help but remember the famous tree of Xibalba, of the underworld, mentioned in the Popol Vuh. According to this source the Lords of Xibalba put the head of the vanquished ball player Hun Hunahpu in this tree, and immediately fruit grew out everywhere. Later on, the head changed into a cala-bash and managed to fecundate a young earth and moon goddess by spitting in her outstretched hand. Clearly, decapitation was a sacrifice on behalf of the earth in order to nourish and fecundate her” (403). Here, within this idea, lies the notion of a bound system of sacrifice—the male ball player to the feminine aspect of the Earth. *The Fountain* places the tree as inherently tapped into the feminine (as Izzi becomes the Tree of Life). Up until these final moments, Tommy takes from the tree to prolong his own life, and the tree is in bad shape. The male force drains the female. Now, his sacrifice comes when he lets go of clinging to life. He and Izzi are one, but even before that, the tree blooms one final time before being obliterated.

With the deaths of Izzi and Tommy comes a bringing about of balance to both themselves and the universe in which the film functions. All three pieces of the narrative coalesce, finally, into one cohesive and unified thread. The very last lines of the film end it in the present story, the rewritten version, presumably, where Tommy chooses Izzi, chooses to be with her through life and death rather than wasting his time fighting the inevitable. Izzi asks, “Is everything all right?” to which he answers, “Yes, everything’s all right.” Even those things that he cannot control—the moment of death and what comes after—have been brought into union. Thought and belief, the double-meaning of “creo” are made whole.

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Notes

¹This observation has been made by filmgoers and is in and of itself not revelatory. Indeed, the Internet Movie Database’s Trivia page for the film lists this translation. What has been missing is any sort of treatment of the implications of her name, and of Tommy’s, with regards to understanding the film.

²The *Epic of Gilgamesh* presents much the same message, although this is just one example. Gilgamesh, after watching his close friend Enkidu sicken and die, heads out to the far reaches of the world in an attempt to learn the secret of immortality. What he discovers instead is that mortality is inevitable and that civilization continues on, while individual lives end. Even religions of consolation, like Christianity, focus on the rewards that come in the afterlife, not the permanence of any physical reality or mortal self. In E.O. James analysis, “In Christian iconography the Cross was symbolised as the Tree of Life, being the emblem of the victory of Christ triumphing over death. As the Fall of man was attributed to the Tree of Knowledge in Eden so the Tree of the Cross was equated with the Tree of Life as the means of redemption and resurrection” (244). While this is certainly true, that doesn’t mean that humans are meant to believe they can similarly triumph over death – Christianity, as a religion of consolation (looking to everlasting life in the afterlife), does not allow for humans to be both earthly and immortal.

³The parallels to Buddhism do not mean that this film espouses Buddhist philosophy. It only does so in the sense that Tommy tries to find a type of enlightenment and must let

go of his attachment to the physical.

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MORE THAN JUST GHOST LORE IN A BAD PLACE: MIKAEL HÅFSTRÖM'S CINEMATOGRAPHIC TRANSLATION OF STEPHEN KING'S SHORT STORY "1408"

At first, Mikael Håfström's movie "1408" seems to be just another typical ghost story: typical in the sense that it aims "to scare its readers" (Briggs, 11) through a confrontation with the inexplicable that finds manifestation in the restless souls of the dead re-entering the world of the living. This analysis, however, shows that Håfström's film goes beyond the features of a typical ghost story portraying ghosts seeking revenge, demanding retribution, requiring the completion of unfinished business, or correcting an injustice. Moreover, this analysis illustrates that the film, which is loosely based on Stephen King's short story of the same title published in 2002, even goes beyond the author's unidentifiable textual gore expressed in the original text. It moves away from the domineering "feelings of revulsion, disgust, and loathing" (Botting 124) expressed in King's text. Håfström's individual use of the folkloric, spiritual, and literary perception of ghosts together with his personal interpretation of King's literary text leads to a ghost story that despite some similarities with other ghost stories is very different in its focus.

In Håfström's film, the appearances fulfil two functions. On the one hand, they are a symptomatic expression of the main character's pathological mourning and melancholy provoked by his daughter's fatal illness. On the other hand, they function as a personification of the main character's personal desire for as well as fear of death. In this sense, Håfström's adaptation of ghost lore and of the literary source is a product of "mixture of repetition and difference, of familiarity and novelty" (Hutcheon 114). Only through the interplay between the past and present understanding of ghosts does Håfström actualize his own perception of the invisible world of the dead in film, concretize his personal interpretation of King's horror tale, and visualize his psychological understanding of a modern ghost story.

FROM FOLKLORE TO FICTION

In contrast to Stephen King's short story "1408," which plunges the reader right into the horrifying events of room 1408 without ever specifying the happenings' origin or linguistically defining the strange phenomena, Mikael Håfström's cinematographic adaptation of the textual source offers an independent understanding of the text's bewildering "voice of the room" (King 499), the "whiff of burning sulphur" (King 501), the intense light "filling the room with that yellow-orange glow" (King 500) and the "rips in the wallpaper [and] black pores that quickly [grow] to become mouths" (King 500). Similar to

Algernon Blackwood's ghost stories, in which "trees, bushes, earth, snow, even the wind" (Sullivan 115) function as ghosts, Håfström's adaptation of King's text lets everything come to life: the hotel room, the walls, the furniture, and first and foremost, the human mind. Moreover, the film director creates a full story-line around "the intruder" of this particular.

Even though both text and film stress the fact that the story's main character—Mike Enslin—"is in search for another place" (King, *Room* 4) and another life, Stephen King's manuscript differs from its filmic adaptation also in the sense that it neither provides the reader with any insight into Mike Enslin's emotional and mental state, nor offers a possible answer to the question why he desires to enter a forbidden universe that has been locked away since 1978 and that is characterized by the hotel manager Olin as evil. Moreover, King's short story does not elaborate on why a fiction writer who specializes in the investigation and depiction of so-called paranormal occurrences demands to enter a room that is not even "listed on any of the websites dealing with paranormal locations or psychic hotspots" (King, *Room* 472) other than to prove to the hotel manager and to himself that there "are no ghosts in room 1408 and never have been" (King, *Room* 469).

Even though Stephen King, on more than one occasion, has stated explicitly that Mike Enslin does not believe in any paranormal phenomena, the king of horror fiction never grants the reader any explanation why Enslin continues describing his ghostly encounters. The reader of King's text gets the impression that Mike Enslin, like the once prolific ghost story writer M. R. James, only writes about ghostly encounters because it gives pleasure "of a certain sort to [the] readers" (James vii). Mike Enslin's disbelief in the supernatural and in the natural finds a much stronger articulation in Håfström's filmic adaptation of the material. Through an "extended intertextual engagement" (Hutcheon 8) with the source text, the director actually uses horror fiction's conventional "theme of the nuclear family in crisis" (Wadenius 131) as departure point for everything that follows.

According to Håfström's adaptation, Mike Enslin's strong disbelief and negative outlook on life—his cynicism regarding death, religion and the existence of the afterlife—is a symptomatic expression of his anger and non-acceptance of "the limitations of the physical world" (Edwards 83). He cannot come to terms with the fact that neither modern medicine nor he was able to heal his daughter and to prevent her from dying. Thus, he unconsciously seeks consolation in his unfruitful investigations of apparently haunted dwellings whose individual stories he publishes in his books: *Ten Nights in Ten Haunted Houses*, *Ten Nights in Ten Haunted Graveyards*, or *Ten Nights in Ten Haunted Castles* (King, *Room* 463). Enslin's true motivation to investigate and to hopefully experience what King calls "phobic pressure points" (King, *Danse* 4) results from something other than his apparent interest in paranormal activity and writing: It follows from an unresolved trauma that still rules his mental and

emotional life leading him back to the emotionally charged city of New York, the city of pain, mourning and death.

It is in the city of New York, on the thirteenth floor of the Dolphin Hotel, that he faces the real horrors of his life: his melancholic desire for a complete family life, his still unprocessed mourning for his daughter Katie, and his guilty conscience over not having tried harder to save his daughter's life and his marriage. In order to succeed in his unconscious attempt to detach himself from his still too dominant nostalgia for the past, he has to test reality in the seclusion of "a poisoned room" (King, *Room* 477), in which internal psychological processes take the form of ghostly apparitions and become external dangers stimulating the desire for as well as provoking the fear of death. Even though Mike Enslin does "have visions and epiphanies which change everything" (Sullivan 2) around him, the ghosts in Håfström's film differ from those described by Sheridan Le Fanu, M. R. James, Walter de la Mare, or Henry James, as they are more than a spiritual power, an evil force, or "a traditional medium of communication between the past and the present, the dead and the living" (Briggs 111).

MOVING TOWARDS AND INTO THE ROOM 1408

Similar to the Overlook Hotel in *The Shining* (1977), Sara Laughs in *Bag of Bones* (1998), the summer cabin in *Secret Window, Secret Garden* (1990), or the pink villa in *Duma Key* (2008), the hotel room 1408 is another "Bad Place" (King, *Danse* 264) within King's fictional world. Like many haunted houses in ghost stories, gothic novels, or horror films, room 1408 "stands for the unknown, for ignorance that threatens the safety of the occupants" (Ruffles 104) by absorbing, transforming and setting free "the emotions that had been spent there" (King, *Danse* 265). As such, it is a personalized space that somehow holds all of its occupants' hopes, fears, and desires. In regard to Mike Enslin, it is a space that he unconsciously fills and fuels with re-occurring thoughts and emotions from the past provoking weeping or laughing fits and extreme changes in his mental and physical condition.

As a "Bad Place," room 1408 imposes a mental, a physical, and an emotional threat to Enslin's being. The room becomes "a protagonist in its own right" (Ruffles 104). It becomes Enslin's main antagonist. Whereas King's manuscript ends without defining the antagonistic evil of room 1408, Håfström's film provides (at least) suggestions of how to understand these evil forces. Håfström turns away from King's original text in which nothing is familiar and moves toward the re-occurrence of the repressed that now reappears in an unfamiliar disguise. In other words, Håfström exchanges King's unidentifiable textual gore with a cinematographic representation of Enslin's repressed past—the true ghost of the "room on the thirteenth floor" (King, *Room* 478). By doing so, Håfström achieves three things: First, he challenges the viewer's understanding of ghosts in a film of the twenty-first century; second, he alludes to the possible meanings of King's text depending "upon a complex

invocation of ideas of similarity [with] and difference [from]" (Sanders 22) the textual source; third, he creates an independent work of art.

Regardless whether King's choice of floor and room number alludes to the superstitious fears stemming from ancient Scandinavian folklore¹, from ancient Egyptian beliefs², or from M.R. James' short story "Number 13," what matters is that Håfström's filmic adaptation differs from King's text in the sense that the adaptation alludes to everything that is associated with the number 13 and King's text does not. The illustration of the room's hostile energy and supernatural forces that continuously decrease its size, transform its layout from a regular room to a stormy sea, to a field of ice, and finally to a room on fire, visualize Enslin's fear of destruction, of great suffering, and of approaching death. At the same time, these happenings represent Enslin's conflicting emotions including not only the fear of but also the desire for death, a desire that has been nourished by his extremely guilty and melancholic conscience.

Håfström's film illustrates that Enslin's obsession with death is set into motion through what Sigmund Freud once called 'hyperremembering' and defined as "a process of obsessive recollection during which the survivor resuscitates the existence of the lost other in the space of the psyche, replacing an actual absence with an imaginary presence" (Clewell 44). In other words, Enslin's profound mourning of the death of his daughter does hinder him "to adopt any new object of love" (Freud, *Mourning* 244). It lets him turn away from the realm of the living and towards the realm of the dead; not in order to understand the spiritual implications of the afterlife (like many characters in Walter de la Mare's ghost stories), but to prolong the interaction with what he has lost.

On several occasions does the film reveal Enslin's "clinging to the object" (Freud, *Mourning* 244), for example when he imagines a crying baby, "sees" Katie on the TV screen, or believes to hold her revived body in his arms. Instead of resolving his trauma and processing his mourning and resulting melancholy, Mike Enslin unconsciously seeks the reception of those stimuli for the purpose of being able to relive the impulses of pleasure and psychological pain. The unconscious externalization of his inner excitations then leads to the confrontation with the spirits of his own soul taking the form of the five ghostly manifestations Enslin imagines in the room 1408.

THE RETURN OF THE DEAD AND THE REMAINS OF LIFE

In scene 10 (0:43:25-0:48:23), Mike Enslin encounters the first ghostly apparition that, in contrast to the other four manifestations, is the only one trying to harm him. This ghostly aggressor enacts Enslin's pain and disappointment he would still like to take out on everyone who was involved in the unsuccessful attempt of healing his sick daughter Katie. Taking into account that Enslin is ruled by many conflicting emotions and that the essence of being but also of becoming and creating are notions that are associated with the number 1, the existence of the first apparition "gives rise to multiplicity" (Cirlot 221) of

meanings and unpleasant surprises while being in the room with the number 1408.

It is when the walls close in on him that Enslin notices that the door handle has broken off denying him access to the outside world, that the supernatural manifestations come out of nowhere only to take his life, and that the neighbour across the street is a mere mirror image of his wishful thinking, but does not belong to reality. Håfström represents Enslin's realization of enclosure and increase of anxiety through fast alternating shots decreasing in size from eye-level medium-shots to extreme close-up shots. Whereas at first, eye-level medium-shots show Enslin walking around in the room, lying on the bed, or standing in the hotel room window, the director replaces these by extreme close-up shots, revealing for example the alarm clock counting down from 60, Enslin recording his fearful apprehension that no one will last longer than an hour, Enslin trying to check out of the room over the phone, and Enslin peeking through the keyhole. All close-ups convey that there is no escape from this room that has turned BAD and that the viewer already understands as an architectural manifestation of Enslin's anxiety-ridden mind.

But why does Mike Enslin suffer from sudden anxiety attacks? Enslin's change of disposition is provoked by the return of the repressed, which causes "the changing of libido into anxiety" (Freud, *Anxiety* 410). In other words, Enslin's still existing love for his deceased daughter and "affective fixation to something that is past" (Freud, *Fixation* 276) implies an incomplete process or even "a pathological form of mourning" (Freud, *Fixation* 276). As such, his still existing love for his deceased daughter becomes a source for his developing anxiety finalizing in his extreme fear of death, which manifests itself in the return of and interaction with the dead. The ghostly encounters in Håfström's film, thus, express Enslin's "special interest in the past" (Briggs 111) that is closely connected to his present life.

In scenes 11 and 12 (0:48:24-0:58:45), Mike Enslin encounters a total of three ghosts: First, an older man jumping out of the window; second, a middle-aged woman crossing the room prior to jumping out of the hotel window; third, Mike Enslin's deceased father sitting in the bathroom complaining about his spiritual existence. In accordance with a traditional ghost narrative, all ghosts personify to some degree "the magical interaction" (Briggs 17) between Mike Enslin and his universe that somehow belongs to the past; a past that represents a lost perfection of family life consisting of him as the Father, his daughter Katie, and his wife Lily.

He notices the first two specters after "seeing" his entire family on TV (scene 11, 0:48:26-0:49:51). This is a moment that juxtaposes this past stability with his present instability provoked by his desire, his pain, and his idealization of and consequential search for his lost life that has become a haunting shadow. This idea of bodily and "natural limits" (Cirlot 222) causing loss and pain opposes Enslin's feelings of "solidity, calmness, and home" (Venefica 2009): notions that find representation in the room's second number: 4.

The combination of the two first room numbers—number 1 and 4—gives us even more insight into Mike Enslin’s disturbed psyche, as the resulting two-digit number 14—the product of 7×2 —stands for fusion and, consequently, holds characteristics of both numbers. Even though number 7 has the symbolic meaning of perfection and order, it also contains the notion of the seven capital sins, among which we find wrath (uncontrolled anger and self denial), despair, (sadness and unhappiness) and acedia (melancholy and depression), feelings that rule Mike Enslin’s life. Dualism, however, is especially a characteristic of number 2, a number that signifies unity as well as a “movement away from unity” (Greer 494). In relation to the scenes 11 and 12, the number 2 symbolizes unity (husband and wife), as well as division (the breaking up of his family) and contrast (his present vs. past life). Consequently, it expresses dualism between opposing poles, which in Mike Enslin’s case are defined by marriage and divorce, union and separation, life and death, and the immortal and mortal. Hence, number 14 reflects Mike Enslin’s previous life that he unconsciously cherishes to an utmost perfection and that opposes itself to his present existence and struggle between life and death. In this, the first two room numbers (1 and 4) express change in the sense of becoming oneself without the other. The two-digit number promotes the separation from the “ghosts of the dead, but also [from the] ghosts of the living—[...] the living when they were at a quite different period of their lives” (Bell 823)—in our case—when they were husband and wife.

The realization that this desired family life has elapsed leads to two other dominant feelings of Mike’s: emptiness and nothingness—feelings that are symbolically represented in the third room number: 0, a number that is significantly linked to Mike Enslin’s grief, loss and depression.

Prior to the encounter with the third ghost—his deceased father in the bathroom—he hears a baby crying, a phenomenon that relates to Mike’s own past as a young father. When he enters the bathroom, Mike exchanges roles of father and child. He becomes the child himself, ruled by his too vivid imagination that takes over reality and that produces the horrifying events taking place in room 1408. However, whereas the first two ghosts personify death as “the supreme liberation” (Cirlot 74) from all earthly pain and anguish, his father’s ghost relates to the folkloric belief of the spirit being earthbound until the cause or matter of death has been clarified. In this last case, death represents the end of life, but not of extreme suffering.

Even though we could easily assume that the novelty of the situation gives Enslin some pleasure in the sense that he has finally found the ghosts he has been looking for, the sudden occurrence of the supernatural entities frightens him as they represent and remind him of his long-ruling desire for as well as fear of death. In accordance with the symbolic reading of the number 3, the three ghosts of scene 12, thus, embody “the beginning, the middle and the end” (de Lys 472) of something he cannot yet define.

When Mike Enslin envisions the appearance of his daughter Katie walking through the incinerated room towards him (scene 17, 01:23:02-01:28:32), seeking the everlasting love of her father, he is free of any fear. The imagined existence of his daughter returning from the dead is symbolic for Enslin's still extreme emotional attachment to the loved but lost object. It visualizes that Enslin turns away from reality and clings more than ever "to the object through the medium of a hallucinatory wishful psychosis" (Freud, *Mourning* 244). It is not surprising that Håfström uses Katie as the fifth ghost, as the number 5 results automatically by adding up the first three numbers of the room ($1 + 4 + 0 = 5$). Moreover, number 5 entails the two most dominant feelings in Mike Enslin's life: love and pain. With the emotional highs and lows associated with the notions of love and pain, number 5 carries yet another connotation that also applies to Mike Enslin's state of mind: It comprises "instability and unpredictability, and radical changes" (Venefica 2009). The ghostly apparition of the deceased daughter is, at first, a source of extreme pleasure. When Katie "dies again" and when the imaginary dissolves and becomes an empty reality, his source of pleasure transforms, however, into one of extreme unpleasure. Left behind in complete darkness, Enslin's horror is too strong to endure, leading to his emotional outburst: "No. No no no. You can't take her twice. Not again, please God. You can't. Please. No!" (01:26:38-01:27:00).

DISINTEGRATION OF THE PAST AND PRESENT

We can argue that enclosed in the hotel room, Mike Enslin's almost forgotten past overwhelms him to the extent that it becomes the present reality allowing him to "assess the value of past relationships and [to] comprehend what he [...] lost in losing the other" (Clewell 44) as well as when losing his own self. It is in this room that his so far successfully repressed emotional pain returns in connection with "instantaneous wish-fulfillments, [the] secret power to do harm, and the return of the dead" (Freud, *Uncanny* 401). The return of the repressed overpowers him to the extent that he is incapable of differentiating between imagination and reality. Lifeless objects and paintings become animated, ghosts appear, and the radio and the TV turn on and off by themselves. As a result, Enslin enters a world that produces a new melody "of disestablishment and disintegration" (King, *Danse* 13) of the dead and the living, leading to a repetitious visualization of destruction, madness, de-realization, self-alienation, culminating in self-dissolution.

Taking these individual elements of Håfström's film into consideration, it is obvious that his ghost story differs from a traditional ghost story relying on the reader's belief in demonic intervention and the frisson by ghouls disturbing the nightly rest of the living. Even though the film, in accordance with the psychological ghost story, desires the apparitions "to be regarded as symptomatic of mental disturbance" (Briggs 143), Håfström's tale diverges from the psychological ghost story in the way that Mike Enslin's mental disturbance is neither caused by misdirected passion, sexual repression, nor by

schizophrenia. Mike Enslin's conflicted state of mind has been caused by the unprocessed loss of his daughter.

By combining and developing the folkloristic understanding of ghosts, their depiction in literature throughout the centuries, the psychological understanding of mourning and melancholy, as well as the use of numerology, Håfström goes beyond Wilkie Collins' description of Isaac Scatchard's nightmare in "The Dream Woman" (1855), Sheridan Le Fanu's representation of the alien inner world in "Green Tea" (1869), Guy de Maupassant's illustration of insanity in "Le Horla" (1887), or of delirium and obsession in "Qui sait?" (1890). He goes beyond Henry James' interpretation of ghosts as evil intruders representing the character's misdirected passion in "The Turn of the Screw" (1898). The spectator of Håfström's film has to realize that the spectral entities haunting the hotel room are not apparitions seeking retribution or an appropriate burial. They are not harmless apparitions trying to disturb playfully Enslin's nightly rest. Håfström's ghosts are mirror images of Enslin's past life and unconscious memory—traces that he has tried to repress. As such, they are reflections of Enslin's emotional trauma that get projected onto the outside. Every single one of the 5 apparitions personifies Enslin's psyche to some extent and proves that for Mike Enslin the past has become "more important than the present" (King, *Danse* 255). Håfström leads the viewer to this conclusion by replacing Enslin's observation of and interaction with the dead with him staring into the bathroom mirror, observing his broken reflection (scene 12, 0:53:34). Whereas first he seemed convinced of the presence of spectres, he now has to recognize that the only face looking out of the mirror "is also the face looking in" (King, *Danse* 259). He has to come to terms with the fact that he actually is alone and that there are no ghosts around him.

By framing Enslin's face, Håfström recalls Enslin's enclosure and also evokes the idea of him being an integral part of the room in form of a picture. As such, Enslin's self becomes one with the room and with "the power of whatever inhabits [it]" (King, *Room* 479). The room with all its ghostly manifestations, then, becomes a symbolic representation of Mike's psychotic mind to which the viewer now is restricted as well. It becomes a representation for Enslin's inner struggle, self-imposed thread, and resulting warning: If he does not balance out the "opposing forces" (Cirlot 223) and does not process his so far unresolved trauma, the past will pull him down while being kept in the isolated room of 1 4 0 8.

CONCLUSION

We can conclude that unlike King's original text, Håfström's film does not rely on the gruesome and gory alone, but focuses on the illustration of the familiar unknown returning in an unfamiliar disguise. Håfström gives King's "phobic pressure points" a visual image and, by doing so, combines horror with folklore, superstition, and psychoanalysis. He lets the ghosts become manifestations of Mike Enslin's self and other. The director leaves no doubt that Mike Enslin's ghosts are part of his memory, at the same time that they are a

reflection of his present life, and also of what will happen to him in case he does not fully process his emotional loss. They symbolize the interconnectedness of “all that was, that is, and that will be” (Magga 2009).

The fact that towards the end of the film Enslin decides to put his experiences into writing illustrates this interconnectedness, as well as that it marks a new beginning in the writer’s life. By writing a story—a story that on the outside looks like yet another ghost story, but which on the inside actually is a testimony of Mike Enslin’s grief work—Enslin processes his loss. While outlining his fears, hopes and pain prior to and after Katie’s death, the author comes to terms with the death of his only child. The writing of the book then has to be understood as Enslin’s attempt to free himself “from the lost object” (Freud, *Mourning* 252) and to reattach his libido to a new object in order to being able to accept “consolation in the form of a substitute for what has been lost” (Clewell 44).

His book becomes the key to unlock and close room 1408; a room “whose very numerals add up to thirteen” (King, *Room* 478), which captures everything that the number 13 comprises, and which has to be understood as the architectural manifestation of his mind. In addition to superstitious fears of destruction, suffering, pain, and death, this particular place holds Enslin’s final step towards transformation. As such, it “symbolizes the death to the matter or to oneself and the birth to the spirit: the passage on a higher level of existence” (Desrosiers 2009). In this sense, the book is the explanation for all of Mike Enslin’s fears, desires, superstitions, and hopes.

Even though 1408 can be classified as a ghost story within the field of horror fiction, the viewer has to acknowledge that the director adapts and transforms the long-established folkloristic and literary tradition of ghosts in a way that its result stands for its own and becomes a fictional expression of mourning. By doing so, Häfström accomplishes three things: First, he creates a new type of ghost story, which is composed of the traditional, antiquarian (folkloristic), and psychological ghost story. Second, he reshapes King’s original text. Third, he turns his film into a “fully independent work” (Cahir 26) of art. In other words, Häfström creates “a work that is second without being secondary” (Hutcheon 9). It is as Linda Hutcheon would say, “its own palimpsestic thing” (9).

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Notes

¹ Legend has it that twelve Gods were at dinner, when the evil-spirited God Loki entered the room and provoked a dispute leading to the death of the loving God Baldur. Since then, the number thirteen has been viewed as misfortune, especially “unlucky in terms of dinner parties” (Morse 182). Since then this unlucky number has been associated with the fear of destruction, of great suffering, and of the approaching death.

2. According to ancient Egyptian beliefs, the number 13 represents “the final step or stage of earthly existence, in which one was merged into permanence or spiritual transformation” (de Lys 481).

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MORE THAN JUST GHOST LORE IN A BAD PLACE 63

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BOOK REVIEWS

The Portrayal of Social Catastrophe in the German-Language Films of Austrian Filmmaker Michael Haneke

Dennis Eugene Russell

The Edwin Mellen Press, 2011

In *The Portrayal of Social Catastrophe in the German-Language Films of Austrian Filmmaker Michael Haneke*, Dennis Eugene Russell presents a meticulous and insightful semiotic analysis of some of Michael Haneke's major films, which allows him to reach both pertinent and irrefutable conclusions regarding the significance of this particular body of work within the contemporary cultural landscape.

Russell's open-ended critical approach is not the least remarkable aspect of his essay, for it allows him to establish a concrete conceptual base for the interpretation of Haneke's work, which is neither forced nor subjected to fashionable rhetoric excess. His critical sources are selected according to their pertinence vis-à-vis the matter at hand and we find, next to Baudrillard's notion of simulacra, the crucial concepts regarding the society of spectacle put forward by Guy Debord, a doubtlessly pivotal thinker whose fundamental contribution to a critical view of consumer's society has been so far grossly overlooked by postmodern inquiries.

Russell's insightful study of Haneke's cinematographic semiotic codes points to crucial issues of modern consciousness, such as the communicative breakdown of postmodern exchange, the alienation of the self in a spectacularized reality, and the deep epistemological crisis that challenges the very foundations of a post capitalistic order. Russell considers both the narrative mechanisms of Haneke's work and their relationship to our perception of reality; hence, his book is not only relevant within Cinema Studies, but also within the field of sociology as well, for it relates in a theoretically sound manner filmic semantic structures to historical contextualization.

Russell's book responds to a very present need in our field for it addresses fundamental questions raised by the works of an important film maker in a clear, conceptually informed manner served up in an engaging and convincing style, making it both a pleasant and highly informative read.

Daniel Ferreras Savoye , West Virginia University

APPENDICES

Appendix A

To the Reader, By Charles Baudelaire Translation by Robert Lowell

Infatuation, sadism, lust, avarice
possess our souls and drain the body's force;
we spoonfeed our adorable remorse,
like whores or beggars nourishing their lice.

Our sins are mulish, our confessions lies;
we play to the grandstand with our promises,
we pray for tears to wash our filthiness;
importantly pissing hogwash through our styes.

The devil, watching by our sickbeds, hissed
old smut and folk-songs to our soul, until
the soft and precious metal of our will
boiled off in vapor for this scientist.

Each day his flattery makes us eat a toad,
and each step forward is a step to hell,
unmoved, through previous corpses and their smell
asphyxiate our progress on this road.

Like the poor lush who cannot satisfy,
we try to force our sex with counterfeits,
die drooling on the deliquescent tits,
mouthing the rotten orange we suck dry.

Gangs of demons are boozing in our brain —
ranked, swarming, like a million warrior-ants,
they drown and choke the cistern of our wants;
each time we breathe, we tear our lungs with pain.

If poison, arson, sex, narcotics, knives
have not yet ruined us and stitched their quick,
loud patterns on the canvas of our lives,
it is because our souls are still too sick.

Among the vermin, jackals, panthers, lice,
gorillas and tarantulas that suck
and snatch and scratch and defecate and fuck
in the disorderly circus of our vice,
there's one more ugly and abortive birth.

It makes no gestures, never beats its breast,
yet it would murder for a moment's rest,
and willingly annihilate the earth.

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From the Editor's Desk

- Popular Culture and Epistemological Doubt: The Limits of Reality in Postmodern Science Fiction.....**

**Daniel Ferreras Savoye
Fernando Ángel Moreno**

- The Doubling of Death: Human, Animal, the Real, and the Irreal in the Films of Michael Haneke.....15**

H. Peter Steeves

- Of Baudelaire and Holmes: Ennui in Contemporary Culture27**

Rich Logsdon

- The Crime Fiction of Leigh Brackett.....37**

Christine Photinos

- Y Si, Yo Creo: Thought, Belief, and the Search for At-one-ment in Darren Aronofsky's *The Fountain*43**

Amy Green

- More Than Just Ghost Lore in a Bad Place53**

Alexandra Reuber

BOOK REVIEWS 65

- The Portrayal of Social Catastrophe in the German-Language**

Films of Austrian Filmmaker Michael Haneke by Dennis Eugene Russell

Reviewed by Daniel Ferreras Savoye 67

APPENDICES:

- Appendix A, "To the Reader, By Charles Baudelaire
Translation by Robert Lowell** 71

CONTRIBUTORS..... 73