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Generation Kill

HBO, USA / UK, 2008

A Review by Sheamus Sweeney, Dublin City University, Republic of Ireland

In a relatively short time it has become a truism to describe David Simon's *The Wire* (HBO, 2002-2008) as one of the best, if not the best, drama in television history. Superficially focussed on the city of Baltimore, it opened into a dissection of "the American Empire" (Talbot, 2007), "rampant capitalism" (Lanahan, 2008) and the "victory of capital over labor" (Mills, 2007). With that drama's conclusion came the news that David Simon and Ed Burns (his collaborator on *The Wire*) were turning their attention to the Iraq war and post-Katrina New Orleans. [\[1\]](#) The picture was emerging of a writer systematically engaging with the major faultlines of the new American century.

HBO's *Generation Kill*, broadcast in the US in 2008 and released on DVD in 2009, is based on a book by *Rolling Stone* journalist Evan Wright. Wright was embedded with the First Recon marine unit during the 2003 invasion of Iraq. The book, while insightful, confirms the flaws inherent in this practice. Wright is dependent on the marines for his protection. His life on occasion is in physical danger. At times it appears that the distance between reporter and subject is significantly diminished. It is clear from the book that Wright is dubious about the reasons for the invasion. He makes a point of referring to the opposition to the war and questions the marines for their own opinions. This sense of context is important, but it largely disappears as soon as his unit crosses the border from Kuwait into Iraq. On the book's inside cover is a photograph of the author. He is grimy and unshaven with smoke rising behind him. The picture speaks volumes in terms of how the war is portrayed in both book and series. At certain points the pro and anti-war arguments disappear to be replaced by the visceral rush of "bullets, bombs and ultraviolence" (Wright, 2005).[\[2\]](#)

The resistance encountered by the unit, while undoubtedly significant in subjective terms, is sporadic. Very few serious injuries are suffered by those on whom the book focusses. At various points the author attempts to draw out the political opinions of the invaders. These range from the insightful to the terrifying. Sergeant Espera opines that the US should invade all of the African and Middle Eastern countries and impose McDonald's and Starbucks on them, to create the good system that Americans have today (*Ibid.*: 96). That the consumer paradise of the United States is arguably based on the exploitation of those countries is lost on him. On the other hand, Lieutenant Nathaniel Fick, a

student of the classics and political science, is more ambivalent. At one point he recounts a saying about the war on Afghanistan: "the incompetent leading the unwilling to do the unnecessary" (*Ibid.*: 34). The darkly funny Ray Person periodically comes up with more outlandish reasons for the invasion, at one point ascribing it to the ambitions of NAMBLA (the North American Man Boy Love Association). The book is undoubtedly an insight into the mindset of troops on the ground. There are also episodes that, for writers as politically astute as Simon and Burns, contain fruitful material for a television adaptation.

The mini-series is remarkably faithful to the book. It also draws out some of the tropes familiar to viewers of Simon's other work. His sympathy is with the troops on the ground and their immediate superiors who simply want to get the job done. The institution they serve, in this case the military, betrays them. The upper levels are obsessed with perception management and impressing their own superiors. They are unaware or unconcerned at how incompetent their actions appear to those on the ground. Troops are sent into Iraq in dark green haz-chem suits that are completely unsuitable for a desert environment. The grease needed to keep the machine guns working is in short supply. No arrangements have been made to deal with prisoners or refugees. *Generation Kill* is interested "in how the earliest days of the war revealed its fatal missteps" (Brown, 2008). That the first misstep may have been the one taken over the Iraqi border is never adequately addressed. The word that comes most consistently to mind while watching the drama is incompetence. There is no suggestion that the war itself was a mistake, or illegal. David Simon has stated that his own feelings about the war "do not belong in this piece" (*Ibid.*). Ed Burns has described it as "the wrong war", a "make up war" and suggested that those responsible for it should be tried in a courtroom (Havrilesky, 2008). Simon has also claimed that one of his dramatic templates is Stanley Kubrick's *Paths of Glory* (Sepinwall, 2008). Colonel Dax, played by Kirk Douglas, keeps faith with his men against the callousness and arrogance of the high command. But the central theme in *Paths of Glory* (1957) is unambiguous; the pointless, inhuman waste that is warfare. Three soldiers are executed to encourage the others ("*pour encourager les autres,*" as it is put in the film), who will be cast back into the mud of the trenches. It shares none of the ambivalence that characterises *Generation Kill*. The attempt to create an apolitical drama out of the Iraq war means that there is no suggestion that the war itself was anything but badly executed. It fits neatly into what has become the prevailing liberal narrative about the war in the US. The problem was not a war launched in defiance of international public opinion and international law. The problem was that it was not done properly.

The episodes in the book that raise the possibility of a wider narrative surrounding the war remain intact. Lieutenant Fick, following an ambush by "foreign fighters," observes that there were no "jihadis" in Iraq before the invasion. One of the best realised scenes is when the platoon encounters a

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stream of refugees and sets up an improvised roadblock. A young woman caustically informs Sergeant Colbert that she is grateful to be allowed to pass on her own road in her own country and is grateful to be liberated. But these moments fail to challenge a narrative that predominantly valorises those who simply see themselves as having a job to do.

What this job entails is one of the most problematic aspects of the narrative. Throughout *Homicide: Life on the Street* (NBC, 1993-1999) and *The Wire*, Simon and Burns have focussed on people, mostly police officers, who attempt to do good work despite institutional indifference and outright hostility. Part of their intention was to present experience in a way recognisable to those being portrayed. A similar intention underwrites *Generation Kill*. But while the role of the police is far from unproblematic, the nature of the job undertaken by the marines in the First Recon unit is even more so. The homicide cops Simon shadowed in Baltimore were flawed human beings, but their job was to catch murderers. The role of the marines is to invade a sovereign state and if necessary kill its citizens. The series shows how quickly the rules of engagement break down and the "enemy" by definition becomes the random "haji." Their job is that of invader and occupier.

In one respect, comparisons with *The Wire* are unfair. A more apposite comparison would be with *The Corner* (HBO, 2000). In the early 1990s Simon and Burns spent a year on a Baltimore drug corner, effectively embedding themselves. This experience produced a book of narrative journalism (Simon & Burns, 1998) and an HBO mini-series. For some of the detectives with whom Simon had worked when writing *Homicide* this switch was something of a betrayal (Simon, 2006: 632). Yet in both cases the priority was to present the roles of the police, drug dealers and users on their own terms, untainted by cant and cheap sentiment. *The Corner* mini-series is bleak and claustrophobic, devoid of editorialising. *Generation Kill* evinces a similar approach. However on this occasion Simon's determination to keep his opinions to himself means that it also becomes depoliticised and one-dimensional. This is an important distinction. *The Corner* attempted to give voice to a marginalised and silenced underclass, whose customary role on US television is as raw material for the righteous violence of law enforcement. Presenting their narratives in the most unvarnished way possible restores their humanity. In contrast to the mini-series, moreover, the book contained lengthy tracts of sociological analysis.

On the other hand there is no shortage of "men at war" narratives, especially where they concern the US military. These range from romanticised portrayals of tough but honourable fighting men, to flawed and damaged individuals attempting to survive in war zones shorn of any real context. In fact these latter narratives, for example *Platoon* (1986) and *Full Metal Jacket* (1987) are usually the most lauded for supposedly showing things as they really were. They show the difficult decisions facing troops on the ground, dealing with a resistance that is asymmetrical and whose fighters melt back into the general population after

they strike. In such situations, large numbers of civilian casualties are inevitable but they are seemingly, ultimately the fault of the resistance themselves. The invaders become the victims, the wars an "American Tragedy" (Pilger, 2009). *Generation Kill* sits relatively comfortably within this tradition.

Another part of the problem appears to stem from David Simon's own experience of embedding, whether with the police or drug users. Embedding offers what appears to be an unfiltered perspective on history as experienced from the bottom up. Yet there is a huge gulf between the experience of embedding with a domestic police force in one's own city and (leaving aside military control of media access) doing the same thing in a hostile and foreign environment. Despite his scathing indictments of mainstream journalism, so effectively articulated throughout *The Wire's* fifth season, Simon remains sceptical about the alternatives. When speaking of the inadequacies of Internet journalism and the citizen journalist, there is disdain for what he perceives as mere bloggers who never leave their keyboards (Simon, 2009). He believes, with some justification, that only large news-gathering organisations possess the resources to cover stories like the war in Iraq. But in Fallujah, for example, the news that did emerge in the mainstream media came from those in the large news-gathering organisations who were, like Evan Wright, embedded with the US military. In fact there was a military imposed news blackout for the second assault on Fallujah in November 2004 (Jamil, 2007: 233).

Yet there *were* unembedded journalists in Fallujah, one of whom subsequently collected his experiences into a book. Dahr Jamail, a Lebanese-American reported at length from Iraq in the aftermath of the invasion. Tellingly, while Jamail's reports were widely published in print throughout the Middle East and Asia, and to a lesser extent in Europe, the bulk of his first generation reporting was disseminated via his own Internet mailing list. In this respect he was an Internet journalist by necessity, not by choice. This is not to mention the blogs of Iraqis themselves, most notably that of Riverbend, a self-described "girl blogger" from Baghdad. [3] Added to this is the testimony of returning US soldiers themselves who recreated the Vietnam era Winter Soldier hearings, to tell of their experiences. [4] It was undoubtedly possible to write a drama about the Iraq war showing it from multiple perspectives as *The Wire* did on its terrain. The subject matter demands such dramatisation. Unfortunately, *Generation Kill* is not that drama.

While the mini-series and book contain relatively little to upset mainstream opinion, there is also relatively little to upset conservative supporters of the war. There seems to be pervasive casual racism, which is evidently part of the transgressive subculture of the marines. Certain troops are ill-educated and trigger happy. This would not shock any but those with the most idealised view of the military. The reception accorded the invaders is largely positive. The Iraqis they encounter are happy to provide information on fedayeen and

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republican guard movements. Young men and women wave from the roadside and wish to erect statues to George W. Bush. They are grateful at the dispensing of military rations and candy. Part of this perception is undoubtedly due to the rather dubious translator allocated to the unit. Every outpouring, no matter how agitated or apparently angry, is translated as the natives being grateful for liberation. Further, despite the "inevitable" civilian casualties, the marines are shown to be largely courteous and helpful to the civilians they encounter. This contact ranges from providing medical assistance to the wounded to giving an overburdened refugee a ride on a Humvee. There is no reason to suggest that these incidents are either overemphasised or non-existent or that they were motivated by anything less than altruistic or humanitarian motives. Insofar as the invaders did act with humanity and decency, this should be acknowledged, even if they are often ameliorating injuries for which they are responsible.

This raises the question as to why, of all the stories that could have been dramatised from the invasion of Iraq, HBO chose this one. The narrative it presents is one rendered largely redundant by what has transpired since. Some scenes in the final episode seem to prefigure the future chaos, but again from the perspective of a botched invasion. A narrative drawing on the writings and experiences of non-embedded citizens and journalists would undoubtedly have revealed a more complex picture of the nature of the occupation and resistance to it. In this respect, the recent three-part Peter Bowker drama *Occupation* (BBC, 2009), is far more successful. The narrative combines the stories of several people, including a British army medic, a female Iraqi doctor and private military contractors, and shows how the development of the occupation impacts, negatively, upon them.

The final episode montage, accompanied by Johnny Cash's "The Man Comes Around" is suggestively apocalyptic. In common with *The Wire*, both occupiers and occupied are fated protagonists at the mercy of Olympian forces. But where *The Wire* deals with the impersonal forces of rampant capitalism, the context in *Generation Kill* is far more specific. Marxists may argue that the war itself grew out of the competitive nature of international capitalism and imperialism, but the immediate reasons for the war are less nebulous. It is now largely uncontested that the desire to redraw the political map of the Middle East and the exploitation of Iraq's oil were major motivating factors. It can also be argued that *Generation Kill* is the logical extension of the pessimistic worldview articulated in *The Wire* itself: a declining American empire bringing the rest of the world along for the ride.

It seems apparent that David Simon was drawn to this project by the similarities he saw between his own work and Evan Wright's. Ed Burns is a Vietnam veteran. The story told on this occasion is in many ways diametrically opposed to that of *The Wire*. It would be wrong to suggest that *Generation Kill* is a glorification of empire where *The Wire* chronicles its decline. As David Harvey has argued, the fact that the United States has exerted its military force in such a crude way

over the past decade does suggest an empire in decline. It has been forced to rely on the area in which it remains overwhelmingly dominant: its military power (Harvey, 2005). This is not the narrative of *Generation Kill*. It does suggest that war is brutal, that it dehumanises both invaders and invaded. However it does so absent any wider frame of reference. It brings forcefully to mind Slim Charles's remark in *The Wire's* third season when the Barksdales are about to embark on a full-scale confrontation with Marlo Stanfield: "If it's a lie, then we fight on that lie." This comment itself was impossible to read as anything other than a reference to the Iraq war. It is also hard to escape the conclusion that there is something inherently noble in the fighting man; that at a certain point the fight itself trumps context. This is a deeply disappointing conclusion for a writer who has described himself as the "king of meta" (Simon, 2008). Simon is correct to suggest that the metanarrative is the decline of the American Empire. It would have been better served in the case of Iraq by dramatising the aftermath of the invasion and by not leaving his own opinions on the sidelines. Sergeant Rudy Reyes, who plays himself in the mini-series has described how he:

started hating the fact that we're not helping anybody over there [...] I wanted to fight people and engage and kill people who are oppressing others, right? It's quite sobering when you look in the mirror and you're like, 'Oh I guess I'm kind of that person too.' (Reyes, 2008)

If there were a glut of Iraq war dramas filling our television screens, furnishing multiple narratives and perspectives, then *Generation Kill* would have a place. Its focus on institutional, rather than individual, failings is a welcome counter to the "few bad apples" narrative that emerged in the aftermaths of the Abu Ghraib abuse and Haditha massacre. This unfortunately sidelines the question of an individual soldier's responsibility not to carry out illegal orders. This was a gulf successfully bridged in *The Wire*, which combined systemic critique with, for example, the question of parental responsibility. It should also be acknowledged that, while in terms of its military focus, it shares much in common with Steven Bochco's *Over There* (FX, 2005), in terms of its relative depth and lack of sentimentality, *Generation Kill* is a vastly superior piece of drama. Ultimately, however, it is hard to escape the conclusion that this drama is not only a misuse of Simon's and Burns's talents, it is also myopic and obsolete.

Notes

[1] The latter is the focus of Simon's HBO drama *Treme* (2010-).

[2] This statement appears on the front cover.

[3] See *Baghdad Burning* <http://riverbend.blogspot.com>

[4] See "Winter Soldier: Iraq & Afghanistan," *Iraq Veterans Against the War*, <http://ivaw.org/wintersoldier>

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Diary of the Dead

Dir: George A. Romero, USA, 2007

A Review by Sigmund Shen, LaGuardia Community College, City University of New York

It was right in the middle of watching George A. Romero's fifth zombie film in forty years that I found myself, not exactly on the edge of my seat with thrill or dread, but reflecting on the whole problem Freud had with Marxist class analysis. It wasn't that he didn't get what the communists were saying about religion or exploitation or the masses. It was just that he didn't think any critique of capitalism could account, all by itself, for the historical dialectic between oppression and revolution by which humanity's endless episodes of horror and heroism were and are still being played out. In Freud's view, the instincts of eros and thanatos, desire and death, are far more ancient than class struggle, and would continue to be at war no matter what material injustices we overcame: "Aggressiveness was not created by property" (1961: 60).

So what if those instincts were unleashed from the controls of civilization, say, by a Hollywood apocalypse? In Freud's day, one fantasy embodiment of such an irruption might have been Count Dracula, that liberating icon of lust and appetite made even more threatening by condescendingly superior table manners. But in our age, thanks to romance novelists such as Anne Rice and Stephanie Meyer, vampires have ironically become more soulful than scary, their aristocratic, old world origin transformed from a nightmare of blue-blood tyranny to a comforting reminder that chivalry is not dead.

The uncanny cadavers made famous by Romero's inaugural classic *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) present a more unnerving, less easy to eroticize figure of Freud's theory of the instincts. One recurrent thesis of the zombie subgenre seems to be this: the unconscious, if set free by a society-felling disaster, would not manifest in a hellish utopia of unfettered, libido-driven wish fulfillment. The fall of civilization would not look anything like *Girls Gone Wild*. What we'd see instead would be a descent into the compulsive repetition of dreary subroutines – ungraceful shambling, artless mumbling, infantile reaching and grabbing, and of course, mindless, insatiable eating, even when the undigested food is dripping out of the zombies' guts, which typically have been half-removed by other zombies. If that kind of pure, self-perpetuating, uncivilized desire sounds alarmingly obtuse, it's because it is, and appropriately enough, the first thing other zombies will always try to take from you is your brain.

Such a scenario doesn't sound very liberating and indeed could be imagined as a new form of self-enslavement, where our own most primitive instincts turn out to be – surprise! – even more oppressive than the laws and policemen that once kept them in check. Thus, part of the black comedy in zombie apocalypse

stories can be found in their aura of disappointment, their "Is That All There Is?" angstiness. For this New Yorker, the perverse pleasure of going along with an evocative end-of-the-world adventure is the wave of nostalgia for the freaky imaginings of those first few days after 9/11. Back then, one could almost picture the anthrax cloud settling down and the unquarantined hordes totally rolling over all of the cops, the firefighters, the doctors, the nurses, and the public transit workers. All we needed was for Wal-Mart and Wall Street to crumble, and it would have been curtains for capitalism. But zombie stories imagine a reality quite different from the rapturous day of judgement that every good Marxist is supposed to be waiting for. For some reason, the world always ends, not with triumphant dancing in the streets, but with even more ruthless military juntas, poignantly manic shopping sprees, and wild-eyed rednecks holed up in their cellars amid barrels of shotgun ammo and moonshine. The story of the zombie apocalypse is the story of the death of civilization, not by lust, murder, greed, or any of the other comparatively interesting Judeo-Christian sins, but by stupidity.

Think about that for a second. No wonder they're so damn scary.

And the most disturbing thing about the zombie kind of stupidity is, it is a category completely unrelated to strictly *cognitive* prowess, or lack thereof. Several more recent books and movies in the subgenre, including David Wellington's *Monster Island* series, Grace Lee's *American Zombie* (2007), and Romero's own *Land of the Dead* (2005), present us with ghouls who exhibit unmistakable reasoning and language skills. And even the most dimwitted shamblers must still retain solid motor and hand-eye coordination; how else could they keep on their feet during all those entropic encounters when their presumably more brainy (for now) victims keep slipping and tripping all over the place? If zombies are supposed to be truly mindless creatures driven by nothing but appetite, shouldn't they lose balance and fall, maybe break a hip? Actors who play zombies have gotten good at exuding a peculiar awkwardness, but beneath that one can always sense determination, even deliberation, as if every step were the direct result of focused (albeit wrenching) mental effort. They almost walk like developmentally average toddlers, except that when they smile you don't wish to hug them, and the only time they fall down is when somebody shoots them in the head. (They say you never forget how to ride a bike; could the same be true for the undead?)

No, the really unsettling thing about zombies has nothing to do with their IQ: it's more of a deep, disquieting, *philosophical* stupidity, become all the more repulsive because we recognize it, however unconsciously, in our own wretched little lives. This isn't about the stupidity of teens in 80's slashers, bumbling down funhouse corridors when the audience is screaming at them to run the other way. They may not have brains either, but at least they have curiosity, the compulsion to *know*. What we have here is so much sadder: it's the

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compulsion to *repeat*. Why do the zombies keep eating when they've already won – and lost? Why are the rednecks still driving around with their shotguns when the gasoline and ammo are all but gone? The futility of both sides is almost Palinesque: "Kill, baby, kill!"

This is the critique Romero seems to be making in *Diary of the Dead*. I say "seems to" but in truth he doesn't do it with much subtlety. The fact that the zombies are blatant representations of our own most decadent and self-defeating tendencies – whose diary is it again? – is nothing new; it's been an unmistakable theme of the filmmaker's ever since he shot a crowd of zombies wandering listlessly through a shopping mall. But there are actually two parts to this argument. The first is that we are just like them. But the second is that we (as represented by the documenters of our final days) are still trying, pathetically, inanely, to prove that we're alive, to delude ourselves with the belief that we still have hope and a future.

It's this second part that makes *Diary of the Dead* not just philosophically depressing, but also esthetically so. Romero has done more than just follow the "apocalyptic log" conceit of *The Blair Witch Project* (1999): he has imagined what it would have looked like if Heather Donahue's video editing skills were more scarily inept than her ability to find her way out of a forest. The meticulously affected amateurishness of the eponymous student-made film (which the film's director, Jason, sophomorically titles *The Death of Death*) is hard to separate from Romero's film itself. And it's not just the editing that offends the eyes. The musical score is lifeless, relying heavily on bass heartbeats and sad violins. The acting and character development are correspondingly wooden, reminiscent more of the UPN nighttime teen soap vibe that pervaded *The Blair Witch Project's* interesting but discordant sequel. Yet I think this is part of the point – or the joke, depending on whether Romero's oddly Pynchonesque brand of self-satire strikes you as being more stirring or cynical. It's not just the student filmmakers' opus, *The Death of Death* that is a clichéd, plodding, and lifeless movie – it is *Diary of the Dead*. This is the first zombie film I've seen where the mindless shell of a human being, absurdly still walking around and trying to grab hold of other people, is starting to feel like a metaphor for the subgenre itself. The movie keeps moving even though there is no longer any point for its existence.

The slow pace is all the more soporific because the characters themselves often stop to expound upon the thematic significance of every new plot development, via nihilistic aphorisms. You won't need to watch the DVD with the director's commentary turned on – it's redundant. Right after a zombie stumble-by in a hospital is delightfully thwarted by a live defibrillator to its head, one character, a war veteran who apparently has never seen Principal Skinner's Vietnam flashbacks on *The Simpsons*, has to ruin the fun by pronouncing "In wartime, killing comes easily." About a half an hour and a few zombie kills later, another character discovers, "It's interesting how quickly we find out what we're capable

of becoming." Wherever possible, atmosphere is constituted by exposition. When the student filmmakers take shelter at a rich friend's parents' mansion, one laments, "I can't do this anymore. Every time we walk in somewhere somebody dies." Her friend, who must think morbid irony is reassuring, replies "Or somebody's already dead. It's gonna be the same everywhere we go." This can't be dismissed as Romero just making fun of mumblecore 20-somethings: even the students' hard-drinking, washed-up film professor delivers the Dorian Gray line: "Mornings and mirrors, I despise them. Mornings and mirrors only serve to terrify old men."

It's not that Romero never heard the old adage about showing and telling. His older zombie films were never quite this talky, and *Season of the Witch* (1973) was practically a tone poem. And he obviously hasn't forgotten how to tell a good story filmically. In one of the more refreshing sequences, our heroes are rescued by an amiable deaf-mute person, whose actions and unflappable survival instincts speak far louder than words (literally, since his signature move is to throw dynamite at the problem). Named Samuel, he is also an Amish farmer, and the contrast between his near-*joie de vivre* and the other principals' drony navel-gazing is probably a clue to narrowing down the primary target for Romero's satire in this movie. Instead of the intersection of race and class (*Dawn of the Dead* [1978]), or gender and the unconscious (*Season of the Witch*), Romero seems to be concerned here with the juncture between dystopia and technology.

This becomes evident by the time Jason begins to care more about the number of hits his uploaded YouTube dailies are getting ("72,000 in eight minutes!") than the number of his friends who are still among the living. The other students, including Jason's mysteriously hot girlfriend Debra, are exasperated and bewildered by his media obsession (he even stops to recharge his video camera in an abandoned hospital, which is, as more than one film-reviewing blogger has observed, the last place you'd want to be when the dead are coming back to life). At first, Jason's determined guerrilla filmmaking seems to be a means of airing Romero's lefty concerns. A TV broadcast shows that the government has recut the footage of the first recorded zombie attack and dubbed "expert commentary" over it to imply that undocumented immigrants are at fault for having started the epidemic. This prompts Debra to muse that "[t]he media was lying to us, or the government to them. [...] Now I understand why Jason was so anxious to upload his own footage." There are references to racism, anti-immigrant hysteria, and euthanasia throughout the film. It is even implied that such tricky problems can be addressed through revolutionary consciousness-raising: the narrator at one point says "[i]n addition to trying to tell you the truth, I am hoping to scare you so that maybe you'll wake up." But faster than you can spell "postmodern disillusionment," the rising cacophony of political stupidity begins to draw attention, not to all the individual and crazy meanings that people are assigning to the zombie pandemic, but to the powerful

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medium that is amplifying all of their voices at once. The utopian promise of the online commons leads to discursive anarchy.

Thus Jason's quest for survival and significance, both off- and online, becomes a dispiriting way of allegorizing the lifeless routinization of Web 2.0, where imagined online communities compulsively document and tag-cloud our unedited musings on "user generated content" sites like YouTube and Facebook, to say nothing of corporate co-optation attempts like CNN's "Sound Off Comments" and Amazon's "Customer Reviews." Here, once again in a different form, is the perversely depressing anticlimax of the zombie apocalypse, the revelation that our own stupid, repetitive instincts are potentially just as destructive as any state or ruling class apparatus ever was. Debra says "The mainstream had vanished. With all its power and money. Now it was just us. Bloggers, hackers, kids. The more voices there are the more spin there is. The truth becomes that much harder to find. In the end it's all just noise." Debra goes on to clarify that this noise is not just "confusing" (as if finding out "the truth" would be sufficient in itself) but ultimately *pacifying*. The artist becomes complicit with an old political problem. As a documentary filmmaker, Jason relinquishes his freedom when he says, "I don't want to make this kind of movie either but I can't change the script." And, as Debra observes later,

Seeing things through a lens, a glass [...] you become immune. [...] you're supposed to be affected, but you're not. I used to think it was just you out there, the viewers. But it's not. It's us as well. The shooters. We become immune, too, inoculated. So that whatever happens around us, no matter how horrible it is, we just wind up taking it all in stride. Just another day. Just another death.

Why are Debra and Jason and the other student auteurs so mopey and bloodless, so whiny and annoying? The "inoculation" Debra names here is not against disease or death or even undeath, but against life and passion, and the political will to break through the apathy of anarchy, the paralysis of postmodernity. Web 2.0 was supposed to take the consumers of the shopping mall from *Dawn of the Dead* and transform us all into critical thinkers, *creators*. But Romero seems to be saying that this, too, was a lie. Producing "content" for the web has become just as mindless as shopping or watching TV. Although Jason seems like a stock B-movie character in many ways, his girlfriend's moments of trenchant, ironic analysis show that Romero is in control of the joke, and no less ambitious here than he was in the Seventies. His juxtaposition of the student filmmakers against the zombie hordes implies that the procedure of uploading our blood and guts to the web has become so easy and reflexive that, *not unlike them*, we are doing it without even knowing why we are doing it anymore. The purposely amateurish dissolves and montages in *Diary of the Dead*, along with the splicing-together of downloaded found footage with shaky-cam home video, ripple and quiver like upside-down reflections of the barely conscious, stumbling, and ultimately pointless motions of the zombies

themselves. Except that even the zombies aren't static-headed enough to cannibalize themselves, or one another, as Jason is basically doing, and as all of us are doing whenever we sign over our photos to Facebook. When Debra intones wanly over the film's haunting final shot, "Are we worth saving? You tell me," it feels less like a thematic climax than an epilogue – not just to *Diary of the Dead*, or the zombie subgenre as a whole, but to the very hope of a technology-assisted rebellion. Not that any of the above should dissipate anytime soon: as the old chestnut goes, how can you kill what's already dead?

Despite the mixed reviews you may have seen for *Diary of the Dead*, I can assure you that many things have not changed for George A. Romero. One of them is the fact that, despite how clever, fanciful, and/or ridiculous his subject matter can sometimes appear, his themes remain troubling, in a good way. Here, as with the original *Night of the Living Dead*, it's death itself that gets the last laugh.

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Rich and Strange

Dir: Alfred Hitchcock, UK, 1931

Stage Fright

Dir: Alfred Hitchcock, UK, 1950

A review essay by Judy Beth Morris, Susquehanna University, USA

Triangular Relationship Structures in *Rich and Strange* and *Stage Fright*: Hitchcock's reversals of expectations in two lesser-known films

Alfred Hitchcock liked to link his lead characters together in triangles of desire, as can be seen readily in *Notorious* (1946), *Vertigo* (1958), and *North by Northwest* (1959). He would use this winning triangular structure of "good guy—woman—bad guy" to great effect and success. He often reduced the female love interest to the role of sexual object, or, in Richard Millington's words, an "erotic commodity" that is exchanged between the men and is used by one man as a tool against another man (1999: 139). Some, like Tania Modleski, have speculated that Hitchcock himself was both fascinated and repelled by women and this ambivalence is transferred onscreen onto the psyches of several films' male characters. But what happens when he presents a female protagonist and reverses the triangle: two women fight for the affections of one man? Such is the relational structure of both *Rich and Strange* and *Stage Fright*.

The two women/one man triangles in *Rich and Strange* and *Stage Fright* ultimately serve to underline women's limited options in our society rather than draw the audience into a passionate romance between two charismatic, good-looking stars (as all three of the mentioned two-men/one-woman films do). The triangles of the three better known films are all about longing, rivalry, and romance: the leading man (Devlin in *Notorious*, Scottie in *Vertigo*, and Thornhill in *North by Northwest*) can't have the woman he wants and, even worse, his nemesis is in possession of the woman for much of the story. Sure, the man could have other women and he still has his career. The real issue is his heart—his passion or obsession for *this* particular woman. But when it's a two-women/one man triangle and a woman is in the central role of the film, her quest is less about love and self-actualization and more about her basic survival. The two women of the triangle are presented less as rivals and more as a sisterhood of self-preservation. *Rich and Strange* and *Stage Fright* suggest that a woman must secure a man, any sort of man (even if it defaults to being her own father, as might have happened in *Stage Fright*), in order to live in this world. Heaven forbid she turn out like the spinster in *Rich and Strange*.

In *Notorious*, *Vertigo*, and *North by Northwest*, the audience is positioned to want the hero to get the woman—those couplings are naturalized as desirable and even probable by the films' end (although that proves impossible in *Vertigo*). But this is not true for *Rich and Strange* and *Stage Fright*, wherein the women are depicted as easily fooled or prone to martyrdom. They love cowardly, undesirable men because they just can't help it. We don't want them to end up with the guys they want. Because of this, their agency as protagonists is diluted. Yet, the films provide the female leads with some autonomy and agency, which further complicates this question of Hitchcock's ambivalence, as will be shown.

Rich and Strange

Hitchcock adapted and directed *Rich and Strange* before he had fully developed his trademark thriller techniques onscreen. The comedic melodrama stars Joan Barry and Henry Kendall as Emily and Fred Hill, a middle class English couple who live in a small but cozy flat in London. The Hills unexpectedly receive a large amount of money from a relative, which allows them to leave their predictable, traditional life behind and go on a series of adventures. Although *Rich and Strange* consists of a somewhat predictable narrative, it exhibits many of the mature artistic visual elements characteristic of Hitchcock's later work. Perhaps more importantly, however, is how the film's depiction of its central relationships foreshadows Hitchcock's career-long fascination with images of women and his attitude of ambivalence towards them. The film comments upon the problems and consequences of patriarchy, although this may not have been Hitchcock's primary intention.

Rich and Strange begins with Fred Hill coming home from his work as an accountant in a large firm. The opening sequence (which is without dialogue) emphasizes Fred's boredom with his life as he breaks his umbrella, gets caught in the rain, and then salivates over different advertisements on the subway in the London Underground. [1] The scene is played up for comic effect and Fred appears like a pathetic, fussy child (though his dark eyelid makeup, a leftover from silent films, makes him appear somewhat malevolent and brooding). When he goes home to his pretty, petite homemaker-wife (Joan Barry) and complains to her, she tells him that she is content and never expected the things Fred desires; she knew they weren't going to be a part of her life when she married him. Her attitude reveals her maturity, although at times she comes across as a ditzy, childish simpleton. [2]

Fred then picks up the mail from the landlady and learns of his good fortune; his uncle wants to bankroll some "real" life experience. The couple immediately takes off for Paris, where they enjoy the high life. They then take off on a cruise to the Far East, but Fred is laid up with seasickness for the first part of the journey. It is during his illness that the film's perspective shifts and the audience is invited to identify with Emily. Hitchcock presents some amusing

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shots of seasick Fred down in the cabin, but he is no longer driving the action. Emily befriends Commander Gordon, a distinguished-looking and polite older man who admits that he's never been in love. Emily is eventually able to borrow some seasickness medicine from an ever-present snoopy spinster (played by Elsie Randolph) to give to Fred. But by this time, Gordon has fallen for Emily and the pair gives into temptation and kiss while alone together on the ship's deck. This scene has some of the compelling visual elements that foreshadow Hitchcock's later craftsmanship, as when Gordon's and Emily's elegant eveningwear is contrasted next to the grittiness of the deck's tackle and manacles. As the pair seek out a secluded spot on the deck, they must walk over some rope and heavy chains and past some sailors loudly singing and playing cards in a nearby lounge. The camera follows their legs as they weave their way through the clutter. The contrast between the fine clothing and shoes next to the grimy, metallic objects and sound of the crude sailors seems to mock the shallowness and airs of the well-dressed couple. The shots are also evocative of how the couple is flirting with infidelity, sidestepping the "chains of matrimony" that tie Emily to Fred.

When Fred is feeling better, he strolls on the deck with Emily, who now seems to have abandoned any interest in Gordon. But within minutes of coming on deck, Fred meets "the Princess" (Betty Amann). Fred is enchanted by her when he learns she is a princess. At this time, the shift in the audience's sympathy is made complete. The title "Fred has met a princess" appears (showing the continuing influence of silent films on this late-1931 release) and is bookended on both sides with images of Emily happily watching the pair. The editing and title card suggest that this is what Emily is thinking, that Fred has met a princess; Emily is happy because Fred is happy. But it may also be construed that Fred's meeting the princess means Emily is free to return to Gordon and renew his affections.

Emily's perspective is further strengthened with the many point of view shots in the film: much later, when she drives off with Gordon towards his home, she looks momentarily at the road below, racing past the car, as if she is considering throwing herself from the car. She also watches Fred and the princess leave the ship for a day ashore and then walk through a marketplace. During the climactic scene in the hotel suite, Emily reads a letter from Gordon. The point of view shot becomes blurry as the words provoke tears from Emily, which obscure her (and thus our) view of the letter. The film always comes back to her and allows the audience to register her expression and reaction, solidifying our identification with her. This subjective filmic device would reappear in later Hitchcock films.

As Fred continues his dalliance with the princess, Emily seems to have no choice but to take the arm that is offered - that of Gordon, who is conveniently on hand when needed. Yet the film seems to posit Emily's no-win dilemma: she can wait for her two-timing husband and hope he returns to her, go with Gordon, or be

with no one at all, which, as embodied by the spinster-without-a-name, is positioned as a fate worse than death.

As this second voyage comes to an end and the ship docks in Singapore, Fred has decided to leave Emily for the princess. Emily knows of this, though is never told directly by Fred, and she reluctantly and tearfully agrees to go with Gordon to his home in Kuala. As they drive toward his home, Gordon tries to calm her worries about leaving her husband; he calls Fred a "bluff, an empty shell, a fool...a great baby." Emily admits that she is still in love with Fred. Gordon tells Emily that the princess is a scam artist, an adventuress pretending to be a princess to lure men and then steal their fortunes. She set her sights on Fred, Gordon says "because he was the biggest ass aboard." On hearing this, Emily decides to return to Fred to warn him of the princess's treachery. She can't forget Fred, she tells Gordon, because she is his partner and "half a mother" to him.

The scene in which Emily confronts Fred and the princess in the hotel suite is the central, climatic segment of the film. The scene begins with a long shot of the suite; Fred can be seen in the background (through a doorway), washing his face in the bathroom sink. He wears a pair of pants and an almost sheer undershirt; his relationship with the princess is casual enough for him to be partly undressed. This shows that they are sleeping together. There is a knock at the door. Both characters freeze and look in the direction of the door (screen left). The princess says that it must be a waiter with dinner. She yells, "come in!" as she remains turned away from the door. Emily enters.

The princess, her back still facing the door, looks into a small makeup mirror and her eyes lock onto Emily's mirror image. This particular image is creatively orchestrated; Emily is in a medium shot, but in focus, while the princess is close to the mirror but out of focus. The two women appear trapped in the same tiny reflection; they together are rivals for one man's attention. But the man, Fred, is unworthy of such devotion. The film presents the women as a sort of sisterhood because their options are so limited; they are the two sides of one coin or the mirror images of one another. Their only valid option in life is dependence upon a man, legitimately (through marriage) or illegitimately (through prostitution or con artistry). They are reduced to fighting over this one pathetic man. And yet, they don't fight because the princess, as we later discover, has already realized that she must leave (when she sees Emily at the doorway). She has what she wants anyway - Fred's money - and now can make her exit.

Fred comes over to the princess and the three are positioned as points on a triangle, literally in the shot and figuratively in their relationship to one another. This is another compelling image that reappears in later Hitchcock films such as *Notorious*. Fred goes to get a shirt and the princess takes one parting shot at Emily, in yet another intriguing image. As she leaves the suite (after saying she

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will wait downstairs for Fred while he talks to Emily), she goes to the doorway and stands to Emily's right. She says, "You didn't go with [Gordon]? You little fool! You damn little fool!" These lines are particularly meaningful after viewing the complete scene. The princess must have known she was going to take this opportunity to abandon Fred; why does she call Emily a fool? She obviously doesn't want Fred for herself. The answer must be that she believes Emily a fool to return to pathetic, cowardly Fred when Emily had a chance to nab loving, debonair (and apparently wealthy) Gordon. The princess seems to mock Emily merely for Emily's own actions, apart from any personal longing for Fred. Her lines confirm the implied sisterhood of the two women; the princess chastises her naïve counterpart, Emily, for doing something so foolish as to return to the hapless husband.

In viewing the film from the princess's point of view, one might say that she would have originally set her sights on Gordon on the cruise, but he was already taken by Emily. Though the women never really converse during the cruise, they are connected because they both must attract and keep a man in order to survive economically, and in a sense, it doesn't matter which man they attract, as long as they can hold him. Emily captures the prize: Gordon. The princess eventually ends up with the leftovers: Fred. Calling Emily a "fool" is poignantly accurate in this context, as one woman to another in the self-preservation racket; their positions reshuffle when Emily voluntarily takes the princess's place of the loser, allowing the princess to escape.

After the princess leaves, the scene plays out somewhat unpredictably, and once again affirms Emily's goodness and Fred's brutishness. Instead of blurting out the news that the princess is a fake, Emily sits down, gathers her courage, and waits to see what Fred will do with her, now having returned to him for no obvious reason. He says he is planning to go sunbathing with the princess; he supposes that Emily doesn't want to come but will go off again with Gordon. Emily replies that Gordon has gone home, though he had wanted her to go with him because he was in love with her. Fred throws a tantrum, talking incoherently as he paces away. Emily explains that she returned to him because she was blinded by love for him, but Gordon opened her eyes to what Fred really was: a coward and a sham of a man. Fred is furious, but we know he probably won't hit her with his clenched fists.

The shot of Emily in the bathroom and Fred at the doorway, closing and opening his fists, presents another compelling sight. He is in the light, dressed in white, which contrasts with his actual guilty behavior and selfishness. Emily is obscured in the bathroom, facing the mirror and diagonal to him. Hitchcock presents an image of a couple who are at odds with one another relationally and literally in this shot. The metallic screens that serve to divide the main room from the bathroom area also throw interesting patterns of oblique lines of shadow on the walls and doors. Hitchcock often uses lines of light and dark to create mood, suspense, and add sinister layers to the physical features of his characters.

Notably, this metalwork motif reappears in *The 39 Steps* (1935), when Hannay watches the two spies from his apartment building lobby's metal-framed door.

Fred asks Emily why she didn't go with Gordon. She still holds off with the news of the princess's deception, choosing to tell him that she felt an obligation to him, as his wife and caretaker. He sarcastically thanks her for this. We are itching to hear her tell him the truth about the princess, but what has just transpired is of particular poignancy: Emily tries to give Fred a way out before he discovers what a fool he has been by trusting the princess. If Fred were to abandon the princess now, before learning of her treachery, he might regain his place in the relationship - he would not be fully disgraced. But he is too stupid and selfish to see this.

Emily finally now tells Fred the truth about the princess: "She's just a common, cheap adventuress and she only threw her hat at you because you were the one man on board." He interrupts, yelling "Shut up! Shut up!" He can't bear to hear more, grabbing her and shaking her, and then forcibly throwing her across the room and onto the bed. Fred screams at her to "shut up!" no less than five times within this one scene. He refuses to believe her and says he is going off with the princess; "My things can be sent on. Goodbye." Fred takes his coat and hat and leaves while Emily remains seated on the bed, crying.

Emily, first silenced, is abandoned. Emily, who now more fully understands her marriage, is left alone and is powerless do anything. This is significant, considering Patrice Petro's claim that "we occasionally encounter a film which adopts a feminine viewpoint and allows the woman's voice to speak (if only in a whisper), articulating her discontent with the patriarchal order" (1986: 123). As Petro suggests, Hitchcock's *The Lady Vanishes* (1938) is such a film. In *Rich and Strange*, however, Hitchcock allows such a feminine viewpoint to prevail but as Petro suggests is common in Hollywood, does not permit the woman to truly speak or express her discontent. It would take another six years for this to happen with Hitchcock's later work, although perhaps *Rich and Strange* foretells of the feminine voice Petro describes that is embodied in Iris, the female protagonist of *The Lady Vanishes*.

Now alone in the hotel suite, Emily looks out the window, out towards the beach and palm trees. The image of the window is divided into three segments by two vertical bars, another device to be repeated in future Hitchcock films. The bars emphasize Emily's feelings of entrapment: she is trapped in a loveless marriage and abandoned in a foreign land. Fred shortly returns, having discovered that the princess has left him (with most of the couple's money). He tells Emily, "If you say 'I told you so,' I'll strangle you, I swear I will!" At this point, Fred is inconsolable, saying, "What a fool she's made of me, what a fool!" Most significantly, he is worried about how he has suffered rather than the damage he has done to his relationship with Emily. Emily responds to him sympathetically. She has now resigned herself to a mother role.

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On the surface, *Rich and Strange* may appear to be about a couple falling apart but then successfully reuniting after arduous tests and trials. William Rothman puts forth this interpretation in his *Hitchcock: The Murderous Gaze*: "[The Hills'] relationship is threatened but they fall in love with each other again and rededicate their marriage" (1982: 110). Rothman contends that the film concerns itself with "the redemption of an ordinary marriage" (*Ibid.*) and is an early example of the comedy of remarriage as exemplified by films like *The Philadelphia Story* (1940) and *The Awful Truth* (1937). Yet Rothman's take is rather simplistic: how can a film that contains scenes so uncomfortable to watch (such as the costume party and the climatic scene explored earlier) be classed concisely as a comedy? Only the introductory sequence, the Paris scenes, and the very last scene of the film, when the couple returns home, seem comedic. In addition, the film does not convincingly reaffirm and redeem the couple's affection for one another; the last shot of the film is of the pair bickering over whether or not they will move into a bigger house. True, this "friendly argument" is an improvement over the venomous spite Fred spews at Emily during the climactic scene in the hotel suite, but the ending does not have a "happily ever after" feel.

Yet, the film's reflections on marriage do become evocative if they are considered to disclose the relationship Hitchcock had with his wife, Alma, as is contented by Donald Spoto. As Spoto notes, the pair wrote the film together and modeled the characters "Fred" on Alfred and "Em" on Alma (Spoto, 1983: 130-132). Furthermore, the name "Hill" is somehow reminiscent of "Hitchcock," which makes Spoto's claim more convincing. Spoto says that *Rich and Strange* is one of Hitchcock's "most openly autobiographical films" (*Ibid.*: 133), especially in how the wife withstands her husband's mood swings and childishness. Hitchcock realizes that no other woman would put up with him, Spoto suggests, and the film is an "open diary" of this fact (*Ibid.*). Thus, the film may be Hitchcock's quiet admission of guilt, an apology to his wife for his ongoing selfishness and childishness. Alma gave up her promising career as an editor and future director, though she is quoted as saying "I was never terribly ambitious" (*Ibid.*: 93). This considered, the onscreen marriage may indeed divulge enlightening allusions to the Hitchcock union.

Rich and Strange presents an unusual vision of marriage. The "compromises" Rothman and Spoto speak of are asked far more often of the wife than the husband: what does Fred give up for Emily? He always has his way and Emily follows obediently behind. Yet in exposing the problems of this patriarchal marriage, the film text also implies that this is a state of affairs that needs changing. No alternatives are suggested, but depicting the double standards and complications of traditional patriarchal marriage is a start for 1931. *Rich and Strange* foreshadows the problems of patriarchy Hitchcock would explore (intentionally or unintentionally) throughout his work. The discomfort he builds in the audience's psyche in several scenes, and the subjective perspective he

plays with throughout the film hints at his future mastery of suspense and point of view. Although the film is riddled with perplexing moments and relationships, it provides us with a tantalizing "voyage of adventure" into the early work of a man whose brilliance would later become apparent to all filmgoers.

Stage Fright

Hitchcock's *Stage Fright* revisits the theme of masquerade and the world of live theatre that he played with in films such as *Murder!* (1930) and *The 39 Steps*. Johnny (Richard Todd) is accused of murdering the husband of a well-known, seductive actress and singer, Charlotte Inwood (Marlene Dietrich). Johnny turns to a young woman, Eve Gill (Jane Wyman), for help. Eve, a student at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts in London, decides to hide Johnny because she loves him and, meanwhile, solve the case by casting suspicion on Charlotte as the murderess. The film presents two strong female lead characters, Eve and Charlotte, who drive most of the action. These two leads, along with lesser character Nellie Goode, provide viewers with an array of autonomous, interesting women who appear to wield much power in the course of the story. But in the end, Hitchcock tightens his auteur's grip on *Stage Fright* by bending the rules of classical Hollywood cinema, playing with the audience's expectations, and by transferring any power the women had over to the male characters.

When *Stage Fright* is discussed among Hitchcock fans, the film is dismissed as one of Hitchcock's lesser works because the opening flashback is later shown to be a falsehood concocted by Johnny. In the first shot of characters in the film, Johnny and Eve are speeding through London in her car. They are relieved that they have eluded the police. Eve asks Johnny what happened and he tells her, through the device of a flashback. Johnny was at his home when Charlotte came to him, her dress bloodied in front, asking for his help. She tells him that she killed her husband. He agrees to help her and goes to obtain a dress from her home for her to wear to the theater. [3] While he is in Charlotte's home, he is seen by her maid, Nellie, and he dashes out the door with the dress. After he returns to his house and gives it to Charlotte, she leaves for the theater. The police arrive to question Johnny (who has imagined Nellie telling them everything in a sort of dream sequence within the flashback), but Johnny flees and goes to the drama academy, where he enlists Eve to help him. Eve takes him in her car to her father's house, thus returning us to the beginning shot of the film.

One reviewer says that *Stage Fright* "falters because it betrays the viewing audience" and that "one of the fundamental rules in moviemaking is that flashbacks should not deceive the audience" (Brady, 1998). Kristen Thompson believes the film to be a "duplicitous text" (1977). But is this really a betrayal of the audience? These critics assume that all narrative films must follow the unwritten rules of classical Hollywood cinema, yet have we not seen Hitchcock

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break these rules, resulting in pleasure and suspense for the audience? *Rope* (1948) played with the conventions of cinema by presenting the action in real time and with very few cuts. *Rear Window* (1954) and *Dial M for Murder* (1954) take place almost completely within one apartment, which goes against typical filmmaking's use of multiple settings. Hitchcock played with perceptions of the police throughout his films, often personifying evil in the characters who should be the most trustworthy (the officers in *The 39 Steps*) or showing the police to be foolish or ineffective (rushing the villains' hideout in *The Man Who Knew Too Much* [1934], ridiculing the woman who comes to confess the killing in *Blackmail* [1929]). Audiences familiar with Hitchcock know he experiments with subjective camera. *Spellbound* (1945) contains an entire dream sequence focalized through one character's memory. Here, in *Stage Fright*, the flashback is framed very carefully and shown to be Johnny's version of the events. Hitchcock pushed the boundaries on subjective story-telling a little more with each of his earlier films, and now he goes one step further by falsifying an entire flashback sequence.

Is this really a "flashback" in the conventional sense, anyway? The first shot of the film, of London, is revealed to us through the rising of a safety curtain. The next shot is of Johnny and Eve in her car—Johnny about to explain what happened. Thus, the curtain rising on an actual setting hints that the film is going to distort realistic elements. [4] Since Johnny is shown to tell the story, it is already a compromised truth, even if it is recounted visually instead of verbally. Is not his "flashback" actually a sort of daydream sequence, carefully constructed by Johnny, to make both Eve and the audience believe his innocence? The audience may be willing to accept it as a dream sequence more than as a flashback, since spectators know that dream sequences are created by the character's conscious or unconscious. Yet is not also a flashback a creation, too? All of what we are seeing is a constructed fiction. Hitchcock was skilled in setting "spectator traps" in his films (Wood, 1986: 176-177). *Stage Fright* reminds its viewers that they should question all that they see: the characters, plots, and ideologies of the film.

Probably the most convincing evidence as to why the "fictitious flashback" is not a betrayal of the audience is that by end of the film, when Smith (Michael Wilding) tells Eve's father (Alastair Sim) that Johnny is the murderer (and shortly afterward, Johnny admits to Eve that this is true), we have already been lead to suspect Johnny was lying in his earlier version of the murder. The ways in which Hitchcock casts doubt upon Johnny's character and alibi are telling of Hitchcock's genius as a storyteller. First of all, we are given clues as to Johnny's true character from the outset of the film. Johnny has been two-timing Eve—dating both her and Charlotte at the same time. In the car on the way to Commodore Gill's house (after Johnny has just relayed the flashback), Johnny asks her, "Eve, do you hate me now that you know about Charlotte and me?" Eve says no, "but I do wish I'd taken lessons on the second fiddle." Johnny is a

cad who apparently has deceived both women, for later we learn that Charlotte believes Johnny to be friendless ("He had no friends; he only had me," she tells Freddie). And there are other hints as to Johnny's true character. Early in the film, we are stunned and annoyed along with Eve when Johnny throws the soiled dress into the fire and throws a fit, saying he trusts Charlotte implicitly. After Eve returns to London and sees her father again (as Smith plays the piano), Commodore Gill says, "Johnny's not much of a sailor. He was abominably seasick. In fact, as soon as we got ashore, Johnny ran away." He goes on to compare Johnny to a stray dog: "He's about 57 different varieties [...] I dare say he'll find his way back to his old master or mistress." This image of Johnny does not cut a romantic figure, making the audience begin to hope that Eve won't be paired with him by the end of the story.

Hitchcock transforms Johnny's appearance through the course of the film, playing with our expectation and (early) desire for Eve to end up with him. He is handsome, clear-faced and youthful in the early scenes, but by the end of the film he has bulging eyes, a crooked scowl, a scarred and tattered face, and appears short and rumped. Important, too, is the romance that develops between Eve and the detective, a twist that supplants Johnny as the romantic lead in the film and makes him into an expendable, pathetic character, preparing us for his eventual death. We are led to feel that Johnny is not good enough for Eve when he goes to the theater the first time to talk to Charlotte, and eventually tries to blackmail her with the blood-stained dress (which he no longer has). Johnny is shown to be a sniveling, self-seeking charlatan. Richard Todd pulls off a complex performance, creating a chameleon whom the audience sees as first as a sympathetic lovesick pawn of a designing woman, next as the foolish murder suspect on the run who doesn't know how to keep himself hidden, then, as the (again sympathetic) confessed murderer who cannot control his passions, and, finally, as the cold and conniving killer who wants to murder Eve so he will look insane to the court.

By the end of *Stage Fright*, Johnny has altered so much in appearance and character that it isn't that much of a surprise that he wasn't telling the truth in the initial flashback. In fact, Hitchcock leads the audience to *want* the flashback to have been false, because it is the only way Eve and Smith can come together as a couple. Upon second viewing, it is evident that Johnny is not trustworthy from the start of the picture—nor is his recollection of any event. After all, if Johnny were truly innocent, why would the story shift to Eve suddenly? In almost every other Hitchcock story of misidentification (*The 39 Steps*, *Strangers on a Train*, *The Wrong Man*, *North by Northwest*), the wrongly accused character maintains the central focus of the film until he clears himself. [5]

Although the flashback in *Stage Fright* has occupied the central discussion about the film, the issue of female agency should be given much attention. There are no fewer than three strong female characters in *Stage Fright*: Nellie Goode, the

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opportunistic maid; Charlotte Inwood, the manipulative performer; and Eve Gill, the heroine. Nellie is hardly sympathetic but she is a tough, sharp, and interesting character who exploits the circumstance of seeing Johnny at the scene of the murder, using it to blackmail Eve and the media. She is more typical of Hitchcock's villainous women because she is plain, wears glasses, and talks too much. Yet here, she is never punished. Kay Walsh succeeds in creating a fascinating portrayal of Nellie, who, though only involved in the story occasionally, seems to be lurking around the corner.

Yet, it is Charlotte who really looms over this story and Marlene Dietrich demands our attention (and that of the other characters) whenever she is on the screen. Modleski identifies Charlotte as the "figure of female resistance" in *Stage Fright*, noting that Charlotte is, for most of the film "the most self-possessed and self-obsessed of women. She is continually shown looking at herself in a mirror [...] she is a woman in love with herself" (1988: 115-116). The vixen-like beauty seems to relish control and changing her mind, as when she tells Doris to read the letter of recommendation from Nellie, then tells her to soften her voice (as she simultaneously orders two seamstresses around as they fit her mourning dress), and, later, when she asks Doris, "Where have you been? I thought you were dead," but then quips, "You needn't go into detail, darling. I hope you're not going to turn into one of those explicit people who always tell you exactly how they feel when you ask them." Although she turns out to be innocent of the actual murder, Charlotte is made to appear as guilty or guiltier than Johnny. In fact, she seems to be the true villain in the film in her exploitation of poor, gullible Johnny, and then her casual discarding of him when he has served his purpose. Although we learn early on in the film that Johnny was two-timing both Eve and Charlotte, it seems a greater offense that Charlotte is two-timing Johnny with Freddie, her manager. She had never intended to be with Johnny, but led him to think that all that prevented their happiness was her hapless husband. Thus, Johnny is made, at least to some degree, into a victim, and his guilt passes to Charlotte, who looms large as the central villain of the film.

Little sympathy is given to Charlotte. Dietrich is photographed as she has been in other films wherein she played the doomed seductress, which adds to her mysterious treachery. Hitchcock depends on her already established screen presence as vamp to lure the audience into thinking that she is the villain. [6] We are led to want her to be guilty and punished because she is so egocentric and nasty. Hitchcock plays with our expectations. It is frustrating when Charlotte does not confess to the murder during the pre-arranged blackmail scene in the theater. Charlotte is given quite a bit of agency in *Stage Fright*, but it comes at the price of her association with deception and narcissism. It's as if Hitchcock must punish Dietrich because of her strength. Modleski expands this in her argument, pointing out that in the bloodied doll scene (in which a boy scout delivers the doll to Charlotte while she is performing, distressing her),

Charlotte begins to receive her comeuppance for resisting patriarchy: "To reduce woman to a castrated hysteric is a way of dealing with her 'inaccessible,' 'enigmatic,' 'indecipherable' character. Similarly, we might say that Hitchcock's text exposes for a brief moment the need of patriarchy to reduce the 'great' female 'criminal' to a frightened hysteric—bearer of the bleeding wound" (*Ibid.*: 116). This emphasizes Hitchcock's seeming ambivalence toward women in his films. He loved to photograph them and even let them figure prominently in the story of *Stage Fright*, yet they are ultimately silenced if they upset the social order.

Eve Gill, the central character of the film with whom we are to identify, poses a unique challenge in terms of agency. Modleski proposes that she is not a good model of female agency because she is complicit with the male characters and desires to restore patriarchal law (*Ibid.*: 116). Yet agency is agency and even in a matriarchal society murder must be seen as a transgression of the law. For much of *Stage Fright*, Eve manages herself remarkably: she convinces Nellie to let her substitute as Charlotte's maid. She picks out the detective (Smith) on the case, and, like Charlotte, uses her feminine charms cleverly by pretending to feel faint from the talk of murder, motivating Smith to assist her. Also, like Charlotte, Eve is shown to have some control over the action around her. She seems to play Hitchcock's role of the director on screen, directing her father to help hide Johnny, getting him to bring her money to pay off Nellie, and, when he and Nellie are outside at the party, motioning them to talk to one another. She is able to fake a convincing cockney accent to Charlotte and Freddie, making them think she is a maid. Thus, Eve does display a striking amount of autonomy for a woman in a Hitchcock film—for a while.

There are two obstacles interfering with Eve's canonization into the annals of classic movie heroines. First of all, since she is unable to see through Johnny's falsified flashback, her actions from the beginning of the film are misguided and thus rather nullified because she is, in essence, abetting a murderer. The second problem with Eve's agency comes in the form of her father, who takes it away when he decides to use a shooting gallery prize to expose Charlotte's guilt during the theatrical garden party. Eve calls on him for help when Nellie blackmails her for more money and the Commodore obliges, but he then unexplainably takes the story's perspective away from Eve and drives the action almost to the end of the film. Not only does he engineer the blood-stained doll incident, he comes up with the idea of Eve blackmailing Charlotte over the real blood-stained dress.

Eve surrenders agency to her father and to Smith by the end of the film. She cannot foil Charlotte's (and Nellie's) intrigues by herself. Thus, *Stage Fright* doesn't endorse female agency and it even punishes women when they do try to drive the action. But the film leaves us with a shred of hope. In the last sequence of the film, when Eve and Johnny are hiding from the police, Johnny

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confesses that he did, in fact, kill Charlotte's husband. Eve tells him that he is mentally disturbed and need not fear being executed because the court would put him in an asylum. But Johnny insists he is sane, though Eve has given him an idea. If he were to kill someone without a clear motive for doing so, then perhaps the court would think him insane. His fingers tighten as he considers strangling Eve, but she talks him out of it. She tells him that it is safe to leave through the orchestra pit now and follows him toward the door. He goes first. She yells out to the police, "Here he is!" and then quickly slams and locks the door, delivering him over to the authorities. Thus, Hitchcock allows Eve to persuade Johnny not to kill her and to induce him to go into the orchestra pit without her.

With Eve's final, victorious act of outwitting Johnny, it appears that the film will end by restoring autonomy to its female lead. Yet there is one more action that will negate Eve's agency. As Johnny is scrambling around up on stage, the police closing in on each side, someone calls for the safety curtain to be lowered. The metal dividing plate slams down with force on fallen Johnny, decapitating him in front of Eve, who has run around backstage to witness the sight from the wings. She is horrified, but not allowed to look at it for very long; Smith is there to jerk her face away, voiding her gaze and preventing her from gaining knowledge of what happened. She attempts to look again but he forcefully pushes her face back towards him, reminding us how she has slipped through his fingers several times in the film. But now she relents: the last shot of the film is of the back of the couple walking away from the horrific scene, down the corridor. It appears that Smith couldn't keep her attention through conventional flirtation and courting, so he resorts to physically forcing Eve's head in his direction, to look upon him and give up her doomed affection for Johnny, now sliced in two upon the stage floor.

Although *Stage Fright* shows that female agency is possible, the film ends with the heroine giving her autonomy to the male detective, leaving us to believe they will be married and reasonably happy. The pair walks away from the stage (as if the masquerade is over—perhaps suggesting Eve will now give up the theater for good). But why should Eve give up everything for Smith; might she not make an excellent actress, after all of these life experiences? *Stage Fright* seems to mock Eve, who has traded her training for the predictable, quiet life of a housewife (we can assume).

Eve and Charlotte are convincing as heroine and villain, yet *Stage Fright* does not allow them to fully drive the story. Hitchcock lets the men enter the story and tidy up the loose ends. In this way, the grand auteur seems to betray his female leads, which is a greater betrayal than the supposed trick done on the audience with the duplicitous flashback.

Notes

[1] This first segment is silent (it has no dialogue), as are a few others in the film. There are also some title cards in the film, which may be somewhat jarring to filmgoers today. The film combines silent and talkie elements, evidencing the transitional time period in cinema during which it was made.

[2] This may be due in part to Joan Barry's performance. Hitchcock supposedly disliked her acting style and had hoped to hire a different actress. One of Barry's habits is to pause mid-sentence, making her appear as if she forgot her lines (Spoto, 1983: 130). Her voice sounds high-pitched and babyish; perhaps she was ill-adjusted to talkies (or maybe it was marred by the recording quality).

[3] Ironically, this "dress exchange" need not really have happened, at least not like this. Firstly, Charlotte didn't need to wear the dress on stage; it was simply her street attire. Also, Charlotte was wearing an overcoat when she arrived at Johnny's house (in the flashback, anyway). She could have worn the coat buttoned up to the theater and no one would have noticed. She could have given the dress to Johnny at the theater, or have taken it off right there at his house and simply worn the overcoat with nothing underneath. There would surely have been other regular street-appropriate dresses at the theater, considering how elaborate Charlotte's dressing room is—with all of the comforts of home. Finally, it would have been safer if Johnny has bought a new dress or borrowed one from Eve or someone else, rather than returning to the scene of the crime. This all serves to make Charlotte look deceptive and manipulative and Johnny stupid and brash.

[4] Donald Spoto discusses this opening in *The Dark Side of Genius*: "At once [with the curtain rising over "real" London], then, the distinctions between theatrical life and street life (and, in what follows, between art and life itself) begin to blur. As the story unfolds, everyone assumes false identities, everyone plays a role. Appearances slip and slide, and nothing is certain in a world marked by costumes and matinees and benefit garden parties and the lies of false friends" (1983: 315).

[5] At least one exception of this is *Murder!*, in which the accused murderess is in jail and Sir John takes on the responsibility of proving her innocence.

[6] Marlene Dietrich played a seductive femme fatale in films such as *Blue Angel* (1930) and *Blonde Venus* (1932).

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Blood: The Last Vampire

Dir. Chris Nahon, Hong Kong / Japan / France / Argentina, 2009

A review by Kia-Choong Teo, University of Calgary, Canada

"I live for one purpose, and one purpose only: to kill all bloodsuckers." This adage that *Blood: The Last Vampire's* lead character of Saya, the halfling (half-blood vampire) of over 400 years old, utters in the middle of the movie is a good summation of the whole movie's *raison-d'être*. Indeed, in the plot of the movie, all that Saya lives for is to kill, kill, and kill all the bloodsucker vampires who seek to destroy the human race. Considering that we have already been initiated into the former Marvel Comics-inspired movie franchise of *Blade* (1998, 2002, 2004), starring Wesley Snipes, and which has now been made into a lesser-known Spike TV series also called *Blade* (2006), the movie reminds one of its predecessors in popular cinema and their relative lack of blockbuster commercial success. I think though, as Jeon Ji-Hyun's foray into Hollywood cinema, it is actually more redeeming in many ways, especially when it turns to a real Asian presence in terms of acting cast, production and screenwriting crew, and even location shooting in China and Japan.

Jeon Ji-Hyun, who markets herself as Gianna to the North American film market, is better known for her role as the sassy ("yupki" in Korean) girl in the famous South Korean teenage romantic comedy *My Sassy Girl* (2001). This movie tests her ability to switch from a sweet girl-next-door to a cold ruthless vampire slayer who has no qualms about killing all vampires on sight. Having seen Jeon Ji-Hyun on earlier movies such as the Hong Kong thriller *Daisy* (2006; set in Amsterdam but starring South Korean and Hong Kong actors in collaboration), it is hard to actually doubt that Jeon can act and emote, especially on non-saccharine sweet movies. *Blood: The Last Vampire*, however, is relatively scant and brief in developing the story's emotional scenes. These scenes invoke the master-student relationship between Saya and Kato, her father's best retainer (a human vampire slayer), and the female-friendship bonding between her and Alice McKey (the US general's daughter in the military high school, Kanto High School, on the US Yokota airbase). They also invoke the short-lived romance between Saya and her childhood sweetheart in the village amidst the mountains, and even the blighted nemesis-matriarch relationship between Saya and Onigen, the oldest and most powerful vampire, who turns out to be Saya's real biological mother. Within a brief running time of 85 minutes, which are filled with immense sword-slashing action and blood-spurting alongside the explosions, perhaps such emotional developments are best reserved for interludes of reminiscences in the movie.

The interesting emotional scenes are those in which Saya comes face-to-face with her nature as a half-vampire before her master Kato, those of master Kato combing her hair for her as a surrogate father figure, and her confrontation with Onigen, the leader of the vampire-demons who turns out to her biological mother. These are scenes which, in some strange way, reminds one of the spirit of Arthurian legends, samurai movies, and even Greek tragedy, as Saya comes to grips with the dichotomies between her vampire bloodline and also her divinely assigned task to destroy the Evil rampant on earth in the vampires. The first two scenes, unlike the rest of the movie, are narrated in Japanese instead of English, and remind one of actually the reverence that Asian screenwriting talents seek to pay to Akira Kurosawa films, in the idea of a warrior's rites of passage. "I am a demon," utters the young girl Saya in a scene before her master Kato who is dying. "No, demons have no soul. You have a soul," responds Kato in his dying breath. "Heaven puts demons on earth to test humans' virtue," Kato says to Saya as he combs her hair for her in an earlier flashback. "If demons are there for us to show our good, why do we then kill them?" asks Saya. "Every man is appointed to his duty by heaven. It is not for us to ask beyond that," as Kato responds concerning the need for Saya to abide by her mission. The idea that one is called to heroism, to martial action against evil even in the darkest hour and against all odds, is an idea which has roots in these very ancient and medieval narratives, and which in some way enjoys currency even now. In addition, the confrontation between Onigen and Saya, which begins and ends with an element of familial-Oedipal hatred, is foregrounded where Onigen highlights her role as Saya's mother. "Denial, just like your father," exclaims Onigen concerning Saya's father, Kiyomasa, a 16th-century vampire slayer who emerged from amidst the evil--as a vampire himself--to kill the vampires, before being killed by Onigen herself. "Kill me and be like me!" shouts an injured Onigen--penetrated in her heart with a broken piece of wood by Alice McKey--to Saya, as Saya pushes the blade of her sword into Onigen's heart. The emotional scene of Saya dealing that death blow to Onigen and crying in tears after she screams, "You are not my mother! You never know what it is to be a mother!" reminds one of the age-old Greek dramatic narrative of Oedipus killing Laius his father in a most unsuspecting setting. Such scenes become interesting where in essence, they distill the very basics of what heroic narratives such as samurai stories, Arthurian legends, and classical tragedies mean for us. They reiterate the themes of man's divine appointment to a noble duty, his tutelage under an elder master who is more versed in the ways of the world and its treacheries, and the recognition of one's own failing and flaws as someone less than divine.

Considering the various versions of the *Blood* franchise, including an anime feature made in 2000, and both a manga and television-series adaptations, there is much of familiarity for the current viewers of *Blood: The Last Vampire*.

These viewers have a lot to expect of a movie which is arguably living in the shadow of its vampire-slayer predecessors. It is probably when such expectations are brought to bear on the film that it might fall short, since it is noticeably short and gives very little indication of what actually happens to Saya after she kills Onigen. We are brought back to the very adage she declares to every human whom she meets, including the leader of the Council, an organization responsible for wiping out all traces of the vampire bodies that she kills and dismembers. She has no other purpose in life except to kill vampires, especially Onigen. Her whole soul entwines around that singular purpose, much like the very nature of the movie itself as a witness to the need to see vampire bodies pierced by her sword and splashing blood across the screen. To give the real game away as a reviewer, even Alice McKey's testimony to the police upon investigation of her father's murder and the whereabouts of Saya gives little indication too, since Alice claims with a wry smile and a cryptic response to the unbelieving police that Saya is "looking for a way to escape from the other side of the looking glass." Whether there is going to be any form of serialization in the movie spin-offs from the *Blood* comics might depend on the film's commercial success, but this is probably what director Chris Nahon and his production crew seek with this qualifiable degree of ambiguity.

The movie also involves the heavy use of an Asian production crew and cast, including Corey Yuen, veteran of scores of Hollywood and Hong Kong films; Japanese actor Yasuaki Kurata, who acts as Kato and is famous for his numerous appearances in Japanese samurai and Hong Kong kung fu films; Koyuki who enacts Onigen and is best known for her international appearances as skincare brand SK-II's model representative; and playwright Chris Chow, screenwriter of Jet Li vehicle *Fearless* (2006). With this export of Asian talents to Hollywood, one does start asking if it is a new sign of Hollywood buying out Asian cinema, or whether Asian cinema is in the ascendancy and actually forging its own distinctiveness in tandem with Hollywood money and technology. Of course, the question is not an easy one. When contextualized in the light of debates about globalization, it is in itself the question of whether all roads--in moviemaking--do lead to Hollywood at all, insofar as we are invited to constantly evaluate the movie in light of classical Hollywood films.

Coraline

Dir: Henry Selick, USA, 2009

A review by Alice Mills, University of Ballarat, Australia

Coraline is Henry Selick's adaptation of Neil Gaiman's deeply scary 2006 novel for children. The film version achieves a surprisingly high level of creepiness, suspense and horror, but most of the ways in which it differs from the book weaken this. Most obviously, the director's decision to film in stop-motion animation eliminates much of the contrast between the "real world" of Coraline's mother, father and neighbours, their house and garden, and those of the "other world." In particular, Gaiman plays on the fear of being blinded, when the flesh-and-blood child, Coraline, is threatened by her other mother with the prospect of having her real eyes replaced by sewn-on buttons. It is a much-reduced shudder of horror that is evoked by the threat of blinding cartoon eyes, however winsome.

Not only does the film reduce the book's frightening contrast between bodily parts and buttons, but it systematically blurs the book's distinction between this world and the grotesque oddities of the other world, on which much of the terror relies. In Gaiman's text, Coraline's neighbours are eccentric within the human range of behaviours, Mr. Bobo with his mouse circus and the retired actresses pining for their past glories. In the film, Mr. Bobo (voiced in both worlds with a thick Russian accent by Ian McShane) appears in the real world as a grotesque athlete who can perform physically impossible gymnastic feats. This leaves little to distinguish him from the other Mr. Bobo, until this version collapses into nothingness. Coraline's real mother (voiced by Teri Hatcher, who also voices with panache the other mother in both her sweet and menacing forms) is shown to have a remarkably long pointed nose in the film, reminiscent of Pinocchio, and the other mother appears initially to be rather more human. Similarly the real father (voiced by John Hodgman as both indifferent real father and loving other father) has an impossibly elongated wry neck, while the other father's body is again, in its early manifestations, more within the bounds of human possibility. Coraline (voiced by Dakota Fanning) is anorexically thin of leg and arm.

To blur the distinctions still further, the film invents a new character to share Coraline's adventures, Wyborn, also known as Wybie (voiced by Robert Bailey Jr.), who first appears as a terrifying monster in our world, his head seeming to be both mechanical robot and skull, his gloves patterned with skeletal shapes. The fact that this deathly monster soon takes off his bicycle helmet to reveal himself as a boy renders the later, other-world morphing of the other mother to insectoid, then arachnid with mechanical legs and hands, rather less scary than

the book's transformation of her. If one character's monstrous shape was merely a costume, can this second shape-changing really be so terrible?

Another character introduced in the film is Wyborn's grandmother (voiced by Carolyn Crawford), who is occasionally heard calling for him and only appears in person as a sweet old lady at the end. Her role as powerful summoner of a child aligns her with the other mother, and the film's final insistence on her benevolence is not altogether convincing. Wyborn's name is also alarming: is a child whose name asks why he deserves to live (i.e. "why be born?"—is he born merely to be his elders' prey? Is he an abused child?). The final image of Wyborn assisting his aged grandmother does not carry enough weight to overcome the film's more powerful portrayal of tortured other Wyborn and over-submissive this-world Wyborn.

Such alterations to the book's strategies of *grotesquerie* and terror might be understood as shifting its concerns from the undesirability of seeking an ideal life, and the connection between the ideal and terrible mother towards an interpenetration of the two worlds. This world's father and mother are not so unlike the other father and mother, a frightening thought to qualify the film's happy ending. However, the film retains the storyline in which Coraline is tempted to renounce ordinary, everyday, imperfect family life in favour of getting whatever she wants (which turns out to mean whatever the other mother wants). The two lines of argument clash rather than strengthen one another.

Nevertheless the film has its strengths. Like the book, it is strong enough to present its main female character as a whining, bored, discontented and not altogether likeable child. Jennifer Saunders and Dawn French revel in their voicing of the two aging actresses, and here the film takes more risks than the book. Gaiman's Shakespearian references are altered into parodies of Shakespeare, Homer and Botticelli, These actresses, it seems, have enjoyed a sexually *risqué* past. Extraordinarily for a children's film, their final snatch of dialogue concerns slipping some gin into their soft drinks. The consumption of alcohol—even by adults—is such a powerful taboo in contemporary literature and film for children that it is astonishing film censors did not force it to be cut out.

Following Gaiman, the film offers a good range of the uncanny, as theorised by Freud, including blinding, premature burial, ghosts and the terrible mother. It adds to these the Freudian motifs of the doll and the machine that both are, and are not, alive. The opening sequence, in which a metal hand dismembers and disembowels a doll, blinds it and then resews and restuffs it, combines these Freudian terrors, leaving the viewer uncertain whether the doll actually experiences torture, vivisection and death.

Two of Gaiman's favoured uncanny effects are dispensed with throughout the film. One is darkness. The tunnel connecting the two worlds is frighteningly dark

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in the novel. In the film, it is mostly shown as illuminated, blue and pink, with no possibility of hidden horrors. The film's Coraline is repeatedly shown falling asleep under the creepy observation of her other parents, but falling asleep and waking always take place in a well-lit bedroom. The moon is gradually eclipsed by a giant black button, but at the moment of total eclipse the sky turns brilliant white. Scenes never fade to black. Such choices may reflect the film's 3-D presentation, for 3-D effects are impossible on a black screen, but the effect is to lose the terror of the tunnel.

The film also privileges sharp angles in body and setting. In the book's most horrifying moments, the other father collapses into a doughy mass and the two actresses become a mass of living jelly inside an insect cocoon. This sticky mass is replaced in the film by sharply defined actress arms and hands, in a paper wrapping that Coraline can easily tear apart, and the dough father is replaced by a father controlled by a mantis-machine. At its best, such angularity produces impressive spectacle, as when the other world disintegrates. What is lost is the horror of the decaying corpse.

Gaiman has no qualms in drawing on the Grimm fairy tales' full spectrum of horror. It is a pity that the film adaptation could not be equally bold

Before and After

Dir. Barbet Schroeder, USA, 1996

A Review by Clodagh M. Weldon, Dominican University, USA

Before and After: A Kierkegaardian Analysis

Barbet Schroeder's 1996 film adaptation of Rosellen Brown's book *Before and After* (1992) is far removed from Søren Kierkegaard's home city of Copenhagen, and yet the Abraham-Isaac motif that pervades both the film and Kierkegaard's classic work *Fear and Trembling* (1843) is worthy of some comparison and analysis. In his *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard finds himself both amazed and appalled by Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son Isaac when so directed by God (Kierkegaard, 2006: 33, 35, 40, 60, 70, 137), amazed by his faith and appalled, ethically speaking, that such a willingness makes him a murderer – in intent at least. In exploring this paradox, Kierkegaard's thesis is that in Abraham we see a "teleological suspension of the ethical" (Kierkegaard, 2006: 65), i.e. he suspends the ethical (and universal) duty to his son whom he should love "more than himself" (Kierkegaard, 2006: 66), and this ethical duty becomes relative "as against the absolute relation to God" (Kierkegaard, 2006: 83-84). In other words, nothing – not even universal morality – can come between Abraham and his God. As Kierkegaard expresses the paradox, "[Abraham] stands in an absolute relation to the Absolute" (Kierkegaard, 2006: 64, 138, 148). In this context, it is in an "infinite movement" of resignation that Abraham "gives up his claim to Isaac" (Kierkegaard, 2006: 141), resigning himself to the impossibility of keeping Isaac. In a second movement, a movement of faith, Abraham holds onto the belief that in spite of this resignation he can in fact keep Isaac. In other words, he "acts on the strength of the absurd" (Kierkegaard, 2006: 65) that "it won't happen, or if it does the Lord will give me a new Isaac..." (Kierkegaard, 2006: 141). It is, says Kierkegaard, "on the strength of the absurd he gets Isaac back" (Kierkegaard, 2006: 65).

The film *Before and After* tells the story of a professional New England couple, doctor Carolyn (played by Meryl Streep) and sculptor Ben (played by Liam Neeson) caught in a dilemma when their son, the angst-ridden Jacob (played by the androgynous Edward Furlong), is named a suspect in the death of his pregnant girlfriend, a girlfriend they didn't know existed. The movie begins when the local sheriff and family friend shows up at the home of Carolyn and Ben with the news that a young girl, Martha Taverner, has been brutally murdered, and that their son Jacob was the last person to see her alive. Ben is livid to hear that his son is a suspect. With no knowledge of what actually happened the day of Martha's death, the impulsive and protective Ben, consumed by the duty to love his son, tampers with evidence: the trunk of his son's car which he finds in the

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garage. He burns a bloody glove and wipes the car jack clean. When he tells Carolyn he has covered up a crime which he assumes has been committed, she is furious. Why does he not have faith in "the truth" – whatever that may be? Jake, in the meantime, is on the run. Five weeks on, the catatonic teenager is arrested, charged and freed on bail. As the drama further unfolds around the family dinner table, Jacob emerges from his catatonic state to make a full confession to his parents and his sister, and the viewer discovers that Martha's death was not murder but a tragic accident. As Jake tells it, the two youngsters had pulled off a snowy road, Martha had revealed that she was with child – not his, and during a heated tussle he had pushed her, she fell and was impaled on a car jack. Now in possession of the truth, Jake's family is confronted with the driving question of the film: Are they bound by the obligation to tell the truth or by the obligation to protect their son? Should they, like Abraham, be willing to sacrifice their son for something higher – "truth" – in an act of faith that all will be well?

Lying "sleepless" in bed, Jake's father ponders aloud, "'Abraham and Isaac, - remember that story?' God says, 'Prove your faith. Why? Because I'm God, because I say so. And Abraham is willing. He's very sad, but he'll do it. He'll cut his own son's throat if that's what God requires. Very obedient, Abraham, but very righteous. But when they tell that story, they always miss the point: who would want him as a father?'" This is Ben's dilemma throughout the movie, articulated as it is in Abrahamic terms: the role of the good father as one who above all else has an obligation to his family. In many ways Ben plays the role of the anti-Abraham. As he puts it, "The worst thing you can be called in this world is someone who didn't stand up for his family." He will not, under any circumstances, suspend this ethical duty to his son. Echoing Ben's torment, Kierkegaard writes in his *Fear and Trembling*, "What is left out of the Abraham story is the anguish; for while I am under no obligation to money, to a son the father has the highest and most sacred obligation" (Kierkegaard, 2006: 29). Indeed he argues that "the father should love the son more than himself" (Kierkegaard, 2006: 66). For Kierkegaard, then, Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son *should* make us sleepless: "The ethical expression for what Abraham did is that he was willing to murder Isaac; the religious expression is that he was willing to sacrifice Isaac; but in this contradiction lies the very anguish that can indeed make one sleepless; and yet without that anguish Abraham is not the one who he is" (Kierkegaard, 2006: 31).

In contrast to her husband, Carolyn sees an obligation to 'the Truth' as primary - or as her lawyer puts it, "you and your Absolutes." It is the classic torment that confronts the reader of the Abraham-Isaac story in Genesis: Is Abraham bound by the duty to love and protect his son or by his love and duty to God? Are the two incommensurable? For Kierkegaard, Abraham stands "in an absolute relation to the Absolute" (Kierkegaard, 2006: 64, 138, 148) and nothing – not even the moral duty to love the son – can intervene. In the movie, Ben is tormented by

Abraham, and projects the story of Abraham and Isaac onto his wife. In several scenes she is willing to sacrifice her son. By "sacrifice" I am not suggesting that she is willing to give up her son in an act of renunciation. But she is willing to give him up if 'truth' (the ethical) so demands, and as such looks like Kierkegaard's "knight of resignation" (Kierkegaard, 2006: 65). And although there is no "second movement" (Kierkegaard, 2006: 141), she does, on the surface, appear to act as Kierkegaard's "knight of faith" who, like Abraham, "acts on the strength of the absurd" (Kierkegaard, 2006: 65) that in giving up her claim on her son she will get him back. Indeed at one point in the movie she defends her willingness to put truth first and expresses it in Kierkegaardian terms. "I just want my boy back," she says. When she receives a postcard from her son on the run, she wants to tell the cops that he is in Boston; she testifies against him, telling the truth of her son's dinner table confession. Her lawyer, appalled and amazed by her willingness to sacrifice her own son, threatens to throw her to the dogs. "I'm talking about saving your son," he says. "So am I," replies Carolyn. Defending her actions to Jake she says, "I love you and I want to save you." Ben on the other hand sees this as absurd: for him this is not love but betrayal. He refuses to testify on "[his] own flesh and blood," saying, "I don't bargain for my son, and I won't help them convict him." He cannot understand the actions of his wife, she who is the mother of his son. In a similar vein, Kierkegaard is "constantly repulsed" at the "monstrous paradox" (Kierkegaard, 2006: 35) of Abraham and remarks: "Abraham I cannot understand; in a way all I can learn from him is to be amazed" (Kierkegaard, 2006: 40).

Just as Kierkegaard cannot understand Abraham, Ben cannot understand Carolyn. For Ben, Carolyn is like Abraham, willing to cut her son's throat if Truth so demands. Like Abraham she is obedient and righteous. But, as Ben suggests (by analogy with Abraham), who would want him as a father? – and, by extension, her as a mother? Thus he is in agreement with Kierkegaard that "...while Abraham arouses my admiration, he also appalls me" (Kierkegaard, 2006: 70). The reader of Genesis is horrified that Abraham does not plead to spare his son, and given his earlier pleadings for the people of Sodom (Genesis 18: 16-33), Abraham's silence is troubling. Likewise, Carolyn does not plead to spare her son, a silence which troubles Ben. As Kierkegaard sees it, Abraham "*cannot* speak, therein lies the distress and anguish. For if when I speak I cannot make myself understood, I do not speak even if I keep talking" (Kierkegaard, 2006: 139). Ben cannot understand Carolyn, and Carolyn knows she cannot make herself understood.

But is she really, like Abraham, Kierkegaard's "knight of faith" (Kierkegaard, 2006: 53)? Although Ben is haunted by the similarity of his wife's actions to those of Abraham, Carolyn is not like Kierkegaard's Abraham. Abraham is exceptional, exceptional in the sense that he is an exception to the universal (for Kierkegaard the ethical is the universal, i.e. it applies to everyone, and Abraham

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as an individual suspends the ethical). But when Carolyn, in Ben's eyes, "sacrifices" her son, she sacrifices one ethical duty (the duty to love her son) for a higher ethical duty (the duty to tell the truth). Unlike Kierkegaard's Abraham, her choice remains an *ethical* choice, and as such there can be no "teleological suspension of the ethical" (Kierkegaard, 2006: 65). Thus in Kierkegaard's terminology she would not be a "knight of faith" like Abraham but a tragic hero. Further, although Ben has difficulty understanding his wife's actions, the fact that they are ethical means that they can, unlike those of Abraham, be understood.

The climax comes near the end of the film. After hearing that his mother has testified against him, and confronted with his father's fury, Jake disappears (again). When Carolyn and Ben find their son, he is at the police station, and he has made a full confession. Like Isaac, though admittedly not so innocent, he now realizes that he must be sacrificed for something higher: the Truth. There is, however, a problem: Jake needs a parental signature. Standing in "an absolute relation to the Absolute" (the Absolute here being Truth – for Kierkegaard's tragic hero the ethical is the divine), and analogous to Abraham drawing the knife, Carolyn obediently raises the pen and signs. But when Ben takes the pen and raises it, he does what we the reader of Genesis might have expected Abraham to do. "I can't do this," he says, "I can *never* put my hand to anything that would take you away from me. I love you too much, Jacob." Out of love, Ben will not sacrifice his son, his only son. Throughout the film he resists all moves to "sacrifice" his son. He is even willing to lie to the police and cover up his son's crime. He says that he does not want to have to be forgiven "because [he] did nothing when [he] had a chance to save him." Thus for Ben, salvation is about love, and it does entail self-sacrifice, but it is not a love for which he will sacrifice the son. "Who would want [Abraham] as a father?" he asks. In this respect he is the antithesis of the father who does what Abraham is ultimately not required to do: sacrifice the son out of love (John 3:16). Like Kierkegaard, Ben "lack[s] the courage to act like Abraham" (Kierkegaard, 2006: 147) because, as Kierkegaard notes in a passage where he imagines himself as Abraham, "The moment I mounted the horse I would have said to myself, 'Now everything is lost, God demands Isaac, I sacrifice him, and with him all my joy'" (Kierkegaard, 2006: 37). Realizing his father's fears of losing him, Jake says to him, "*Nothing* can ever take me away from you." Ben replies, "My son, my son", strongly evocative of the moment in Genesis in which Isaac realizes that he is in fact the sacrifice. Jake, unsure and craving for his father's love throughout the film, remarks, "I wish we could go back. I never knew how much you loved me." Once again, this affirms the father's belief that although love is self-sacrificing, love resists the sacrifice of the son.

In the closing scenes of the film, the judge finds no criminal intent, remorse from the accused, and a full and free confession. He acknowledges, however, Jake's culpability in running away and covering up the crime. Jake is convicted of

involuntary manslaughter in the second degree and sent to a juvenile facility for five years (of which he serves two). His father serves one year for tampering with evidence. As these sentences are handed down, the lawyer turns to the mother and questions, "Still think it was worth it?" It is a question echoed in *Fear and Trembling* when Kierkegaard notes that the Abraham story is glorious only if "we are willing to 'labor and be heavy laden'" (Kierkegaard, 2006: 28).

As the film ends, Jake's sister Jude (she of hopeless cases) offers a commentary on the family's situation. "None of us is free," she says, "Each of us is marked forever now: before and after." Once again, Kierkegaard is lurking in the background. In his book *The Concept of Anxiety*, he uses the biblical story of Adam and Eve to illustrate that the fall represents a "leap" out of freedom into sinfulness. From this moment on, he argues, the knowledge that we can make free choices creates *angst*, or an existential fear of non-being, regarding what we choose. We do not know how things will turn out and so angst will always shadow our freedom. As Kierkegaard writes, "Anxiety is the dizziness of freedom, which emerges when the spirit wants to posit the synthesis and freedom looks down into possibility, laying hold of finiteness to support itself. Freedom succumbs in this dizziness...in that moment everything is changed, and freedom when it rises sees that it is guilty. Between these two moments lies the leap" (Kierkegaard, 1980: 61). This is akin to what Jude is saying when she acknowledges that, in the context of before and after (before and after her brother's fateful choices), they are (paradoxically) free but not free. Through her family's experience she has come to the realization that with the knowledge that we can make free choices comes an anxiety about the choices we make. Kierkegaard writes, "Anxiety is neither a category of necessity nor a category of freedom; it is entangled freedom, where freedom is not free in itself but entangled, not by necessity, but in itself" (Kierkegaard, 1980: 49). Or as Jude puts it in the movie, "None of us is free."

For Kierkegaard, regaining the eternal freedom lost in the first leap requires a second leap – a leap back to God through faith.

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