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CRITICAL APPROACHES TO CONTEMPORARY FILM

INSIDE:

DEATH PROOF

PAN'S LABYRINTH

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Velox: Critical Approaches to Contemporary Film

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Editorial

Godwin claims that as an online discussion grows longer, the probability of a comparison involving Nazis or Hitler approaches one hundred percent. Absurd? We thought so. But after slogging through more internet movie review sites than one person should ever have to, looking for what we felt was substantive analysis of *Pan's Labyrinth*, we began to have a change of heart. What we had found was disturbing: blog after blog, and review after review of reductionist fan-based criticism relegating Del Toro to the status of anti-fascist propagandist. Alright, fine—but was that it? Even the “pros” had seemingly little to say. *Sight and Sound* didn't have anything other than a simple review, and Roger Ebert hadn't even written his own article about *Pan's Labyrinth* in the *Chicago Sun-Times*. Were we really going to have to wait for years until a peer-reviewed article worked its way through a decent journal? Call us pretentious, but the resources the internet was providing us were failing to meet our desire for analysis more sophisticated than the IMDB could generate. Why couldn't decent scholarship and instant gratification happily coexist—weren't we now in the twenty-first century?

Velox is intended as a corrective measure. While we have discovered that the limiting factor in rapid scholarship is, not surprisingly, the human element, this journal is an attempt to at least speed up the millennia-old scholarly machine. Our project is not to reinvent how cinema is discussed, nor is it to arbitrate what is good cinema in the first place. *Velox* exists solely to initiate discussion surrounding contemporary media and do so using available technology, as quickly as possible.

Velox (pronounced WAY-locks) is Latin meaning “swift” or “rapid.” Ultimately, this first issue took about a year to plan, solicit articles, vet, edit, solicit some more, and publish electronically—*velox* indeed. However, here, in

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your hands, or perhaps on your monitors, is the first issue of *Velox: Critical Approaches to Contemporary Film*.

While criticism regarding film has become the realm of every blogger and cinemaphile with a keyboard, consider this: *Action Comics #1* sold originally for a dime in April of 1938, but it has since had an inestimable influence on American culture. Today, a fair condition copy is worth around \$500,000. The ostensible value of a copy of *Action Comics* comes from the fact that it was designed to be disposable; fewer than a hundred *Action Comics #1* exist today, and only a handful in good condition. The ten cent price almost guaranteed the book's eventual appreciation.

On the following pages is the first issue of *Velox*, an electronic publication that, though not likely to ever fetch six figures at auction, will hopefully contribute valuably to the vast discourse of literary and film scholars for years to come. Rather than bland commercial reviews, meaningless production appraisals, superficial analyses devoid of context, or sycophantic praise, *Velox* offers something different. We hope you like what you find.

Kierkegaard *avec* Tarantino: Notes on Repetition in *Death Proof*

by Felix Singer

The only repetition was the impossibility of a repetition.
—Søren Kierkegaard, *Repetition*

Repetition, it goes without saying, is the fundamental structure of revenge narratives. A scenario with a particular result is presented and then repeated so that the result can be “corrected” or “transcended,” but naturally this involves the introduction of an extraneous element into the circuitry. It is repetition, yes, but repetition with a *difference* that drives revenge narratives: the son revisits the scene of his father’s murder when he confronts the murderer, both reenacting and ironically reversing the trauma: it is the victim who now will assume the position of the victimizer, who will become the very thing he hates in order to eradicate it. In more sophisticated forms of revenge narrative, this irony is addressed diegetically (e.g. a cop turns to her renegade partner and asks, “Is this really about ‘balancing the books’ or something else?”) or thematically (e.g. the camera pans past a courthouse to an alley where an armed man waits for his child’s killer to walk free on a technicality, the two loci—courthouse and alley—symbolizing the ethical dilemma of the would-be avenger: law or vigilantism). In popular cinema, the emblematic scene of such irony is certainly that in which Luke Skywalker, having defeated Vader, gazes with mounting horror at his prosthetic hand: “I’m becoming just like him.” The irony is especially thick in this scene because, of course, Anakin and Vader are one and the same person; to “avenge” Anakin, Luke must “kill” Vader, to “redeem” Vader means to “doom” Anakin, and so forth.

Irony aside, though, vengeful repetitions are often presented strictly in economic terms, if only at first (metaphorically, the revenge scenario is about

“payback”¹); that is, the (trans)action is to be finite: at a certain point, the energies of retributive justice are depleted and the violence ends. Or does it? Consider a classic revenge film like *The Searchers* (1956): doesn’t the “logic” behind Ethan Edwards’ rampage belie any kind of economic satisfaction? No matter how many Comanche he kills, even if he kills Chief Scar or Debbie herself, won’t she still be “defiled,” won’t she still have “been with a buck”? The un-tenability of an equilibration, of one act of violence undoing or erasing another, seems underscored at several points during the film’s rather ambiguous denouement: not only does Ethan *not* kill Debbie (instead, after running her down on his horse he, somewhat inexplicably, lifts her up like a child and cradles her), he doesn’t even kill Scar (though he quite shockingly takes his scalp²); and finally, isn’t this un-tenability one of the implications of Ethan’s being framed in the doorway in the final scene? He could enter and accept the “civilized,” domestic moral calculus, but instead he shambles into the distance, out into the desert, while the door uncannily closes of its own accord.³ It’s hard to know what to make of such a conclusion. Much of Ethan’s earlier volatility, his vindictive anger, seems to have subsided by movie’s end, but who can say if it won’t fester, like the poison arrow wound in his chest, and flare up anew?

Recent revenge films, like *Memento* (2000), indicate more explicitly how the circuit continues, how it’s in a way *designed* to continue and how we are complicit in that design. This is the anthropological aetiology of marriage, potlatch, competitive sport, human sacrifice: only some momentous, spectacular communal gesture or other can stall the revenge-circuit.⁴ If left unchecked,

¹ Thus the under-realized Mel Gibson vehicle of same name. An enterprising grad student somewhere should make a survey of how many times the phrase “It’s time for a little payback” (or its variants) is uttered in movies of this ilk. I realize that “a *little* payback” is intentionally understated—and of course, the phrase is typically uttered just prior to some explosive (and often fatal) showdown which more often than not “balances the books” in some symbolic way—but there is also something a bit revealing in it, as if, far from being litotes, it were the literal expression of the unconscious desire to preserve the revenge-cathexis, to enjoy it a little at a time.

² This rather disturbing act is not only a repetition in the sense that Ethan is “repaying” Scar in kind for having taken Martha and Lucy’s scalps, but is also a repetition of an earlier scene in which he shoots out the eyes of a Comanche corpse—in both scenes he defiles the dead body in a way emphasizing his perverse understanding of Comanche culture (perverse because he both reviles and revels in it). The scalping of Scar somewhat undermines the “homeopathic” logic of the denouement: whereas Ethan had earlier been bent on killing Debbie, he seems to mellow after being wounded in the upper chest by an arrow, as if its poison had cancelled the poison in his heart. In the scalping scene, however, we realize that Ethan in many ways remains completely unchanged by his sojourn.

³ It is an inversion of Kafka’s parable, “Before the Law.” Unlike Kafka’s supplicant, who begs and is refused entrance to the Law, Ethan rejects the Law to which he is beckoned.

though, the revenge-circuit continues fugally, a kind of *perpetuum mobile*. Tarantino's *Death Proof* (2007) uncannily literalizes this notion by having its revenge narrative played out by actual automobiles.

Tarantino has something of a penchant for repetition as a stylistic and narrative device: one might say his dominant mode is pastiche, his preferred tic, flashback. *Reservoir Dogs* (1992) and *Pulp Fiction* (1994) both use repetition, paradoxically it would seem, to *heighten* suspense (some sort of phenomenological analysis is warranted here; our implicit conclusion is that feelings of suspense or apprehension are not a function of ignorance, but knowledge—of knowing all too well what is going to happen next but not having gotten there yet). He uses repetition quite deftly in *Jackie Brown* (1997)—in particular during the mall sequence—and with appropriately splashy effect in *Kill Bill* (2003/2004). But it is certainly *Death Proof* which stands out for its virtuosic use of repetition, even if it isn't as subtle as that in *Jackie Brown* or as affecting as that in *Reservoir Dogs*. The repetitions in *Death Proof* are purely kinetic, automatism of plot and editing both. Nowhere else in Tarantino is there a stronger sense of the formulaic, and nowhere else in Tarantino is there a stronger sense that “going through the motions” entails a kind of freedom. The road being laid in advance, there is nothing left to do but accelerate with abandon.

In order to go forward, however, often one must first go back. And in Tarantino's universe, this truism is typically expressed not only in terms of visual motifs lifted from earlier films, but casting and soundtrack as well, where the cachet of obscurity is the vanguardist's most precious resource. In the case of *Death Proof*, whose soundtrack features such blasts-from-the-past as Jack Nitzsche's moody instrumental classic “Last Race” and “Hold Tight” by the justifiably obscure Dave Dee, Dozy, Beaky, Mick, and Tich, it is Kurt Russell who is resurrected as “Stuntman Mike,” a psychopath with a taste for automotive homicide: he uses his reinforced 1970 Chevy Nova (notably bearing the same license plate as Steve McQueen's 1968 Ford Mustang Fastback from *Bullitt* (1968)—the film is chockablock with little nods like this one) to collide spectacularly and fatally with his unsuspecting (female) victims. Like many of Tarantino's leading men, Russell is an actor whose heyday was in 1980s genre-pictures: *Escape from New York* (1981), *The Thing* (1982), and *Big Trouble in Little China* (1986). Stuntman Mike sports a scar similar to Snake Plissken's,

⁴ For more elaboration of the links between (retributive) violence and social rituals/institutions, to which the French socio-anthropological tradition seems much attuned, see Emile Durkheim's *Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Marcel Mauss' *The Gift*, Claude Levi-Strauss' *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*, René Girard's, *Violence and the Sacred*, and Georges Bataille's *The Accursed Share*, vol. 1, to name but a few.

Jack Burton's iconic tank-top can be spied on a wall in the bar scene—the movie is in large measure an homage to the campy low-budget films that made Russell famous, but at the same time it relies on the faded quality of Russell's fame. He's something of an oldster, his hair a ridiculous pompadour, a seedy, over-the-hill James Dean. His pitch-perfect performance is easily the best thing about *Death Proof*, a repetition of the swaggering tough-guy persona from his 80s films, only now tinged with nostalgia.

This nostalgia is of a piece with the whole conceit of the film as part of a “grind house” double-bill, and *Death Proof* delivers on the implicit premises of that conceit. The camera is fetishistic in its depiction of the female characters—lingering on legs and derrieres—who all happen to be attractive, foul-mouthed, and sexually liberated. The plot is outlandish, contrived, and its violence correspondingly shocking, cartoonish. In all of these areas, structural and imagistic repetitions are key. For example, in the first murder scene, Stuntman Mike propels his Chevy Nova, headlights off, down a dark road for its fiery assignation with Lanna, Shanna, Arlene, and Jungle Julia approaching from the opposite direction. He has just killed his passenger Pam (Rose McGowan) by violently slamming his breaks, crushing her skull against the dashboard. Having dispatched his first victim by braking, he proceeds to dispatch the rest by acceleration, plowing into them at high speed. The moment of impact is repeated several times to show in graphic detail the specific fate of each passenger: in the montage, one is launched through the windshield, another is crushed by a tire as the Chevy Nova caroms over the roof of their car, and Jungle Julia, whose leg had been dangling out the window, is dismembered. (One is tempted to read this as a perversely comedic commentary on the fetishistic images that preceded it: here at last is the radical end-point of fetishism, reducing women's bodies to parts.) Despite the suspicions of the local sheriff, Stuntman Mike is released from the hospital with minor injuries for lack of evidence and the movie's first act comes to an end.

We fade back in a little over a year later. The scene has changed (Tennessee has replaced Texas) but most other aspects of the plot remain the same. The second act of the movie is essentially a repetition of the first, but repetition and *inversion*. There are of course differences. Stuntman Mike now drives a 1969 Dodge Charger (the same model as in *Dirty Mary Crazy Larry* (1974))—the Nova, as per its namesake, having been destroyed in the fiery cataclysm—and is stalking another quartet of attractive motorists, Zoë, Kim, Abernathy, and Lee (who correspond roughly with Shanna, Arlene, Julia, and Lanna; missing from this equation is Pam, as if in repetition we were following a logic of diminishing returns). This foursome is part of a local movie crew on break, driving to see a white 1970 Dodge Challenger advertised in the newspaper. One of the four, Zoë, a stuntwoman (Zoë Bell more or less playing

herself) has a particular reason for wanting to see this particular car. It is the same model driven by Barry Newman in “Vanishing Point” (1971), which she wants to use for a dangerous game called “Ship’s Mast.” The four women become three—Lee must be left behind as “collateral” while they test-drive the Challenger—and they proceed to a lonely stretch of country road. Zoë mounts the hood of the car like a maiden on a sacrificial altar, clutching belts secured to each door. As Kim hurtles down the road, Zoë squeals with delight. At this moment, Stuntman Mike attacks, repeatedly ramming the Challenger, which eventually spins out of control, pitching Zoë off the hood (reminiscent of Shanna’s fate). But then something odd, but a little bit funny happens: Stuntman Mike gets out of his car, clearly aroused by the sport (as if his intervention were simply part of “Ship’s Mast”—gone it would seem is the homicidal impulse), only to be shot in the arm by Kim, who carries a gun for self-defense; Stuntman Mike yelps in pain (we find out moments later that he has barely been grazed) and drives off; Zoë emerges from a clump of pussy-willows completely unhurt except for a “bruise on [her] bum” (recall the leg and derriere fetish), and the three women unanimously (and enthusiastically) decide to give chase.

The final sequence of the film is yet another repetition, but with roles reversed, the Challenger now in pursuit of the Charger (the model names are increasingly legible as symbolic: the aggressive Charger and game Challenger). And the film proceeds apace to its inevitable conclusion: the women, now psychotically enraged (i.e. they are exhibiting-repeating Stuntman Mike’s depraved jouissance), catch up with a blubbing Stuntman Mike (i.e. he is exhibiting-repeating their mortal terror), who gets his comeuppance, to put it mildly. This final scene features *at least* two dozen rapid cuts (I didn’t count) of Stuntman Mike being repeatedly punched by the three women before collapsing unconscious. There is a freeze-frame of the women leaping in triumph (an image straight from a car commercial), then a brief credit roll, and then a cut back to Abernathy (Rosario Dawson) crushing Stuntman Mike’s skull with the heel of her boot. The superimposition of campiness and brutality in these last images is difficult to process—the humor in *Death Proof* is usually mixed with groan-inducing images of violence—but it is here more than anywhere that the invocation of the generic formula comes as a relief, it is here we are reminded that this is in fact an exploitation cartoon, one that might in the end critique its own morbid prurience even as it wallows in it.

That said, it would still seem doubly impertinent to invoke Kierkegaard in this context (what’s next, you may ask, a Heideggerian analysis of *Faster, Pussycat! Kill! Kill!* ?): firstly, two more opposed sensibilities can hardly be imagined—the high-minded ethicist and the pop-culture maven; and secondly, it is no doubt rating *Death Proof* too highly to suggest that it has philosophical significance on a par with the Melancholy Dane. I readily concede both these

points (as would Tarantino), but would at the same time suggest that whatever its faults, *Death Proof* is an interesting addition to the “canon” of revenge films. As metacinema or pastiche, it affords no small insight into the primordial structures of the genre, and Kierkegaard gives us a conceptual vocabulary to articulate this insight; to put it a bit grandly, articulating this insight as it devolves from film may in turn help to illuminate the philosophico-psychological substrate of repetition compulsions at the level of individual and culture both. It is infinitely doubtful that *Death Proof* was conceived in any way to engage with this substrate; at the same time, as a staging of one particular kind of repetition, the revenge narrative, it may submit itself more readily to philosophical contemplation than many an academic treatise. It perhaps sounds odd to array Kierkegaard alongside Tarantino, but that would not be giving either enough credit; Kierkegaard, for his part, was one who saw more clearly than most the resources and advantages for philosophy that were to be had in non-philosophical discourses. Many of his own texts were literary: novels, parables, aphorisms, fragments. Who’s to say that if he had lived in the age of cinema that he might not have taken up a camera as readily as a pen?⁵ Kierkegaard’s *Repetition* (1843), then, is a literary rumination on the ethical dimension of commitment, which involves repetition (one attends repeatedly to the needs of the beloved), as against the aesthetic dimension of recollection, which involves security (in cherishing a lost love, one has nothing to lose). The question for Kierkegaard, at least the one that is salient to a discussion of *Death Proof* and revenge narratives, is why do we variously seek after and avoid repetition?

The latter question is probably easier to answer: we avoid repetition because it involves continual effort, we take refuge instead in the immobility of recollection—it is much easier, for example, to fondly remember grandma than it is to clean her bedpan each day. Recollection is safe and undemanding. The “will to repetition,” on the other hand, is quite puzzling. “It takes youthfulness to hope, youthfulness to recollect,” Kierkegaard writes, “but it takes courage to will repetition”; what’s more, repetition is the engine of existence: “the world continues—because it is a repetition” (132–33).⁶ But is there not a consolation

⁵ Constantin Constantius writes cryptically and equivocally, for example, on the individual’s fantasy relation to theater as a place of refuge, an artificial realm where one can confront one’s doubles. This isn’t a proper confrontation, but a superficial confrontation with a superficially imagined aspect of oneself. On the other hand, if one possesses enough “ironic resiliency,” this superficial confrontation can become itself an object of fruitful contemplation. (See *Repetition*, 154–56.)

⁶ Writing about this same topic in *Die Wiederholung als werkkonstitutives Prinzip im Œuvre Thomas Bernhards* (Frankfurt A.M.: Peter Lang, 1991), Oliver Jahraus puts a fine point on it: “Das Invariante ist grundlegend, das Variante ein aus dem Invarianten ableitbares Epiphänomen.” (32) [Invariance is fundamental, from which the variant is a derivable epiphenomenon.]

in repetition comparable to that of recollection? We would do well to maintain a high level of irony when assessing any of the pseudonymous statements. We are all too aware that Constantin Constantius, the narrator of *Repetition*, is limited to the ethical, not yet having made the leap of faith into the religious dimension.⁷ It is safe, therefore, to assume that “his” conception of repetition is likewise limited. It is not, as in recollection, the fugal reiteration of an immutable past—repetition means *difference*, repetition means *engagement*—but neither is it eternal (where it could entail infinite variation). Repetition, even ethical repetition, is a closed loop, its “dialectic [...] is easy, for that which is repeated has been—otherwise it could not be repeated—but the very fact that it has been makes the repetition into something new” (Ibid. 149). New, but not singular.

When we think of this kind of repetition, we realize that it is the same repetition that structures revenge narratives, an ethical economy (payback, *lex talionis*, etc.) that continually inverts the elements repeated in the system without changing or transcending their values. And so Abernathy, the erstwhile victim, brings her boot down on Stuntman Mike, the erstwhile victimizer. There is change and stasis at the same time. When we look at revenge narratives in this way, it becomes clear that, contrary to our expectations as to the presumed moral aspect of revenge, the notion that it descends from justice, repetition *itself* is the point, *not* reversal—reversal, in fact, only serves to camouflage the ulterior desire for an automatism (uncannily literalized in *Death Proof* as the car chase) on the order of recollection, though one with a futurity. *Death Proof* is a kind of endless movie, a dialectical baton race—or more to the point, chase—without a finish line. The moral dimension elided *within* revenge narratives reemerges at the level of their staging: we see them not as the comforting *known*, but as a horrifying perpetuity, and perhaps in seeing them thus, we are in a better position to resist their consolations. Revenge narratives, in the end, teach us to avoid them.

⁷ Kierkegaard referred human action to three stages or dimensions: the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious (in ascending order of difficulty). The aesthetic stage is sensual, the ethical stage is legal, and the religious stage is the “teleological suspended of the ethical” in the name of a higher directive (i.e. God’s).

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Embracing the Horror: Tracing the Ideology of Guillermo Del Toro's *Pan's Labyrinth*

by Jacob Hodgen

Following near universal praise from critics and the reception of multiple Oscars for Guillermo Del Toro's film *Pan's Labyrinth* (2006), critics have cautiously begun to try to dissect the film's complex and highly emotional imagery. In correspondence and interviews, Del Toro has revealed that *Pan's Labyrinth* is closely based on the writings and themes of several of his favorite authors who also wrote fiction surrounding the myth of the god Pan or the motif of the labyrinth: Arthur Machen, Lord Dunsany, Jorge Borges, and Algernon Blackwood. This information, however, has yet to be of much use to film critics or scholars because the themes for which these authors are known are seemingly in direct opposition to the characters and plots Del Toro writes. While Del Toro writes happy endings, or at least endings with some aspect of hope, many of the short stories he cites as inspiration end in seeming bleak chaos and madness. Arthur Machen's "The Great God Pan" (1890), which has several close thematic ties to the film, in particular reveals no hope for redemption and suggests a cosmic horror in the figure of "Pan" that is unknowable, unstoppable, and entirely monstrous. Despite ostensible contradictions between Del Toro's film and the fiction its author cites as influencing it, I will show how Del Toro's ideology presents a strategy for embracing and, as Dominick LaCapra calls it, "working through" the trauma of the human experience. While this strategy draws from the tropes and philosophies of other authors to present a context, style, and mood for his work, Del Toro re-writes the bleak ending of his predecessors and offers a new way for viewers to partake in the trauma of supernatural horror. By connecting the themes of the original Late Victorian and Early Modern texts with Del Toro's film, *Pan's Labyrinth* can be read as a study into the nature of the human response to trauma.

Set in 1944, *Pan's Labyrinth* tells the story of young Spanish girl named Ophelia who travels with her pregnant mother to live with her stepfather at a military outpost. Her stepfather is a ruthless Captain in the army who wastes no time revealing his sadistic nature as he tries to crush the rebels hiding in the nearby forest and maintain the bourgeois ideals of his fascist regime. Whether in reality or dream—the viewer is never entirely sure—Ophelia makes a series of visitations to a mysterious faun who resides in a nearby stone labyrinth and informs her that she is, in fact, a lost Princess of a magical kingdom. In order to reclaim her throne, the faun gives Ophelia several tasks which she must perform, the completion of which, she is assured, will ensure her ability to return to her native kingdom. The desire to escape the world in which she currently resides is tremendous as the brutality of war, selfishness, and despair are continually felt in excruciating ways by Ophelia and those she cares about. Hoping for an escape from the hopelessness of her life, Ophelia courageously attempts to carry out the tasks assigned to her by the faun and is forced to confront various monsters and beings. Although frightening and strange in their own right, these creatures are never depicted as evil—a trait which the viewer will inevitably have few qualms assigning to the ruthless Captain. The film concludes in a gruesome crescendo of violence in which Ophelia is killed. Even though she is ostensibly admitted to her fairy kingdom as a Princess, the audience is left to wonder whether or not the faun and his magical world were nothing but the frenzied delusions of a frightened girl grasping for hope and meaning in a cruel and pointless world.

The need for further discussion of the film is made abundantly clear upon reading through any number of reviews written by popular film critics. Unaware of the literary heritage the film lays claim to, many viewers and critics alike are likely to buy into an overly simplistic reading of the film—as Roger Ebert.com concludes in its review for the Chicago Sun-Times—that it is a moralistic fairy tale for grown-ups: “In order to find her true self, Ophelia must also find the strength to break the rules imposed by authority [and find] an individual conscience: What could be a more powerful anti-fascist weapon than that?” (Emerson). One very popular internet film review site claims that the consensus of critics is that “*Pan's Labyrinth* is a visually imaginative and allegorical take on the fears [...] faced in Spain during WWII” (Rotten Tomatoes). While the refutation of fascist ideals is certainly a theme the film addresses, when asked in an interview if his films were political, Del Toro states that he strives to not merely comment on modern times, but all times. He claims:

It's the difference between a parable and a pamphlet. A parable discusses things that are relevant in the past, the future, and the present—regardless of the outcome in the present. A pamphlet, on

the other hand, is completely concerned with affecting an outcome in the present, the most immediate present. I would like to think that movies like [*Pan's Labyrinth*] or *The Devil's Backbone* or *Cronos* are definitely more parables than anything else. They try to discuss things like immortality and death and truth and choice. (Interview, para.23)

The Spanish Civil War, and fascism, then, are almost incidental to the story and serve only as vehicles with which the film's wider explorations can be undertaken. What then is *Pan's Labyrinth* about, and to what or whom does the careful symbolism and deliberate imagery correspond? The answer lies within Del Toro's favorite hobby: reading.

Some of my favorite writers (Borges, Blackwood, Machen, Dunsany) have explored the figure of the God Pan and the symbol of the labyrinth. These are things that I find very compelling and I am trying to mix them and play with them. Don't get me wrong. I am not trying to compare my meager intellect with the aforementioned giants but just trying to have a go at these rich symbols that hold such a hold on me. (Message Board, para. 2-3)

The problem this statement presents to scholars is immense, as two major discrepancies are immediately apparent. First, several of the authors Del Toro cites, and the Pan fiction he is referring to, typically follows a strict model in structure and ideology; more specifically, in many of these cases, the endings in this genre of fiction are inevitably pessimistic, or at least non-humanocentric, and do not offer any hope for the redemption of mankind. *Pan's Labyrinth*, while ambiguous, can at least be seen to hint towards the possibility for optimism. Secondly, the tropes of cosmic horror to which the fiction adheres reveals the insignificance of humanity by means of horrific incursions of the supernatural into the otherwise happily naïve world of reality; conversely, Del Toro revels in Ophelia's possibility for an optimistic escape from the horrors of reality into the ostensibly more peaceful bliss of the supernatural. By laying claim to the heritage of horror literature that he does, any reading of Del Toro's film must be reconciled with the fact that *Pan's Labyrinth*, while it can be seen to be making stylistic and thematic moves to access the symbols of these previous horror writers, departs from these traditions to create an entirely new model. As Del Toro claims that *Pan's Labyrinth* is the "companion piece" (Dark Horizons, para. 2) to his film *The Devil's Backbone* (2001), and similarities can easily be drawn to both these and his earlier *Chronos* (1993), a more complete understanding of

Del Toro's ideology and treatment of the horror genre through *Pan's Labyrinth* becomes increasingly useful.

A Heritage of Horror: The Literary Labyrinth of the Pan Mythos

Arthur Machen (1863–1947) was a Welsh author best known for his supernatural horror fiction; by far the easiest connection to Del Toro's *Pan* is Machen's 1890 novella, *The Great God Pan*, which tells the story of a peculiar doctor of "transcendental medicine" (2) who performs an unusual type of brain surgery on his adopted daughter Mary in an attempt to allow her a glimpse into a world which the naked eye cannot see. "The ancients," he tells his colleague, "knew what lifting the veil means. They called it seeing the god Pan" (3). Unluckily for her, the surgery is a success and the poor girl sees something which causes her to go into a seizure and become, for the rest of her life, "a hopeless idiot." The doctor's reaction is one of tempered stoicism: "it is a great pity [...] However, it could not be helped; and, after all, she has seen the Great God Pan" (16). Years pass, and a strange woman, Helen Vaughn, comes to town and begins to drive several young men in the area to madness and suicide. The survivors tell stories of the horrific things Helen does to them and of her inhuman characteristics and proclivities. The climax of the story reveals that Helen is the daughter of Mary, who had been horrifically impregnated by the god Pan.

Machen's novella is highly influential within the genre of supernatural horror and its plot forms the structure for both H.P. Lovecraft's short story "The Dunwich Horror" (1928) and Peter Straub's novel *Ghost Story* (1979). The fact that Lovecraft adores Machen and cites him as one of the "Modern Masters" of supernatural horror is vitally important as it further traces a genealogy of influence to Del Toro—a long time Lovecraft aficionado.⁸ What then is it that Lovecraft and Del Toro see in Machen's *The Great God Pan* that would be worth the trouble of emulation and exploration? Lovecraft writes of Machen's *The Great God Pan*: "No one could begin to describe the cumulative suspense and ultimate horror with which every paragraph abounds" (90). The gimmick of the story is that the reader does not figure out that Helen is the daughter of Pan until the last moment. The horror of the narrative is derived from the ambiguous insinuations of the various men who are driven to insanity by what they perceive are Helen's perversions and moments of inhumanity. The specific brand of horror that is most often ascribed to Machen, and particularly this tale, is a term coined by Lovecraft: cosmic horror. For Lovecraft, cosmic horror is:

⁸ Del Toro's *Hellboy* (2004) is set in a world of pseudo-Lovecraftian horror; also, Del Toro has announced his plan to film a direct adaptation of Lovecraft's *At the Mountains of Madness* (Mountains ¶1).

A certain atmosphere of breathless and unexplainable dread of outer, unknown forces must be present; and there must be a hint, expressed with a seriousness and portentousness becoming its subject, of that most terrible conception of the human brain—a malign and particular suspension or defeat of those fixed laws of Nature which are our only safeguard against the assaults of chaos and the daemons of unplumbed space. (15)

While cosmic horror is a relatively difficult term to concisely reduce, for the purpose of this article I will highlight several points which can be found in Machen's novella and be shown to directly correlate with the other authors in question and *Pan's Labyrinth*. The first trope is that of a staunch refusal of the human characters to believe in or trust in the supernatural. For Lovecraft, it was not the unknown but the unknowable that was frightening—a motif exactly paralleled in Machen's *Pan*. Lovecraft's cosmic horror is a manifestation of the indescribable, unnamable, ineffable, or unrepresentable: a gruesome failure of humanity's preconceptions about itself and the universe. Upon close analysis, the frightened men in *The Great God Pan* are never hurt or threatened in any physical way; their terror is wholly derived from Helen's unfamiliarity. The fact that she is partially inhuman and engages in acts which they perceive are perverse, reveals, in fact, much less about her as a monstrosity than it does their own intolerance and inability to cope with change. Helen's "crimes," while the reader is never exactly sure what they are, are most likely of a sexual nature; ironically whatever Machen imagines as sexual deviancy and uses to define Helen as a monster in 1890 is most likely something which would be greatly sought after by fetishists and enthusiasts in our day. As S.T. Joshi explains, "aberrant sex becomes, for Machen, a sort of 'sin against Nature'—something that threatens the very fabric of the cosmos" (21).

Even though the doctor believes that he can lift the veil from his daughter, upon doing so and learning that she has a child he reviles in horror upon discovery of Helen's lapses in normality: "[Helen] was for me a constant, an incarnate horror, and after a few years I could bear it no longer" (115). The root of this horror, once again, is neither acts of aggression or violence, merely the unknowable cultural heritage associated with having a father who is a formless entity in the pagan pantheon. Ophelia faces similar moments of cosmic horror in *Pan's Labyrinth* as she is forced to confront various alien entities in the form of the faun, the giant toad, the mandrake plant, and, the most horrific monster of all, the Pale Man: a hideous devourer of children. While Ophelia cannot deny the existence of the supernatural around her, she struggles to come to terms with the inhumanity of the entities she encounters. Ophelia, unlike Machen's characters, approaches the supernatural with Del Toro's trademark

childish innocence. Like the children in both *Chronos* and *The Devil's Backbone*, Ophelia encounters horror without knowing any better and—without any adults telling her she should be afraid or repulsed—finds herself fascinated and attracted to those things which might otherwise instill terror and revulsion in the adults around her. For Ophelia, that which is not human or normal is not, by necessity, horrific.

Chronologically, the next author in Del Toro's sphere of influence is Algernon Blackwood (1869–1951). While Blackwood wrote many stories revolving around the forces of nature, it is his short story *The Touch of Pan* (1912) which reincarnates the unknowable Pan into the life of an affluent young gentleman. Blackwood's prose eschews a more modern setting and revels in the decadent climate of Victorian high society and propriety. The story unfolds as the protagonist, Heber, meets and quickly becomes infatuated with the bizarre young girl Elspeth (Elizabeth) whose priorities and values are unlike any girl he has ever known: "Money to her was just stamped metal, fame a loud noise of sorts, position nothing. Of people she was aware as a dog or bird might be aware—they were kind or unkind" (148). Elspeth is presented as a wild and unkempt girl who serves to fascinate Heber insatiably. In the middle of an extravagant party she leads him into the woods chanting "In the heart of that wood dwell I" (158). After frolicking together for some time, they come across a large group of orgiastic revelers, including nymphs, who sing, dance, and kiss each other in a state of innocent bliss. Eventually, the god Pan himself comes to bless his devout; as a token of his initiation, Heber begins to grow horns and becomes a satyr.

The horror, if this indeed is to be classified as horror, stems from a similar source as in the Machen tale: those who are uninitiated into the ways of the supernatural world are shocked and disgusted by the culture of those dissimilar to them. Blackwood, however, presents a thoroughly progressive response to the horror of the unknown. Instead of, as Machen or Lovecraft would do, having his protagonist revile against the supernatural realm, Heber embraces the new world of supernaturalism and eventually chooses to abandon humanity in favor of it. For Heber, it becomes humanity that is repugnant, "the [human] women were calculating, but nowhere glad; the men experienced, but nowhere joyous [...] Vice masqueraded in the ugly shape of pleasure; beauty was degraded into calculated trick. They were not natural. They knew not joy" (175–176). Blackwood's story sets the stage for a new reading of the Pan myth; while Pan and his followers may be inhuman and seemingly incomprehensible to outsiders, the reader is given a glimpse of how even something that is strange can make perfect sense, or even make more sense, to an insider than that which humanity ascribes to as its norms. "The Touch of Pan" suggests that the weird and bizarre might actually be a better alternative.

Ophelia, with the innocence of a child, does not know any better when it comes to trusting in, or seeking, the unknown in the form of the mysterious faun. One thing she does know: that her world is filled to the point of breaking with brutal pain and trauma. All around her she confronts the vicious actions of her father and the fascist army; she isn't even allowed any joy in the birth of her baby brother as the event is shrouded in blood and violence. When Ophelia is confronted by the faun to undertake certain tasks—all of which involve her interacting and potentially risking herself in some way or another—the ostensible horror of her supernatural challenges are tame in comparison to what goes on in her daily life. Ophelia is no fool and quickly realizes that the world of the supernatural, while foreign and bizarre, at its very worst is still better than her current condition; it is no wonder that she embraces the horror of her three trials on the mere hope that something, or anything, could be better than her “normal” life.

Thirdly is the full length novel of Irishman Edward John Moreton Drax Plunkett, 18th Baron Dunsany (1878–1957). Lord Dunsany's *The Blessing of Pan* (1927) traces an even more progressive response to the trauma represented by the phenomenon of Pan as an entire village embraces the way of supernaturalism and hedonistic nature worship in favor of traditional human culture. The narrator of the tale relates the plight of the stubborn, yet likeable, vicar, Elderick Anwrel, as he struggles to control what he sees as an epidemic of paganism erupting in his town. What begins as a young boy playing pan pipes in the evening, leads first the girls, then the boys, and finally the adults into nature-worship and a complete abandonment of all things related to Christianity. Throughout the story, the vicar is continually appalled by the evening rituals for which increasingly large numbers of the town turn out to participate in. When his own wife finally yields to the allure of the pan pipes, the vicar suffers a breakdown of Lovecraftian proportions: “learning had failed him [...] then all that was busy and practical [...] Then Heaven and Earth. He knew not which of these had been the bitterer blow, Heaven, when [his wife] failed him, or Earth, when all the simple folk that he loved had gone out of this church and over the hill to the enemy” (259). In utter despair of the ineptitude of the ways of humanity, the vicar succumbs and leads the town in the sacrifice of a bull to his new pagan god. While the novel's horror is derived from the vicar's response to the unknown culture of the followers of Pan, the final pages offer—as in Blackwood's story—the possibility for the reader that forsaking the conventional ways of humanity, in favor of a more exotic breed of supernaturalism, might actually be quite a good idea. The novel does not end with the vicar's conversion; instead, the narrator continues on and explains in rather great detail just exactly how the town, now fully converted to Pan and nature-worship, shuns machines and does not merely survive, but thrives in their new practice:

Ploughing and sowing and harvesting all went their round as of old [...] the sower singing slowly the same song as he scattered the grain, the harvest carried in with thankfulness to the unknowable, and all the old women gleaning [...] All trivial things, it may be said [...] Yet it was amongst such that the people of Wolding dwelt, and they seemed to find amongst silent unfoldings and ripenings, that are the great occasions of Nature, enough to replace the more resounding changes that are the triumphs of man's ingenuity, and which we gained and they lost. (277)

The fact that the entire town embraces the thing that originally presented them with horror and revulsion—the rites of Pan—and has a good time doing it suggests that Dunsany is calling his reader to rethink any humanocentric ideals when faced with the unknown.

Ophelia, like the townspeople in *The Blessing of Pan*, is drawn to the supernatural through means that are themselves supernatural; instead of magic pan pipes, she is carefully lead by a shape-shifting sprite which grants her access to not only the center of the labyrinth, but to the faun who will offer her initiation rites to a new and inhuman world. As fairy tales often do, Ophelia follows an archetypal hero's quest, a journey which for her, she is told, promises a boon of royalty, peace, and happiness. The major difference is that to receive her boon, Ophelia must effectually choose to abandon her human world; there will no glorious return to the homeland and feast of honor, at least not in the land of the humans. If Ophelia had been a character in a work of Machen's fiction, the outcome would have been decidedly different. Machen's short story "The White People" (1904) also corresponds to the motif of a young girl entangled in a bizarre world of the fantastic and bizarre; however, as in *The Great God Pan*, in this story Machen once again refuses to allow any possibility for positive or healthy incursions into the supernatural. For Machen, a Gnostic, the only true way to sin was "the taking of heaven by storm, [...] an attempt to penetrate into another and higher sphere in a forbidden manner" (Machen, "The White People" 119). All three authors which have been discussed deal with this issue to some degree; in effect, all methods for accessing the "higher sphere" of the supernatural are forbidden and trespassers who go beyond their bounds and doomed to become themselves member of the hideous "other." The supernatural, while potentially alluring to some, will always be shunned and marginalized by those who remain in the "normal" world.

Ophelia's ability to both partake fully in the world of Pan and also maintain her innocence in the eyes of the viewer presents an entirely new outcome to the Pan mythos. While Blackwood and Dunsany certainly present the reader with

the suggestion that maybe, just maybe, the realm of the supernatural is not quite so horrific, once you get used to it, Del Toro unreservedly promotes the world of the fantastic as an undeniably superior alternative; his viewers are brought to a place where they find themselves unable to do anything *but* hope that Ophelia has succeeded in entering the faun's mysterious magic kingdom—despite its horrors. It is notable that the main device Del Toro uses to gain the audience's trust in the world of the supernatural is by showing repeated instances of extremely brutal violence by humans on humans—mainly perpetrated by Ophelia's sadistic father. Death and horror are certainly shown to be integral elements in the magic realm: the giant oozing toad, the wailing Mandrake, and the devourer of children are all quite horrific in their own right. However, only humans are shown to be cruel. The scene in the “real world” when the Captain is shown beating to death a suspected poacher, who turns out to be innocent, with a glass bottle is easily more disturbing than all of the trauma presented in the magical realm combined. Del Toro furthers seeks to disrupt the viewers faith in humanity as an extended scene reveals the hideous anticipation of a lengthy torture session of a captured rebel soldier. While very little is actually shown, the build up and aftermath that *is* depicted seems to be more than enough to justify Ophelia's attempt to abandon humanity forever in favor of a new way of life—regardless of how strange and foreign it may be. The film makes it abundantly clear that even the prospect of having dinner with the Pale Man every night is unquestionably preferable to spending one more day with her father.

The final influence cited by Del Toro is the Argentinean author Jorge Luis Borges. The question of what to do with his fiction remains an entirely different problem than any addressed so far in this analysis. While the motif of the labyrinth is an obvious continual fascination for Borges in much of his fiction, and is thus reasonably traceable to Del Toro, the intellectual complexity of Borges's carefully ambiguous work—heavily influenced by the Spanish Ultraist movement—provides for yet a new mode of intervention in understanding the figure of Pan. Harold Bloom claims that,

The Gnostic gazes into the mirror of the fallen world and sees, not himself, but his dark double, the shadowy hunter of his phantasmagoria. Since the ambivalent God of the Gnostics balances good and evil in himself, the writer dominated by a Gnostic vision is morally ambivalent also. Borges is imaginatively a Gnostic, but intellectually a skeptical and naturalistic humanist. (1)

Postponing temporarily any discussion of the strange paradox Bloom creates of the “skeptical naturalistic humanist,” the perspective of Gnostic ambivalent

vision, framed within a general ideology of skeptical naturalism, provides an extremely useful tool for exploring both Borges and Del Toro.

In its own unique way, much of Borges's fiction can be read to correspond with Lovecraft's notion of cosmic horror; Borges's short story "The Immortal" is one of several which are useful in understanding Del Toro and the other authors who influence him. In this highly complex parable, a man seeks to find a "secret river which cleanses death" and the glorious race of Immortals which guard it. Along the way the protagonist encounters a wide variety of strange people and places; themes of philosophical ambiguity and a refusal to accept humanocentric philosophy are intertwined throughout. The protagonist meets with philosophers who believe that "to extend man's life is to extend his agony and multiply his deaths" (106.), dreams of a "nitid labyrinth: in the center was a water jar [...] but so intricate and perplexed were the curves that I knew I would die before reaching it" (107) and explores a palace "older than mankind, than the earth [which was] a fabrication of the gods [...] The gods who built it have died [...] the gods who built it were mad" (110). Eventually succeeding, at least in part, in his search the protagonist discovers that a hideous race of barbaric "troglodytes were the Immortals [...] With the relics they erected, in the same place, the mad city I had traversed: a kind of parody or inversion and also temple of the irrational gods who govern the world and of whom we know nothing, save they do not resemble man" (113). This text, like *Pan's Labyrinth*, is quick to disestablish humanity as of a central importance when observed from a wider universal perspective. The fact that the fabled race of Immortals turn out to be a "bestial breed of troglodytes" (108) and the inhuman gods in this universe are entirely insane resonates well with the Pan mythology mentioned earlier; in particular, Machen's characters find in a similar way only madness and horror upon discovering the inhuman and incomprehensible nature of deity. While Blackwood's and Dunsany's characters eventually make attempts to confront and embrace elements of the supramundane in their lives, Borges's characters are by far the most stoical. As Bloom describes, Borges's "Gnostic vision" eliminates much of the potential horror that accompanies a confrontation with cosmic horror. Since this vision is already "morally ambivalent" and less prone to prudish reactionism, Borges's characters instead react with awe and wonder to fractures in normality.

It is at this point that a direct connection can be made to Del Toro's ideology. While overtly subverting any privilege previously assigned to humanity and its significance, Del Toro is simultaneously appealing to a very human sense of nostalgia through Ophelia to create a sense of hope; hence Del Toro can be labeled, as Bloom says, a "skeptical naturalistic humanist." While Machen, Blackwood, and Dunsany present a largely naturalistic and non-humanocentric ideology, Del Toro introduces a possibility for a glimpse of

humanism to peak through the clouds of entropy and confusion. To reconcile this humanism with naturalism—which are admittedly rather antagonist bedfellows—is to locate a key to understanding Del Toro, whose films simultaneously hate humanity because of its cruelty and arrogance, and yet always seem to offer a glimmer of hope that perhaps there is something in mankind worth preserving. In nearly every case, this special something is the innocence of children. *Chronos*, *The Devil's Backbone*, and *Pan's Labyrinth* all clearly evince misanthropic tendencies as violent authority figures—who are always men—inflict unjustified cruelty on the innocent people around them. However, also every time, children are presented to offer redemption and hope for the viewer in the end; even *Hellboy* follows a similar motif by offering the viewer the innocent love of the youthful looking Selma Blair as a solution to the overtly Lovecraftian horrors of the cosmos brought to fruition by, yet another, evil man.

A further point of departure from much of the mythos cited as influencing *Pan's Labyrinth* is a complete lack of sexual tension or sensuality present in the film. While Machen, Blackwood, and Dunsany rely heavily on the implied horrors of sexual deviance and illicit sensuality, *Pan's Labyrinth* completely eschews this perspective and solely concerns itself with a very conventional sense of the natural trauma associated with labor and childbirth. This strategy most likely lies in Del Toro's tactic of presenting the film, not through the eyes of an adult as other authors, but through the eyes of the innocent:

You should be experiencing both the horror and the wonder as a child would. From a child's point of view. When we're kids, brutality registers differently than when we are adults. I tried to make the violent scenes—in what is essentially a war movie and a fantasy movie mixed together—disturbing and unsettling and heartbreaking. That contrast is great, because it has not only that childlike sense of wonder, but the brutality that only a child would sense. (Del Toro, [Interview], para.12)

Ophelia does not yet, or cannot, see the world in terms of sexuality, thus any attempts to develop a sense of horror through aberrant sex would be pointless. In much the same way Terry Gilliam's highly disturbing *Tideland* (2005) juxtaposes adult trauma into the world of a child who is too young to fully understand how horrified she really should be, Ophelia is saved from the full weight and power of the cruelty that surrounds her by her lack of experience and comprehension. The difficult task that seems to follow this scenario is how to decipher what Del Toro is suggesting in the perpetuation of this model; if

hope, redemption, and escape from horror can only be found in innocence and youth, what options remain for the adult population?

Dealing with Trauma: Working-Through the Horrors of Human Experience

One possibility for constructing a unified ideology—a notion which can be justified by the fact the Del Toro himself claims that his films are directly linked thematically as discussed earlier— for Del Toro’s response to trauma comes from Dominick LaCapra’s notion of “working through”: a typically positively connoted process described as,

Work[ing] on posttraumatic symptoms in order to mitigate the effects of trauma by generating counterforces to compulsive repetition (or acting out), thereby enabling a more viable articulation of affect and cognition or representation, as well as ethical and sociopolitical agency, in the present and future [...] working through does not mean total redemption of the past or healing its traumatic wounds. Indeed there is a sense in which, while we may work on its symptoms, trauma, once it occurs, is a cause that we cannot directly change or heal. And any notion of full redemption or salvation with respect to it, however this-worldly or deferred, is dubious. [...] we can only learn how to live better with its attendant anxiety and not mystifyingly attribute it to an event as its putative cause or project responsibility for it onto a discreet group of scapegoats. (119)

The biographical connection to Del Toro is an intriguing one which recalls an image of a brutal beating he witnessed as a child: “once and I saw a guy hitting another guy with a bottle and one of the things that impressed me the most is the bottle never broke. Unlike in the movies this bottle just kept going and going and going and then I put that in the movie” (Dark Horizons, para.8). As LaCapra notes, compulsively re-living one’s past trauma, or acting out, essentially conflates the past event with the present experience and any difference between them may be lost; however, Del Toro’s re-visitation of his own traumatic episode with the glass bottle goes beyond merely acting out as the director embraces the possibility that he can “live better with [his trauma’s] attendant anxiety.” The fact that Ophelia still manages to thrive and successfully embrace life amidst the high volume of trauma her world contains becomes a “counterforce to compulsive repetition” and a seemingly productive outlet for “working-through” past woes.

Del Toro seems not to be arguing against humanity—as Machen, Blackwood, Dunsany, and Lovecraft can be seen to do—but for a reevaluation of our ideas and ideologies concerning trauma. Del Toro’s model for human experience can be mapped according to the archetypal hero’s quest—with several important adjustments. While Ophelia does not succeed in any conventional way (obviously: she dies), she does succeed in embracing and learning from her confrontation with a powerful non-humanocentric ideology. By merely surviving the trauma of the supernatural, and not going insane, as a Machen character would, she is able to move on to a stage of reconciliation and work through her trauma; she learns from her experiences with an open mind and is thus the only one that come away intellectually and emotionally unscarred. Despite the fact that she dies, she is ostensibly the only character who achieves a state of harmonious coexistence with trauma.

The ultimate question is, perhaps, how Del Toro’s film connects to other literature and film, and of what significance is Del Toro’s suggestion for the possibility of embracing what is perceived as horrific—and is not necessarily so—to escape from the true horrors of human experience. The answer, I feel, is a cultural one. Susannah Radstone writes that “well before the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, it was already commonplace to suggest that the twentieth century would be ‘remembered as the century of historical trauma’” (457). However historically decontextualized and ethnocentric this cultural perception may be,⁹ its very existence in culture at least justifies its analysis. Perhaps Del Toro’s films can be read to offer success strategies for how to survive or even thrive with the attendant trauma of the human experience: sometimes what we perceive as a foreign and horrific ideology isn’t really all that bad and may, in fact, be the better alternative. It is a level of intellectual adaptation that marks the difference between the victims and the survivors in the Pan mythos; Del Toro is suggesting that this adaptation is most easily accomplished through the innocence of a child. While it would be difficult to contend that the highly publicized and media-fanned horrors of the earth’s most recent epoch should necessarily be privileged over history’s past traumas, success strategies for coping in a stage of post-trauma, whenever or wherever that may be, are a worthwhile avenue for literary and academic exploration. As

⁹ Žižek notes the relative absurdity for one nation or society to “privilege” a set of traumatic events over another “which do not have the luck to be elevated by the media into the sublime victim of Absolute Evil” (*Smell of Love* 137). Was September 11th more traumatic or more inscrutable than the Black Plague or fall of the indigenous populations of the America’s to European settlers etc.? The answer is, of course, that no standardized rubric can be found—other than one’s own—and thus any claim that one set of trauma is more authentic, or more traumatic, than another is dubious.

the sting of trauma is arguably an inescapably ubiquitous human condition, we must all ask ourselves at one time or another, what do we do next?

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Cato and Dr. No vs. Anglo Heroes: Reaffirming American Monologia through Film

by Rachel Jeppsen

The release of two British films—*Dr. No* (1962) and *The Return of the Pink Panther* (1975)—straddled the U.S. Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, which opened U.S. borders for Asian immigration. While the release of these movies is not overtly linked with this immigration act, these events are linked under Westerners' perceptions of Asian Americans. The 1965 Immigration Act, often viewed as the U.S.'s response to guilt for their exclusionary rules in the Chinese Exclusion Act (1882-1943), attempted to ease "yellow peril" tension between Americans and Asians. But government policy could not fully transcend the Asian stereotypes that consistently emerged in films such as *Dr. No* and *The Return of the Pink Panther*—films that, while produced in Britain, had a largely American following. These films' portrayals of Anglos interacting with Asians allowed the Anglo American to view himself as the dominant hero figure while confirming the substrata, heteroglot function of other groups. The Asian representations either substantiated the Anglo hero myth, or defied it, but either way the heteroglot's divergence reconfirmed the myth. The subtle message of a monologic culture's dominance in *Dr. No* and *The Return of the Pink Panther* provides two implications about Western films in the 1960s and 1970s: 1) the monologic subject's use of race in film merely reifies the monologic's dominance and the heteroglot's inferiority, and 2) this reification works because such portrayals contribute to an already-formed arsenal of ideas the monologic culture retains about the heteroglot cultures.

The first implication concerning Asian representations in Western films suggests that the mere portrayal of the other serves to reaffirm the Anglo monologic dominance as well as the other's heteroglot inferiority. The monologic, instead of portraying the other just for the sake of portraying the

other, depict themselves in terms of the other. Toni Morrison, in talking about literature, writes, “What became transparent were the self-evident ways that Americans chose to talk about themselves through and within a sometimes allegorical, sometimes metaphorical, but always choked representation of an Africanist presence” (Gormley 183). The Asian representations in *Dr. No* and *The Return of the Pink Panther* actualize this statement and show the reflexive nature of race in film.

First, Cato’s role as the stereotyped toady in *The Return of the Pink Panther* has a double function for American audiences: 1) to elevate an Anglo hero while 2) denigrating an Asian Other. Of course, one could argue that Clouseau’s own deficiencies offset these functions and actually portray Cato as smarter than Clouseau. But this fails to acknowledge that Cato is worse off as one who over-achieves to serve the fool. According to Frantz Fanon, Cato’s obsequious behavior substantiates the monologic culture and backfires as far as placing him on an equal scale to Clouseau. Fanon states, “The intellectual [other] takes refuge in setting out and substantiating the claims of that culture in a way that is passionate but rapidly becomes unproductive” (Fanon 1587). Even though Cato and Clouseau’s relationship brings them together, it ultimately works to further the schism between Anglo and Asian. The same would occur if Cato served more credible or respected Anglos. His status, in the eyes of American viewers, would only correspond parallel to his “superior” Anglo master, with Cato always placed below the one he serves or works for. He is always separate, and his service compounds this separation.

The Anglo hero’s elevated status works the same way in *Dr. No*. Both Bond and Dr. No demonstrate similar qualities that appeal to the American ideals of individualism. Both are intelligent, ambitious, and have a certain disregard for rules. Thus, both are possible models for the Anglo hero. The difference comes in their moral fiber. Bond’s sense of right and wrong aligns with an American audience’s preference for humanitarian ethics over individual power. Dr. No’s desire for power depicts a being that is (though potentially great) ultimately perverse. This portrayal presents the impossibility that an Asian other can achieve sameness with the Anglo hero—a perception that forms a base for racism. Dr. No is the Fu Manchu villain, a representation that mirrors older stereotypes. These collected stereotypes provide an arsenal for the Americans’ assumptions about the Asian Other. Shohat discusses the function of stereotypes and states, “The analysis of repeated, ultimately pernicious constellations of character traits, has made an indispensable contribution by…signaling the social functionality of stereotypes, demonstrating that they are not an error of perception but rather a form of social control” (198). Whether or not Dr. No’s stereotype is inadvertently negative, his character functions just as Cato’s—to reinforce the American monologic image of the Anglo hero and its “substandard”

counterpart found in the other. This reinforcement, often understood as simply providing mere entertainment, acts as a “form of social control” that maintains the monologic’s ideologies.

Yet these forms of social controls weren’t simply accepted as the only possible representations of Asians. Between the release dates of *Dr. No* and *The Return of the Pink Panther*, two films appear to counter these reaffirmations of stereotypes: another James Bond film, *You Only Live Twice* (1967), and Bruce Lee’s *Enter the Dragon* (1973). Both give honorable representations of Asians characters and Asian ideologies. But not only were the representations honorable, the films were popular, with *Enter the Dragon* creating an increased American curiosity in Chinese martial arts films. The popularity of these films coincided with the popularity of *Dr. No* and *The Return of the Pink Panther*, and so it’s reasonable to argue that stereotypes such as the toady or the villain were made moot by such counterbalancing representations. However, in light of the U.S. Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, these recently emerging positive representations had to battle the arsenal of American preconceptions of the Asian toady or villain—an arsenal that began even before the 1913 publication of *The Insidious Dr. Fu Manchu*, which became a status marker for the stereotype. Thus, even though *Enter the Dragon* and *You Only Live Twice* are strong counter-weights to the negative Asian stereotypes, they are merely a beginning that can’t topple decades of racial stereotyping.

If, then, *Dr. No* and *The Return of the Pink Panther* are truly as subversive as suggested, their genres must be accounted for. Perhaps these connections between lighthearted film and the grave implications of upholding racial sovereignty are too far of a stretch, but it is the not-so-serious film that is most potent. The Anglo hero myth reaffirms itself because while the audience escapes reality, they simultaneously process the images and words of the film under an already-formed arsenal of ideas concerning the Asian other. This process of reaffirmation is subtle. An audience voluntarily entering the theater with the intent to escape turns their thoughts over to the film being viewed. George Duhamel identifies this as problematic and states, “Instead of changing the way the world is though, the cinematic image prevented the individual’s agency to think at all: ‘I can no longer think what I want to think. My thoughts have been replaced by moving images’” (Gormley 16). The audience’s preconceived assumptions then align with the film’s depictions. Thus, if an audience presupposes their monologic dominance over another culture before they view the film, any cinematic portrayal of the other that does *not* challenge this presupposition will only further those assumptions.

The Return of the Pink Panther is a comedy, and one large concern for our discussion on race portrayals is Clouseau’s blatant racial references to Cato, which don’t seem subtle at all. He frequently calls Cato his “little yellow friend.”

But because of Clouseau's ridiculousness, audiences can easily negate his behavior. Beyond Clouseau's eccentricities, audiences watching *The Return of the Pink Panther* do so with the assumptions that correspond with comedy. This makes the subversive nature of comedy all the more potent, for that which could or should be taken seriously is not. In the case of Cato and Clouseau, the audience laughs when Clouseau calls Cato his "little yellow friend," not realizing the subtlety behind the message that the monologic Anglo hero will always be superior to any others. The passive audience accepts the message they have already bought into and uses it to reaffirm their identities and the identities of others.

The action genre is also escapist, and so *Dr. No* works for audiences in a fashion similar to comedy. James Bond's license to kill and excessive freedom with women surpasses approved Anglo cultural norms, but it becomes acceptable as his skills compensate for his aberrant behavior. So again, the film instructs audiences not to take it seriously, which opens the door for furthering cultural ideologies. Paul Gormley quotes Walter Benjamin concerning this passivity and thought processing by stating, "Cinema as mass art makes 'the critical and receptive attitudes of the public coincide' by provoking thought within the state of distraction audiences were supposed to have experienced" (17). This turns *Dr. No* and *The Return of the Pink Panther* from innocent escapist films into ones that project racial propaganda, and in such a subtle way that makes it more acceptable (and more dangerous) in promoting dominant racial ideologies.

Both *Dr. No* and *The Return of the Pink Panther*, under the guise of innocent entertainment, undermine U.S. government attempts to ease racial tension through improving immigration laws. This is a subtle violence, but violence nonetheless. In Richard Whitehall's review of *Dr. No*, he states that *Dr. No* is "the perfect film for a sado-masochist society" (Whitehall 66). This is an extreme statement, but one that challenges our perceptions of films like *Dr. No* and *The Return of the Pink Panther* as mere entertainments. In a sense, they are "sado-masochist." Both films inflict pain on the other by reinforcing false stereotypes. The films also inflict pain on the monologic audiences they are directed at by promoting false hierarchical identities. The monologic and heteroglot are binaries that require some antagonism to define each. Perhaps the problem emerges when facing the Other through the monologic lens, which includes both a sense of narcissism and fear, and which creates false realities of the Self and the Other. Thus, what are audiences to do to avoid hurting others and themselves? Is it possible to maintain a monologic culture? Or desirable? Levinas has an idealist answer, which Andrius Valevicius describes:

Levinas wants to move towards the Other, but in such a way that this movement towards the Other would not end up in a return to identity, would not end up at its point of departure. It would be a movement of the Self towards the Other which would never return to the Self...It entails a radical generosity on behalf of the Self, who moves toward the Other...even to the point where in addition to my services it is I who suffer the losses. (Valevicius 41-42)

This suggestion works only when the Self loses fear, or is willing to leave fear of the other behind. Otherwise, the perpetual violence of the monologic on the heteroglot, and vice versa, will continue.

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Profit and Prophecy: the Popular Reception of (Un)truth in the Science Fiction of H.G. Wells

by Jason Douglas

The “plastic, remouldable, socially constructed body” that Terry Eagleton describes does not and has not existed, as Eagleton suggests, independent of the body as a “piece of matter” (Eagleton 186). Body obsession as the intersection of the self and the corporeal form is expressed in the emergence of the body as “a wildly popular topic” (186) in surgical procedures, popular culture, and cultural studies. Research into cosmetic surgery escalates with continued profitability. Television, film, and news media frequently treat the potential benefits and complications of body shaping. Critical theory attempts to grapple with the effect that body image has on issues such as self-perception, self-worth, and gender-identity. The socially constructed body is not merely physical appearance and its reception, but the manifestation of the desire to reconcile social perceptions with the self—or the desired self—through the plasticity of the body. The degree of accuracy and insightfulness in Eagleton’s work on this issue is debatable, but actually comes rather late to the discussion. Almost overlooked in criticism and effectively rejected by popular culture is the exploration of the link between the socially constructed body and the material body set down in H.G. Wells’s increasingly relevant *The Island of Doctor Moreau*. Although the novel is interesting in its own right, the way that its potential contributions have and have not been incorporated into the subsequent discussion of such issues is equally as fascinating. *Moreau* provides an example of a text which has largely failed to establish a permanent place in the popular media, despite the fact that it deals with issues which are an important part of that media.

Moreau was not well received upon publication and has not met with great success in its subsequent, cinematic incarnations. This alone would make the

text little more than a novelty as an overlooked contribution to a cultural discussion were it not for two considerations:

- 1) *Moreau* predates the actuality of advanced, surgical procedures as a cultural force by several decades.
- 2) And secondly, despite a potentially greater degree of prescient vision, *The Island of Doctor Moreau* hasn't experienced anywhere near as much success as some of Wells's other novels which have been embedded into pop culture through television and film.

This suggests the possibility of a pattern in which science fiction texts that remain firmly in the realm of fiction are more favorably received in the critical and commercial arenas. Establishing the actuality of such a pattern with any degree of certainty would require an extended consideration involving a large number of texts. An exhaustive consideration is beyond the limitations of the current conversation and is not necessary for a preliminary exploration, such as this, which can profitably serve to identify the elements that may shape such a pattern.

The principal components in searching for this type of pattern are examples of both a prophetic, unsuccessful work and a popular, fantastical work. As already suggested, *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, in both novel and filmic forms, serves as a text that displays a degree of prophetic accuracy and, despite several opportunities, has not been favorably received in critical or popular opinion. In contrast, Wells's story, *The War of the Worlds*, is more directly colored by the fantastic and has a consistent history of success. These two stories serve as opposites in terms of profit and prophecy, highlighting the potential disparity between the predictive accuracy of science fiction texts and their ability to garner cultural support.

Inherent in any attempt to distinguish works by some gauge of accuracy or adherence to reality are all the dangers associated with the terms 'real' and 'reality.' Language and film have long been haunted by questions of authenticity. Representations are, by definition, not the original. This necessitates careful qualifications in suggesting similarities between any work of science fiction and the events and circumstances of the world in which we live. *The Island of Doctor Moreau* and *The War of the Worlds* are clearly works of fiction. Contrary to the record of Doctor Moreau's research, animals cannot be converted into articulate, human beings through surgical means. Similarly, any reports of a massive, Martian invasion have been greatly exaggerated.

From the beginning, the obviously fictional nature of these stories would seem to belie any sense of prophecy. But, this is according to an event based approach. The commonality of telling science fiction stories in a future time period creates a natural tendency to carry out an analysis according to the event centered chronology of traditional historical models. Certain technological

developments or world events become the focus. However, this is problematic, specifically for Wells's work. He did not set these stories in the future. His use of a setting contemporary to his own precludes an approach strictly based on historical prediction.

The prophetic nature of Wells's work cannot be looked for in the outbreak of hostilities or in the development of any specific, surgical technique. At this point, the logic of binary opposites, suggest that, if factual, chronological data cannot be trusted, i.e. if the story cannot be taken at face value, then meaning should operate on a symbolic or metaphorical level. However, there is very little need for another reading of Martian invasions as anxieties of imperialism, or "Stark Trek" as symbolic exploration of the Cold War, or Tolkien as metaphor for industrialization, or anything of the kind. The fact that fiction is not really true and can be read as symbol, metaphor, or analogy is important, but extremely un-insightful.

The difficulty of reading science fiction straight or simply as symbolic identifies a point of identity crisis that has existed within science fiction from the beginning. Resolving, or at least coping, with this difficulty is not only important, but necessary to identify what qualifications need to be made in defining how science fiction can operate prophetically. Science fiction writers have continually displayed a contradictory desire to be considered serious artists by those "who have the power to do canon-formation" (Daughtrey 236) and yet remain outside the realm of literary academics and the bounds of reality. This has led to a kind of schizophrenia in which characters can be "too real" and "believing in them" (Cowper 79) is a bad thing, while at the same time, texts like *The Science of Science Fiction*, perform a careful and extended analysis to judge the actual and theoretical possibilities of the scientific explanations found in science fiction texts. The result is that science fiction attempts to appeal to principals of logic in its "science" component and seeks protection from its inaccuracies and symbolic devices in its "fiction," component, but ultimately suffers from all the same questions of authenticity and meaning as any other genre of writing or form of art. Wells himself may be less susceptible to this line of questioning in his original context because science fiction, as a genre, had not yet distinguished itself from the rest of the literary realm with degree the perceived degree of separation we can see today. However, Wells's works have gone on to operate within this notion of science fiction as a different kind of text.

Judith Merrill, in her 1966 exploration of the nature of science fiction, identifies the element of art which can facilitate escape from problems of accuracy and authenticity. "Art at any time can achieve validity if it is rooted in the accumulated human experience of its day, and touches somewhere on the nerve center of the culture from which it springs" (Merril 55). The necessity of

culture relevance has long been obvious in the realm of literature, but avoided as justification for science fiction texts. In an attempt to preserve an identity separate from literature, science fiction has fallen prey to its own form of literary snobbery and denied its cultural relevance on anything more than a symbolic level. In reality, the prophetic potential of science fiction is found “only in so far as it perceives, and relates itself to, the central reality of our culture” (Merril 55).

Digressions into the nature of science fiction aside, the actuality of scientific claims or chronological predictions are secondary to the cultural relevance of the ideas associated with the science. Borrowing from Žižekian language, we can say science fiction presents a “mechanism offering us a key to the theoretical understanding of [cultural] phenomena which, at first sight, have nothing whatsoever to do with the” science (Žižek 16). As a mechanism, it offers the chance to move away from the minutia of factual accuracy and consider the overall form presented within the fiction. Thus, a closer textual reading should be eschewed in favor of a moderate distance which will allow the identification of cultural forms and patterns.

The specific ethical and moral infractions committed by Doctor Moreau, as well as the impossibility of surgically transforming one form of animal life into another, can be reduced to a single pattern: Moreau attempts to fundamentally alter the nature and identity of a living organism through surgical means. The obvious element of “biological tinkering” (del Rey 337) in the story are almost universally, and mistakenly, interpreted only as “post-Darwinian” and “evolutionary” (McConnell 89) themes. While there is no denying the that Wells’s scientific training included Darwinian ideas, which would certainly influence his thinking, the general pattern of the story—or the specific details for that matter—do not easily lend themselves to an evolutionary reading. There is very little dealing with adaptation or survival of the fittest. Instead, Wells seems have tapped into the idea of the relationship between identity and physical form presented at the beginning of this discussion. The ability of surgical, body manipulation to bring about changes in behavior and the self are presented with qualifications that suggest limitations and a mutually influencing relationship. The most obvious signs of a current and growing preoccupation with body shaping techniques can be found in television shows such as *Nip Tuck*, *The Swan*, and *Dr. 90210*. These programs avoid delving into the important questions of body shaping by focusing their treatment on either immediate outcome or on the surgeons. Thus, while *Dr. 90210* may have the faintest echo of *Moreau* in its use of graphic, the very concept of dealing with surgery on an immediately “before” and “after” basis assumes that the end results and long term effects are already know. These shows demonstrate how the mainstreaming of cosmetic, surgical procedures is pressing forward with

little regard for potential social and emotional implications. These are the same questions and objections that are raised in a variety of current debates over what can and should be done in altering physical appearance.

A similar approach to *The War of the Worlds* reveals cultural concerns which are far more generalized and consistent with critical response. The plot based elements, of significance, deal with invasion. Along with invasion comes a host of associated issues such as the horrors and impersonality of war. However, the fact that the invaders are aliens is used as a device to impart impersonality and horror. This serves as a convenient gloss that avoids dealings with man's inhumanity to man. Consequently, any prophetic elements must first pass through a layer of symbolic abstraction, problematizing any application to later cultural issues.

But treating *The War of the Worlds* as merely an invasion film would be unfair. Nearly every version of the story, true to the original text, dedicates a major portion of its efforts towards the portrayal of how people, individual and en masse, respond to the invasion. The various faces of panic, fear, heroism, cowardice, and the range of human stress responses, strike more clearly at a culturally relevant issue. However, these issues are perennially relevant to the human condition, which preempts any real notion of prophecy.

While it requires careful qualifications to consider any kind of predictive accuracy, comparing the popular success of these stories is relatively simple. The reception of *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, upon its initial publication, was met with "nearly unanimous . . . distaste" (McConnell 89) and has persisted as "probably the least widely read and taught" (McConnell 89) of Wells's science fiction stories. Of the three major films, the 1933 production, entitled *The Island of Lost Souls* is probably the most successful. It is viewed with at least mild favorability, but has never received the kind of praise that the classics of American Horror Fiction have experienced. From the same year, *King Kong* and Wells's own *The Invisible Man* have received much more initial and enduring attention. Not to mention other classics of the genre and era like *Dracula* and *Frankenstein*. The 1977 film, now bearing the original title, has disappeared in the wake of movies like *Star Wars* and *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. Val Kilmer and Marlin Brando have managed to garner a limited, cult following for the 1996 film, but the critics have generally scorned the film. The box office results portray a similar pattern. The obvious borrowing of Wellsian material for the blockbuster film, *Independence Day*, grossed more than ten times *Moreau's* twenty-seven million. Even a spoof film like *Mars Attacks!*—strangely, another possible rendition of *The War of the Worlds*—managed to outsell *Moreau* by several million.

Besides the films loosely based on *The War of the Worlds* already mentioned, the credited radio and film adaptations have enjoyed an amazing

degree of success. Although much of the response to Orson Welles's 1938 radio program has been exaggerated, there is no doubt that the broadcast has become a classic in radio history. The 1953 film was not only wildly popular, but is consistently considered one of the top twenty science fiction classics of all time. Steven Spielberg's recent presentation of the story has experienced a significant degree of criticism, but in the end is usually given an overall positive response, reflected by its current place at the tail end of the top fifty grossing movies of all time.

The disparity is obvious, but the reasons are a bit harder to pin down. Many of *Moreau's* detractors have objected because of a "distaste for its violence" (McConnell 89), but Moreau's vivisection of living animals is hardly more gruesome than the description of Martians extracting blood from human victims and injecting it into their own system. The only other, major difference between the stories and the subsequent adaptations that is commonly found in the secondary literature is identification of *War of the Worlds* as a work of realism and *Moreau* as an allegory or fable. Yet, from a literary standpoint, *Moreau* can be read with quite a number of characteristics of realism.

This continuity of perceived realism seems to be at odds with the spectrum of prophetic potential. But perhaps it is this confusion of reality and fantasy that explains the disconnect between profit and prophecy. The realism of *The War of the Worlds*, which is centered in the portrayal of the human response to emergency and disaster, is tied directly to the relevant cultural issues. The unifying of realism and culture allows the compartmentalization of the story's fantastical elements. Thus, the Martian invasion, atomic retaliation, or massive lightning strikes can be freely inserted without altering the core appeal of the story.

On the other hand, *Moreau* faces other challenges. The culturally relevant idea of body plasticity is closely tied to the fictional science of the story. Thus, the addition of sexual tension, disease eradication, and genetic engineering fundamentally alter the cultural appeal of the film versions. Perhaps even more important is the fact that the fictional elements are themselves allied so closely to the potential meaning of the story. The prophetic work of science fiction asks us to deal with that which *may* be true and that which we know to be false, in the same breath. The factuality of the science cannot be easily separated from potentially symbolic or metaphorical elements. Dealing with this inescapable melding of fact and fiction makes *The Island of Doctor Moreau* a more difficult story that cannot supply a full sense of unified resolution, despite the prophetic insights it provides. *The War of the Worlds*, which in its own words, is a scene of "profit and panic" (Wells 318) delivers a story that requires less work on the part of the reader/viewer and provides less ambiguous resolution, which appears to be a virtual necessities in securing a profitable reception. The inherent

contradiction in extracting truth from fiction should signal the necessity of flexibility and multiplicity in trying to determine meaning. Unfortunately, such difficulty and uncertainty also signals a lesser potential for popular success.

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Submissions & Style Sheet

Author Guidelines

The editors of the *Velox* invite contributions from scholars of all disciplines. *Velox* is comprised of two major sections: "Now Playing" and "Take 2." Articles in the "Now Playing" section should critically approach a film that is either currently in theaters or has been recently released on DVD. Most submissions should be 800-1400 words (approx. 3-4 pages); however, longer article-length submissions (up to 25 pages) are also acceptable for this section of the journal. Articles in the "Take 2" section encompass films that have completed the standard release cycle and have been overlooked or need to be reevaluated. Authors may submit short articles (approx. 3-4 pages); however, longer article-length submissions (up to 25 pages) are also acceptable.

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