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Sydney Studies in English 36

Special Edition:
The Texts of Contemporary English Studies

This volume of *Sydney Studies in English* is concerned with the changing nature of the text for the study of English. It was not that long ago that, even in the midst of debates about canons, canon formations and 'the great tradition', the object of English study remained unquestioned: it was that reassuringly familiar thing beside you on the desk—a book. However, just as the limits of the orthodox canon were expanded and largely obliterated over the last 30 years, so too the forms of the object of analytical interest for English Studies underwent a significant change—a change that is reflected in the following essays. Here, distinguished Shakespearean scholar Penny Gay turns her attention to the bard as filtered through the forms and styles of the pre-War Hollywood musical; Ben Juers explores the Modernist and Surrealist underpinnings of slapstick in George Herriman's mid-century comic strip *Krazy Kat*; Julian Murphet considers the novelistic dimensions of David Simon's award-winning television series *The Wire*; Luke Harley engages with poetry rendered in a language that not only aspires to the condition of music, but requires a cultural and aesthetic sense of that music for its full poetic character to be realised; Rebecca Johinke analyses Peter Weir's early *The Cars That Ate Paris* in the context of the Australian Gothic and conceptions of the uncanny; Peter Kirpatrick considers the aesthetics and cultural role of the retrieved historical form of the recitation piece and popular ballad; Mark Byron takes up the problematic issue of what actually constitutes a definitive literary text in the digital age; and I consider narrative and narrational aspects of the popular western film in John Ford's epic *The Searchers.*

The essays in this volume offer theoretically informed but practical demonstrations of ways in which English Studies might engage with textual forms that challenge traditional conceptions of the discipline. Together, these essays represent an affirmation of the idea that the view from English Studies provides its own particular insights on a variety of textual forms at a time when the object of English study, in every sense of the term, remains as contentious as ever.

David Kelly

‘A Romantic Musical Comedy’ for the Fin-de-Siecle: Branagh’s *Love’s Labour’s Lost*

PENNY GAY

Kenneth Branagh’s fourth Shakespeare film, *Love’s Labour’s Lost*, was released in 2000. It did not receive good reviews on the whole, with many film critics, keen to show off their high-cultural credibility, complaining about the heavy cuts to the Shakespearean text and/or the amateurishness of the film’s use of 1930s Hollywood genres, in particular the song-and-dance routine as an intrinsic part of the narrative. Given that a Shakespeare play of 3000+ lines takes over three hours to perform, the complaint about cuts seems to be based in irrational purism; I discuss below the history of shortened and rewritten Shakespearean drama in the theatre. The issue of cinematic style is one that academic literary critics have taken up, as they continue to chart and analyse the modern history of Shakespeare on celluloid. This essay will argue that Branagh’s film can be usefully read through the prism of postmodernist aesthetic theory—in particular, ideas of pastiche or parody and belatedness, and a particular energy that can arise from the work of actors in this mode. That is, I will suggest that Branagh operates with a knowingness about the genre of cinema, particularly that of romantic comedy and musicals, that is the very opposite of simplistically nostalgic—and that assumes both actors and audience are willing to take an aesthetic journey that is unconventional by modern standards.[1]

[1] By way of comparison, two other films that operate with a similar aesthetic assumption and had similarly ambivalent critical receptions are Woody Allen’s *Everyone Says I Love You* (1996), and Baz Luhrmann’s *Moulin Rouge!* (2001). Linda Hutcheon remarks on ‘the reductive [critical] belief that any recall of the past must, by definition, be sentimental nostalgia or antiquarianism’ (*A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (New York and London: Routledge, 1988) p. 19), which is characteristic of the dominant Jamesonian school of thought

Linda Hutcheon, in her influential *A Poetics of Postmodernism*,[2] argues that postmodernism in its various aesthetic manifestations counters the conservatism of grand narratives (including ideas about art's function): it 'suggests no search for transcendent timeless meaning, but rather a re-evaluation of and a dialogue with the past in the light of the present' (19). 'Parody', according to Hutcheon, is not ridicule but 'repetition with critical distance that allows ironic signalling of difference at the very heart of similarity. (26) … The past as referent is not bracketed or effaced, as [Frederic] Jameson would like to believe: it is incorporated and modified, given new and different life and meaning' (24). Essentially, in an argument that I would like to offer in this essay, postmodernist art is egalitarian, privileging neither the past nor the present, but honouring the work of artists who put their energy into

> a new model for mapping the borderland between art and the world, a model that works from a position within both and yet not totally within either, a model that is profoundly implicated in, yet still capable of criticizing, that which it seeks to describe (19).

One or two film critics seem to have instinctively understood Branagh's project in these terms:

> The most fascinating thing about the movie is its combination of styles… *Love's Labour's Lost* is unabashedly old-fashioned, and it's going to lose points with some for not advancing the art of cinema. But I believe that it earns points for bringing back styles that many filmmakers seem to have forgotten ever existed.[3]
>
> The overall effect is knowing and joyful at the same time, aided by perfs [sic] from the whole cast that are free of pretentiousness and have a superior stock-company glee.[4]

about postmodernist artworks. Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Verso, 1991).

[2] Hutcheon, ibid.

[3] Review, Jeffery M. Anderson, combustiblecelluloid.com, May 2000.

[4] Review, Derek Elley, *Variety*, 15 February 2000.

Much of the film, with its song-and-dance routines to the music of Gershwin, Berlin, Kern, and Porter, is a homage to the 1930s films featuring the superb dancing duo Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers. Branagh also drew on the Marx Brothers and other 1930s film comics for a style of pacy dialogue and farcical physicality, particularly for the play's lower-class 'clowns'. Jeffery M. Anderson, who clearly knows his film history, points out that

> Branagh also takes into account the dreamlike facades and brilliant Technicolor usage of filmmakers like Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger (*The Red Shoes*), Vincente Minnelli (*Meet Me in St. Louis*), and Stanley Donen and Gene Kelly (*Singin' in the Rain*).[5]

This is an informed aesthetic judgement, and it serves as a compliment to Branagh, making, as it does, comparisons with the greatest of the 1930s-50s Hollywood directors of romantic fantasy musicals. The influence of Stanley Donen and Gene Kelly's own homage to pre-war musicals in the 1952 film *Singin' in the Rain* is a good example of Branagh's conscious entry into a metacinematic style, since that film's comic plot turns on the coming of the 'talkies' in the late twenties, yet Kelly is a 'post-Astaire' dancer. In Branagh's film the dances for the men often reflect choreographer Stuart Hopps's admiration for the more overtly sexy style of Gene Kelly. Branagh's deliberate use of studio sets—only four for most of the film: library, quadrangle, riverside and garden—also clearly evokes the work of these film-makers. Realism, or some notion of historical accuracy, is far from his aim.

However, Branagh is seen as the maker (and star) of such popular and relatively straightforward period-set Shakespeare films as *Henry V*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, and *Hamlet*. But the general public did not flock to see a Shakespeare play that many had never heard of (and that also sounded somewhat eccentric), so the DVD of *Love's Labour's Lost* languishes on the art-house shelves. Nonetheless, after ten years it may be time to reconsider Branagh's film and the work it does towards his oft-stated aim of making Shakespeare's plays available to general audiences.

Branagh cut approximately 75% of Shakespeare's notoriously wordy text, and substituted ten song-and-dance routines replicating the style of the

[5] Anderson, Review, combustiblecelluloid.com.

early golden age of Hollywood. These artistic choices are, in fact, consistent with the tradition of reinventing Shakespeare to suit the age (and its technology) that has obtained since the re-opening of the English theatres in the 1660s. Nahum Tate's famous preface to his re-written *King Lear* (1681) speaks of the play as 'a Heap of Jewels, unstrung and unpolisht', which it was his task to 'make fit'. Shakespeare's comedies, in particular, were rewritten sometimes to the point of unrecognisability, though *Love's Labour's Lost* had little currency either in its original form or cannibalised for 'new' comedies. Swingeing cuts to the text of plays were standard, along with rewrites to language considered 'barbarous'. Perhaps most strikingly, songs were added in profusion—some stolen from other plays, some newly-written for the play, some just insertions of contemporary popular pieces. The fact that every theatre after about 1720 had a resident band meant that music featured largely in every production, as interludes, underlay, solos, or big chorus numbers. If we ignore the twentieth century's drive towards textual purism[6] both on stage and in the study, it is clear that in 'musicalising' the play, Branagh is doing nothing new or radical in his film, but rather reviving a tradition of popular Shakespeare that uses the most up-to-date entertainment media.

Branagh is an experienced film-maker, not only of Shakespeare adaptations, and his interest in the possibilities (and history) of the medium is well attested by his earlier work (*Dead Again*, 1991, *A Midwinter's Tale*, 1995). He is also a highly accomplished stage actor, whose craft effortlessly covers the spectrum from tragedy to comedy. He knows how *Love's Labour's Lost* should work, having performed in several stage productions of it. What then are the specific characteristics and demands of Shakespearean comedy that must be translated into cinematic terms, whatever visual style is used?[7] (We know what generally doesn't work: the

[6] Russell Jackson, the film's academic consultant, comments: 'If we insist on making Shakespeare films with the mainstream, popular cinema, and hope that a wide general audience will enjoy and approve of them, compromises are necessary that effectively ignore the more sophisticated interpretations of the works themselves, or that some will see as leading to reactionary and unadventurous movies… [J]ournalists … invoke a kind of 'purist,' a guardian of the sacred text, hardly to be found in modern academia. 'Filming Shakespeare's Comedies: Reflections on *Love's Labour's Lost*' in *Shakespearean Performance: New Studies*, ed. Frank Occhiogrosso (Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2008), p. 63.

[7] For a more detailed discussion of the characteristics of Shakespearean comedy, see my *The Cambridge Introduction to Shakespeare's Comedies* (Cambridge University Press, 2008), ch. 1.

dreary full-text 'historically costumed' performances of the BBC /Time-Life *Complete Shakespeare* of the 1980s.)

There is a tradition of comedy writing in English, stretching back to just before Shakespeare, that is largely dependent on witty wordplay, generally in quick banter between two speakers. Sexual innuendo is often to the fore, as well as an almost dadaist enjoyment of the absurdity of language in sound and sense. Shakespeare brought this form to its first real flowering, in comedies such as *As You Like It* and *Much Ado about Nothing* (both plays also made into films by Branagh). Clowns—either professional jesters or lower-class 'bumpkins'—take a similar pleasure in words, and share a facility for banter, as well as, of course, the ancient traditions of physical comedy. As for the play's plot, it is generally optimistic: with this light-hearted attitude to life, things will turn out all right, however dark they may occasionally appear. The chief male and female wits will eventually admit their attraction to each other, and weddings will be foreshadowed in the final scene. This is a genre of drama that allows an extraordinary freedom for women's speech and action: a recognition of female intelligence, sexual drive, and desire for equality within conventional society. After Shakespeare this model was imitated successfully by writers of the Restoration and the eighteenth century, by Gilbert and Sullivan and Oscar Wilde in the late nineteenth century, and by George Bernard Shaw, Noel Coward and others in the twentieth century. Arguably the witty banter of the Astaire and Rogers films of the 1930s, or the Katharine Hepburn and Cary Grant films of the same period,[8] is consciously part of this tradition. Branagh has no need to apologise for his instinct that *Love's Labour's Lost* would work using the stylised conventions of such films.

Frequently, song and dance will feature in such plays and films as moments that encapsulate complex issues of courtship and love. From Shakespeare onwards, a formal dance has functioned as a sign of sexual attraction and potential partnering (Shakespeare often uses the joke of a masked dance to deliciously confuse early flirtations). Songs, when not a pensive soliloquy, will often be dance-like, perhaps almost nonsensical in their joyous combination of words and music (compare 'Singin' in the Rain' with any 'Hey nonny nonny' from Shakespeare, for example 'It was a lover and his lass' from *As You Like It*). That is, in comedies song and

[8] E.g. *The Philadelphia Story*, *The Awful Truth*, *Bringing Up Baby*. See Stanley Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* (Harvard University Press, 1981). These films are also known as 'screwball comedies'.

dance do a lot of work that might otherwise need to be done by talking, whether in dialogue or soliloquy; dramaturgically, they change the pace and refresh the audience's attention.

In casting the film, Branagh has stressed that he was looking for 'actors who could sing', rather than 'singers who can act.'[9] The language of Shakespeare was to be spoken naturalistically,[10] and the songs were to be 'imbued with the characters' singing them. In the short, intense rehearsal period he set up a 'musical comedy boot camp': each actor had singing lessons, and there were daily dance rehearsals right through the shoot. The results are creditable to all concerned; they echo, incidentally, Hollywood studio practice from the 1930s to the 1950s (think of Marilyn Monroe's performances in *Some Like it Hot* or *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*). Each actor's different basic talents are exploited to the full—Adrian Lester's dance abilities give him an Astaire-like solo, Natascha McElhone's smooth and stylish mezzo-soprano brings class to the verses of several songs. What we can infer from the details of this process is that this is a film with high artistic aims that demanded massive commitment and hard work from its cast and crew. Criticisms—and there are many among both academic and popular critics—that the singing and dancing are incompetent , constitute an insult to the professionalism of all concerned, and are based, I suspect, in an unthinking snobbery that privileges the original over its postmodern reappropriation. These actors-singers-dancers give highly competent and indeed charming performances in *their own* late twentieth-century styles.

Within a stylistic frame, then, that marries the aesthetically unfamiliar and historically distant with contemporary performance, Branagh re-tells an old story—the romantic comedy. The plot, that is, has its own generic consistency, and the director's job is to ensure that its rhythm and drive proceed seamlessly. However, in *Love's Labour's Lost* Shakespeare

[9] 'Kenneth Branagh: *Love's Labour's Lost*—An Interview by Jeffrey M. Anderson' combustiblecelluloid.com, 2000, provides an illuminating account of Branagh's process in making the film.

[10] Branagh's naturalistic style in speaking Shakespeare is well characterised by Geoffrey O'Brien: 'a more pointed, even jabbing style, a tendency to deflate sonority in favour of exact meaning, while at the same time giving the meter of the verse a musician's respect.' Samuel Crowl, 'Flamboyant realist: Kenneth Branagh', in *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare on Film*, Russell Jackson, ed., 2nd edn, 2007, pp. 226-242 (p. 232), quoting O'Brien in *New York Review of Books*, 6 February 1997.

undermined audience expectations of the genre by refusing to allow his lovers to agree to marry at the end of the play: their courtship is interrupted by the arrival of a messenger with news of the King of France's death. As Berowne says, 'This doth not end like an old play: / Jack hath not Jill …' (Act 5, sc. 2, 842-3). This generic disruption is a gift to the postmodernist director: it gives Branagh, as it were, permission to make his own stylistic interruptions to the text—of which one is the song-and-dance routines, and the other is the half-jokey, half-desperate 'newsreels' that serve the dual function of summarising chunks of the plot and warning us that the Second World War is about to begin, and that the dance-floor will give way to the battlefield.

In pursuing an analysis of what the song-and-dance and newsreel sequences bring to the film, it is worth first of all considering the evidence offered by the scenes which were filmed, then deleted from the final cut. They are usefully included on the DVD, and Branagh's Director's Commentary[11] stresses that he loved these scenes and the work done by the actors in them, but he recognised that they compromised the rhythm of the twenty-first-century film that he was making. The deleted scenes all come from late in the play, where the film has clearly built up its own momentum and is heading towards a dénouement which melds the sixteenth-century play with twentieth-century history—which includes, properly and inevitably, the history of that quintessential twentieth-century form, cinema.

> 1. Act 4, sc. 3, 205-280, with internal cuts.[12] This is the verbose conclusion to the 'library scene', in which Berowne overhears his fellow scholars expatiating on their loves, by reading 'sonnets' they have written to them. In the film these sonnets are replaced by the lines of the Gershwins' song 'I've got a crush on you'; the discussion following Berowne's outing as the fourth of the men in love is clearly unnecessary repetition of material already crystal clear. However, the film's visual joke of the watching stuffed bear (perhaps readable as a symbol of lust—it finally falls over on top of the collapsed men) comes across as unsubtle and unnecessary,

[11] All comments attributed to Branagh which are not otherwise referenced are quotations or summaries from the Director's Commentary on the DVD (Pathé, P8987DVD).

[12] All references to the text of *Love's Labour's Lost* are to the Cambridge Shakespeare edition, William C. Carroll, ed. (Cambridge University Press, 2009).

though stylistically it echoes many moments in 1930s films where self-confident young men are brought low by inanimate objects.

2. Act 5, sc.1, 1-125, with internal cuts. This is the most striking loss to the film as Shakespearean performance. Using all the play's six 'clowns' or comic lower-class characters, the original scene (as written and filmed) constitutes a demonstration of the 'great feast of languages' (as Moth wittily defines it in line 31), that is, the joy of playing with words, particularly the pedantic self-indulgence of parallelisms (eg. 75-6, Holofernes: 'liable, congruent, and measurable … The word is well culled, choice, sweet, and apt'). There follows the discussion of the Pageant of the Nine Worthies that the clowns will put on to honour the Princess that evening. Although the theme of language is not emphasised in the film, Geraldine McEwan's performance, in particular, of Holofernia's lines is an exemplar of how to make even Shakespeare's most obscure verbal jokes work brilliantly. Timothy Spall's absurd Spanish courtier is not far behind her in sheer *joie de mots*. Presumably the major reason for the scene's omission is that the Pageant of the Nine Worthies is finally only glimpsed in the 'newsreel' rather than fully performed (see below, the fifth deleted scene).

3. Act 5, sc. 2, 1-79, with internal cuts, follows in the text immediately on the previously deleted passage. It's a charming scene in which the four girls laugh about the gifts sent to them by their lovers—a scene that might have come straight out of *Sex and the City*. There is a virtuoso 'performance' from Natascha McElhone as Rosaline (winning applause from her friends); some delightfully naturalistic speeches from Alicia Silverstone's Princess—including the thematically central line (unfortunately cut) 'We are wise girls to mock our lovers so' (58); and a somewhat confusing, though beautifully played, moment of sadness from Emily Mortimer's Katherine, who remembers the death of her sister from love, 'the boy Cupid' being to blame. This scene develops further the characters and friendship of the girls, and its omission leaves the film a little poorer. The remainder of the scene, which is filmed in a cut version, does pick up on the mood here created, though losing any reference to Katherine's melancholy.

4. Act 5, sc.2, 157-240, with internal cuts: the 'Muscovite' scene. On film, this is not actually funny, despite Rosaline's ditzy Brooklyn accent and the King's Groucho-esque waggling of his fake eyebrows. It goes on too long, and offers too much of the same joke (this is also often the case when the scene is played on the stage). The replacement discussed below, featuring a raunchy dance in masks and underwear, is a more convincing modern embodiment of sexual teasing and confusion.

5. Act 5, sc. 2, 568-690, with internal cuts, shows the Pageant of the Nine Worthies until it is brought to an abrupt end by the dispute between Pompey and Costard. This classic moment (also to be found in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*), when the clowns perform their version of high classical theatre for the gentry, is deleted in favour of a summary on the newsreel, with glimpses of the performers. Perhaps Branagh considered this scene too 'theatrical', but cutting it entirely means that the audience misses out on the last appearances of the lower-class folk, whose performances create not only laughter but also several moments of poignancy. Costard (Nathan Lane) as Pompey the Great has a touching moment when he admits 'I made a little fault in "Great"' (550), and, smiled at by the Princess, produces a bunch of paper flowers from his sleeve. Richard Briers's Nathaniel is stricken by stagefright; he is 'a little o'erparted', as Costard explains, though he charitably adds that 'he is a marvellous good neighbour, faith, and a very good bowler'. Holofernia, playing Judas Maccabeus in a mask, is cruelly teased by the King's friends, and she rebukes them with dignity: 'This is not generous, not gentle, not humble' (614). Don Armado, as Hector, is subject to the same treatment, and points out, quietly and without bombast, 'The sweet war-man is dead and rotten. Sweet chucks, beat not the bones of the buried. When he breathed, he was a man' (644-5). Like Katherine's memory of her sister's death earlier in the scene, this moment foreshadows the arrival of Marcade with the announcement of the King of France's death—and the subsequent outbreak, in the film, of World War Two.

With these late deletions of over-wordy or stagey scenes the film moves ever more definitely into a familiar genre: that of the mid-twentieth century's romantic dramas about love under the reality of a world at war, with lives disrupted and put on hold. Stage directors putting on Shakespeare's play of *Love's Labour's Lost* have often set it in the shadow

of the First World War, as the long Edwardian afternoon of the privileged classes gives way to the reality of the trenches. Trevor Nunn's production of 2003 (London, National Theatre) showed the whole play as a flashback in the mind of the wounded Berowne. One of the functions of Branagh's 'newsreels' with their somewhat frenetic 'cheeky chappie' voice-over (Branagh himself), is to place the film's narrative very definitely in the period of anxiety and confusion just before World War Two, when one of the tasks of the always upbeat newsreel was to put the best face on things, and offer amusing human interest stories to offset the increasingly disturbing political news. Samuel Crowl points out that 1930s screwball comedy and musicals had a similar function in providing fantasy to a Depression-era world, and that

> [b]y beginning his film on September 1, 1939, as Hitler was rolling into Poland, Branagh provides both a motivation for and critique of the King of Navarre's decision to retreat into his academy… trying to avoid the unavoidable: entanglement with the wider world … Branagh's film complicates the issue by adding war to woman as part of the world's call.[13]

As Branagh remarks, the newsreel's job, although a plot 'shorthand', is to 'underpin the emotional undercurrents of the film' (and indeed of the play, despite its surface 'silliness') with the threat of separation and death. He also provides the information that the newsreels were added very late in the editing process, after several previews revealed that audiences were not clear about how seriously to take the 1930s 'screwball' courtships. Contrast and context are here used cleverly to acknowledge the fin-de-siècle's belatedness—this film made in 1999 *cannot* be viewed with the innocent eyes of those audiences who first watched the 1930s screwball comedies (just as *The Merchant of Venice* can never be produced or studied now without awareness of the Holocaust).

Branagh's other major stylistic intervention was his cutting of so much of the text's witty but often verbose dialogue in favour of song and dance routines from 1920s-30s Hollywood cinema and theatre. The film's songs are by the geniuses of twentieth-century American song, George Gershwin, Irving Berlin, Jerome Kern, Cole Porter. They express a mood, an attitude to love (and life) that sees love as that 'moment' to be grasped,

[13] Samuel Crowl, *Shakespeare at the Cineplex: The Kenneth Branagh Era* (Ohio UP, 2003), p. 43.

with wit, *joie de vivre*, and occasional gentle melancholy (not unlike the songs that occur in Shakespeare's plays, *Twelfth Night* for example: 'Then come kiss me sweet and twenty/Youth's a stuff will not endure'). In the second part of this essay I will examine these unique and strongly characterised additions to Shakespeare's play, asking what work they do in terms of engaging a late-twentieth-century audience with the story and with Branagh's postmodernist interpretation of the genre of 'romantic musical comedy'.[14]

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In his Director's Commentary on the DVD of the film Branagh points out that the first song, when it begins in the library during the men's signing-up to the vow, produced reactions of either shock or delight in test audiences. It is Desmond Carter and George Gershwin's 'I'd rather Charleston',[15] and Branagh gives the song a rationale: in the preceding speech, the King has used the word 'intellects' (1.1.71) in his argument to persuade Berowne to agree to the ascetic restraints. The song's first lines, sung by the King, are:

> I've seen for days that you've got
> Some ways that must be checked.
> In you I never can detect
> The slightest signs of intellect.

[14] This subtitle, as Branagh says in his Director's Commentary, was a deliberate ploy to alert the audience to something different from the standard modern film.

[15] 'I'd Rather Charleston' is from the London show *Lady Be Good* (1926, George Gershwin / Desmond Carter), performed first by Fred and Adele Astaire. The first verse continues:

> [FRED:]
> You're mad on dances, think of the chances you neglect
> You never seem inclined to use your mind
> And it's quite plain to see
> That I'm the brains of the family.
> Take a lesson from me
> [ADELE:]
> I'd rather Charleston …

'It seemed the right kind of song for the King to sing to Berowne,' says Branagh. Berowne's response is a jaunty yet suave dance towards the camera, singing 'I'd rather Charleston'. The other three men immediately join in, demonstrating in the energetic choreography of their dance the pleasure that they have in their youth and fitness, their readiness for life's challenges.

The dance was filmed in one continuous shot, with the camera moving round the room to keep the full-length body of the dancers always in shot; Branagh aspired to do this for almost all the dance numbers as a stylistic homage to the inimitable Astaire and Rogers films. It also works as a demonstration of the modern actors' real skills.

The second dance sequence is to the song (sung by the girls) 'I won't dance', a Jerome Kern-Oscar Hammerstein II number from the Astaire and Rogers film *Roberta* (1935). It takes off, naturally, from the opening dialogue between Berowne and Rosaline: 'Did not I dance with you in Brabant once?' (Act 2, sc.1, 113-4). Rosaline's response to his somewhat puppyish pickup line is to sing 'I won't dance, don't ask me', which all the girls join in. The moment actually anticipates a line from Rosaline much later in the play, spoken to the supposed Muscovites,

> Since you are strangers, and come here by chance,
> We'll not be nice. Take hands. We will not dance.
> (Act 5, sc. 2, 218-9)

The function of these moments is exactly the same: teasingly, the girls, while elegantly flaunting their physical charm and grace, refuse to be seen as easy pushovers for the men who pursue them ineffectually. In particular, to refuse to dance is symbolically to delay (or refuse to recognise) the

courtship mode. These girls are, as they later sing, 'Fancy free'—or would like to be seen so. With delightful irony, Branagh ensures that this is a fully-choreographed sequence for all eight characters—the wooers and the wooed in separate lines, thus confirming for the audience what the previous sequence of close-ups at the meeting of the four couples has already set up: irresistible physical attraction.

A 'cheeky chappie'-commentated newsreel is used to introduce the play's comic characters, with their 'old-fashioned, knockabout slapstick humour', as Branagh characterises it. In the case of Nathan Lane as Costard, Branagh acknowledges this comic genius of contemporary Broadway, who is almost uncannily able to channel pre-War vaudevillians, as well as film clowns—most notably Groucho Marx, including Groucho's characteristic fast New York speech patterns; and Curly from the Three Stooges, whose finger-snapping hand moves were a specialty. Katherine Eggert perceptively comments on Lane's vaudeville persona: 'a Jewish performer himself, he plays Costard as borrowing various shticks from such great ethnic vaudevillians as Groucho Marx (the voice), Milton Berle (the plaid sport coat and the unabashed randiness), and Señor Wences (the Spanish-accented hand puppet)'[16].

[16] Katherine Eggert, 'Sure can sing and dance: Minstrelsy, the star system, and the post-postcoloniality of Kenneth Branagh's *Love's Labour's Lost* and Trevor Nunn's *Twelfth Night'*, in *Shakespeare the Movie II*, Richard Burt and Lynda E. Boose, eds. (Routledge, 2003), p. 82. 'Senor Wences, a popular performer on the Ed Sullivan show from the 1950s onwards, was known for his speed, skill, and grace as a ventriloquist. His stable of characters included Johnny, a childlike face drawn on Wences' hand, which he would place atop an otherwise headless doll and with whom Wences conversed while switching his voices between Johnny's falsetto and his own voice at amazing speed.' (Wikipedia, 'Senor Wences'.) I am unconvinced by the Milton Berle identification—Lane's performance of his 1930s vaudevillian

Among the clowns is the comic Spanish knight, Don Adriano de Armado, the 'braggart' figure from commedia dell'arte and a favourite Shakespearean comic butt. The casual xenophobia both of Shakespeare and of the films of the thirties—Armado looks and sounds different, so he must be a fool—is well countered by Timothy Spall's knowingly over-the-top performance of the Cole Porter classic 'I get a kick out of you', in the various rich-man's fantasy scenarios that the song wittily suggests, along with its underlying pathos.[17] It concludes, as Branagh points out, with a genuinely touching declaration of love from Armado to Jaquenetta.

By this stage the film's genre and plot are clearly established—'a romantic musical comedy based on Shakespeare', and that means, as Branagh explains, 'there comes a natural point at which the next song needs to emerge'. The 'Esther Williams tribute' number, Irving Berlin's

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seems generic rather than specific (see also the comment by Branagh about Lane's clown persona quoted below).

[17] Sung by the character Reno in Porter's *Anything Goes* (1934). Branagh points out that not many people are familiar with the verse before the famous chorus kicks in, but it is entirely appropriate for the displaced and poverty-stricken proud Spaniard:

> My story is much too sad to be told,
> But practically ev'rything leaves me totally cold
> The only exception I know is the case
> When I'm out on a quiet spree
> Fighting vainly the old ennui
> And I suddenly turn and see
> Your fabulous face.
>
> I get no kick from champagne….

'No Strings (I'm fancy free)'[18] performed by the girls (and their doubles in the synchronised swimming sequence) is perhaps not such a natural transition, and in the Director's Commentary Branagh is a little defensive about the song's inclusion. Arguably it has the same rather unsubtle role as those passages in the text's Act 4, sc. 1 where the girls comment on the upper-class pastime of hunting, with all the sexual innuendoes that it has accumulated in Renaissance culture. Branagh's substitution of the girls' 'jolly hockey sticks health and beauty routine' (we also see them practising archery and cricket) is perhaps a way of signalling the delight in physicality and sexuality that Shakespeare gives his female characters in the hunting scene.

The next musical interlude is based on the melancholic lyrical 'The way you look tonight', by Jerome Kern and Dorothy Fields, sung, quite unexpectedly but beautifully, by Geraldine McEwan as the Principal of the Navarre Royal School of Philosophy. Supposedly reading Armado's letter to Jaquenetta, she sings the song to Sir Nathaniel the curate (Richard Briers), to whom she clearly has a passionate attachment. There is certainly something of a bond between Holofernes and Nathaniel in the original text; they share a fetish for Latinate vocabulary which almost becomes a private language between them. Branagh flirted with the idea of making them an elderly gay couple (but rejected the 'cliché'). Geraldine McEwan's performance in the film, as Holofernia, makes the most of the song's underlying tenderness. As Branagh says, the moment complements the focus elsewhere on young love, and shows that the 'silliness' that love lets us all in for is no respecter of age. All the clowns here present (Dull, Jaquenetta, Costard) join in what Branagh calls a 'comic ballet', and Crowl 'a sweetly daft dance'[19] which shows the underlying emotion linking these people—an admission rarely made by the 1930s films, but quite properly in the late twentieth century: that the 'servants' have feelings.

The play's famous 'overhearing scene' (Act 4, sc. 3), a farcical or 'pantomimic' scene (a wonderful opportunity for physical comedy) in which each of the men is overheard by first Berowne then the others (all in hiding) as they read their self-penned sonnets declaring their love, is brilliantly translated into a shared version of George and Ira Gershwins' 'I've got a crush on you'. Branagh explains that the language is 'dense and

[18] From the Astaire and Rogers film *Top Hat* (1935): its light-hearted lyrics conclude with 'I'm fancy free and free for anything fancy.' Words and music by Irving Berlin.
[19] Crowl, *Shakespeare at the Cineplex*, p. 45.

elaborate' in the play here—and one might add, the aristocratic convention of written 'sonnets' to a mistress is long out of fashion, but the sentiment remains the same. The song becomes an opportunity for Adrian Lester, the best of the male actor-dancers, to perform a tribute to Fred Astaire's similar scene in *Shall We Dance*. When Berowne himself is 'rumbled' as being also in love, it is he who signals the men's change of tactic with the speech 'Have at you then, affection's men at arms.' Branagh accompanies the opening lines with a slow tap dance, emphasising the iambic pentameter, and then moves into the naturalistic performance of Shakespearean verse which is a characteristic of this production. At the end of the speech (Act 3, sc. 2, 314), on the word 'heaven', Branagh explains that the character is transformed by the power of the words to the point where 'He's gotta sing'. He segues seamlessly into the opening of Irving Berlin's 'Cheek to Cheek': 'Heaven, I'm in heaven, and my heart beats so that I can hardly speak…' At this point the conventions of the Hollywood dream sequence take over: the men float to the domed ceiling of the library as they join in the song, then the girls are seen outside in flowing choreography and gowns that echo Ginger Rogers's extraordinarily erotic dance with Astaire to this number in *Top Hat* (1935). Finally all the couples are together (the men having magically changed into top hat and tails) and the advantages of the anamorphic wide-screen format chosen for the film are most satisfyingly displayed, as not one couple but four, in imagery of full length and width, dance out their idealised romantic feelings. The song, as Branagh says, has 'an ecstatic and life-affirming quality', first created in the 1935 film and wonderfully acknowledged here by the eight dancing actors of *Love's Labour's Lost*.

It is, of course, a sexual fantasy, just as the following number is. The decision to have the masked girls, in *Cabaret*-style underwear, dance with the singlet-clad boys, offered an opportunity to draw out the (largely

inaccessible) sexual imagery and punning in the original text and show it in a way that offers a 'fantasy of what they'd like to do if they weren't all being so polite and guarded.' The dance style here is that of Bob Fosse, modern and raunchy (Branagh notes also a tribute to the nightclub sequence in *Singin' in the Rain*). Moving away from the formal elegance of the 1930s films into the more *noir* world of 1960s eroticism, Branagh here illustrates the confusion brought on by allowing sexual impulses to rule one's behaviour. Fittingly, the sequence is not shot in one take, and there are few full-screen views of all the dancers: it is a dark, sexual and anonymous moment, with flashing thighs and groping hands. As in the 1960s films, a cigarette enjoyed by all the girls (now fully dressed) is a sign of post-coital languour. This is one of the cleverest sequences in the movie in terms of grabbing the audience's attention and ensuring that the film of Shakespeare's play does not come across as a worthy but dull museum piece.

The Pageant of the Nine Worthies having been cut, as noted above, the stage is clear for another moment of striking contemporaneity, though here also with a strong touch of affectionate nostalgia for the past great days of the Broadway musical and the 1930s cinema choreography of Busby Berkeley. Nathan Lane (Costard), in top hat and tails, sings a slow and affectionate 'There's no business like show business' (Irving Berlin), the Broadway anthem first sung by brassy diva Ethel Merman in *Annie Get Your Gun* (1946). By the time the whole cast of the play has joined in, in an upbeat tap chorus, it is clear that this substitution for the Nine Worthies is in its own way metatheatrical, a commentary by the actors on the strange and delightful job that they have. In any 'realistic' production, certainly the King and Princess would never be seen in a Broadway chorus line, much less with the lower-class comics on an equal footing—in fact, led by Costard the clown. The number becomes an overt acknowledgement of the work of theatre, and in particular comedy, in lifting our spirits. 'I wanted to celebrate Nathan Lane having this wonderful Broadway quality,' Branagh says, 'so that he can sing "There's No Business Like Show Business" in such a moving fashion. It's very touching, because he's got that sort of sad clown's face. I was watching, and thinking, "you really believe in this, don't you? You really believe in this show business being the cure of all ills."'[20] Shakespeare's play too has many such suggestions as it draws to its end.

[20] Anderson, interview, combustiblecelluloid.com, 2000.

Marcade the royal messenger solemnly arrives to interrupt the festivities with the news of the King of France's death. Newspaper headlines ask 'Will France Fall?' Of course it will—everyone in the audience knows that it did in the real world, though in that real world France had no king, and the foreign threat was the much more frightening Hitler and his Nazis. Branagh only offers glimpses of the German enemy; his concentration is on the experience of the individuals of an imagined France (as Shakespeare's was). The lovers, as the men go off to war, separate in multiple visual references to the end of one of the great romantic films of World War Two, *Casablanca*, made in 1942 by Michael Curtiz when the outcome of the war against Hitler was profoundly uncertain. That film celebrates the values of love, and of loyalty and honour —concepts underlying Shakespeare's romantic play with its equally unexpected refusal to 'end like an old play.' Instead of an easy romantic ending, the men are given tasks by the women—to fulfil their masculine duty, and to restrain their impatience for sexual fulfilment in marriage until this work is done. The close analogy with the many films made to support the war effort by linking romance with the higher duty that the times demanded, is strikingly apt for Branagh's directorial vision of the Shakespearean play, while the generic move from escapist romantic comedy to wartime drama mirrors the shift in American national politics from isolationism to international commitment. Harry Warner, whose Warner Bros studio made *42nd Street* and other 'escapist' musicals in the 1930s but switched to making such wartime classics as *Casablanca* in the early '40s, was said to have declared, 'I don't want us to be known as the studio that made the best musical comedies during the war.' [21]

One song remains to be sung—the Gershwins' 'They can't take that away from me', sung first by Fred Astaire in the film *Shall We Dance*. Ginger Rogers is silent and motionless as he sings this yearning, melancholy piece, and significantly, no dance sequence follows in the 1937 film or in Branagh's final shots in his film narrative. Branagh sings the opening lines, his voice deliberately 'cracked', in character as the now deeply feeling Berowne. Each of the other men takes a line and sings it to his girl. The girls share the second verse, so that all eight of the lovers have a last song that acknowledges their love, and they finally sing in unison as the cars draw out of the castle and head to the airport and separation.

[21] Warner is quoted in Philip Furia and Laurie Patterson, *The Songs of Hollywood* (OUP, 2010), p.155.

Branagh decided to end the film with a montage of imagined events of the war, showing each of the characters briefly as they encounter this changed reality. Underscoring the montage is Patrick Doyle's arrangement of 'They can't take that away from me' for a melancholy trumpet solo and strings. Branagh comments towards the end of the film that in the planning stages they had looked for unfamiliar songs, and even tried writing their own, but eventually realised that the great songs of Kern, Berlin, Gershwin, and Porter matched their sense of the play's artistic stature: these classic songs 'are open to all sorts of interpretations, just like Shakespeare himself'—that is, dependent upon performers for their continued life; the 'pure' text, we might say, is the dead text. The final credits to the film take the audience back to images of all the couples dancing joyously in earlier sequences; but now to the tune of 'There's no business like show business'—the 'only possible song', says Branagh.

We might conclude that the film celebrates showbiz, and insists on its importance to the community, from Shakespeare to the present. If that means recalling, recreating, reappropriating earlier work, as long as it is done with confident flair (rather than anxious diffidence), it is doing the work that a postmodernist theory of art encourages. As academic critic Samuel Crowl writes:

> Branagh's nerve and intelligence are his most original qualities. His genius as an artist is as a synthesiser; his imagination works like a magpie, stealing good ideas from others but linking them in surprising and original ways… Branagh is a product of the postmodern moment dominated by a sense of belatedness; a sense that originality is exhausted and that only parody and pastiche and intertextual echo remain. Rather than finding such a condition enervating, Branagh's work seizes on its possibilities …[22]

—and on the energies of his co-worker actors and designers. To quote Branagh himself, on the showing of *Top Hat* to his cast on day one of rehearsals: Fred and Ginger 'are geniuses and we're not. But if we can capture the twinkle in the eyes and feet of those performers, then we'll recapture something that gives people a lot of joy'[23] —what film critic

[22] Samuel Crowl, 'Flamboyant realist', pp. 226-7.

[23] Branagh, quoted in Judith Buchanan, *Shakespeare on Film*, Pearson Education 2005, p. 213. Against this observation we can set the perverse comment of Katherine Eggert (unfortunately published in a major student resource book): 'Branagh's and the rest of his cast's poor imitations of Astaire have the effect not

Derek Elley rightly perceived as 'a superior stock-company glee.' There is an influential strand of theorising about postmodernism that is deeply suspicious of joy, or indeed of pleasure in any form (except, perhaps, the intellectual pleasure of knowing more than your neighbours).[24] Working *outside* this paradigm is a set of artists who are knowingly postmodernist in their ways of referencing and playing with the past. Perhaps the most fundamental quality of this mode of postmodernist appropriation or celebration is that it is not worried about whether or not the audience is equally 'knowing'. The artists (here, Branagh and his collaborators) know what it is they are revivifying in a different context; the audience (apart from a few thirties-musical geeks) is able to sit back and enjoy the virtuosic performances without feeling the need to engage in deconstructive critique. Branagh's various cinematic strategies have ensured that the film is of its moment, the end of the twentieth century; its nostalgia is laced with historic awareness. In capturing the energy of live performance yet framing it as artificial, 'unrealistic', it allows us to see the human performers underneath the mask and enjoy and honour their work. Shakespearean play-texts, in particular the comedies, make a point of offering the audience exactly the same opportunity. In the case of *Love's Labour's Lost* I suggest that Branagh's film could offer teachers and students a way into understanding the generic qualities of romantic comedy, whether Shakespearean or later: the film foregrounds the joyous, creative artificiality of the genre and of any mode of courtship (sonnets, dancing, games, songs …), and, like all the best romances, reminds us of their fragility in the face of war, danger, and death.

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only of *revealing* this production as in some way second-rate, but of *designating* this production with that status.' Eggert, 'Sure can sing and dance', p. 79. Eggert's critique depends upon a reverence for the 'original' that automatically downgrades the work of its modern re-creators.

[24] Katherine Eggert, quoted in the previous note, is an example of Jameson's doom-laden perspective on contemporary creativity. A more empathetic but still critical Jamesonian view of the film is offered in Ramona Wray, 'Nostalgia for Navarre: The Melancholic Metacinema of Kenneth Branagh's *Love's Labour's Lost*', *Film/Literature Quarterly*, vol. 30, no. 3 (2002), 171-8. In particular Wray utilises Jameson's dismissive view of 'nostalgic' artistic practices, with an argument naïvely based on an appeal to 'real history' (173) which excludes the history of art and its habit of creative reappropriation.

on Shakespearean drama including *As She Likes It: Shakespeare's Unruly Women* and, most recently, *The Cambridge Introduction to Shakespeare's Comedies*.

Slapstick and Self-Reflexivity in George Herriman's *Krazy Kat*

BEN JUERS

1

Between 1912 and 1944, a 'meteoric burlesk drama' unfolds in the comic strip section of the newspapers belonging to Randolph Hearst's King Features Syndicate.[1] It is enacted over four panels on weekdays and an entire page on Sundays. The cast is made up of an androgynous and racially ambiguous cat named Krazy, an unsentimental mouse named Ignatz, and a well-meaning yet misguided bulldog named Offissa Pupp. Together, they form a love triangle, around which is generated a plot that remains ostensibly the same over the years. Ignatz throws a brick at Krazy, seeking to punish 'that fool kat' for her naïveté.[2] Krazy misinterprets the brick as a token of affection, and eagerly awaits the 'messidge of love' from 'dahlink' Ignatz, her 'li'l ainjil'.[3] Offissa Pupp, jealous of the relationship between Krazy and Ignatz, pursues and jails Ignatz for his brick-throwing misdemeanours. Innovative Ignatz persists, devising ways to elude Pupp and deliver the brick to Krazy's head. He drops it from hot air balloons, flings it through peepholes and takes refuge inside prams, sombreros, pelican's mouths and boxes. Coconino County provides the backdrop for this espionage, shifting from panel to panel in a 'perpetual

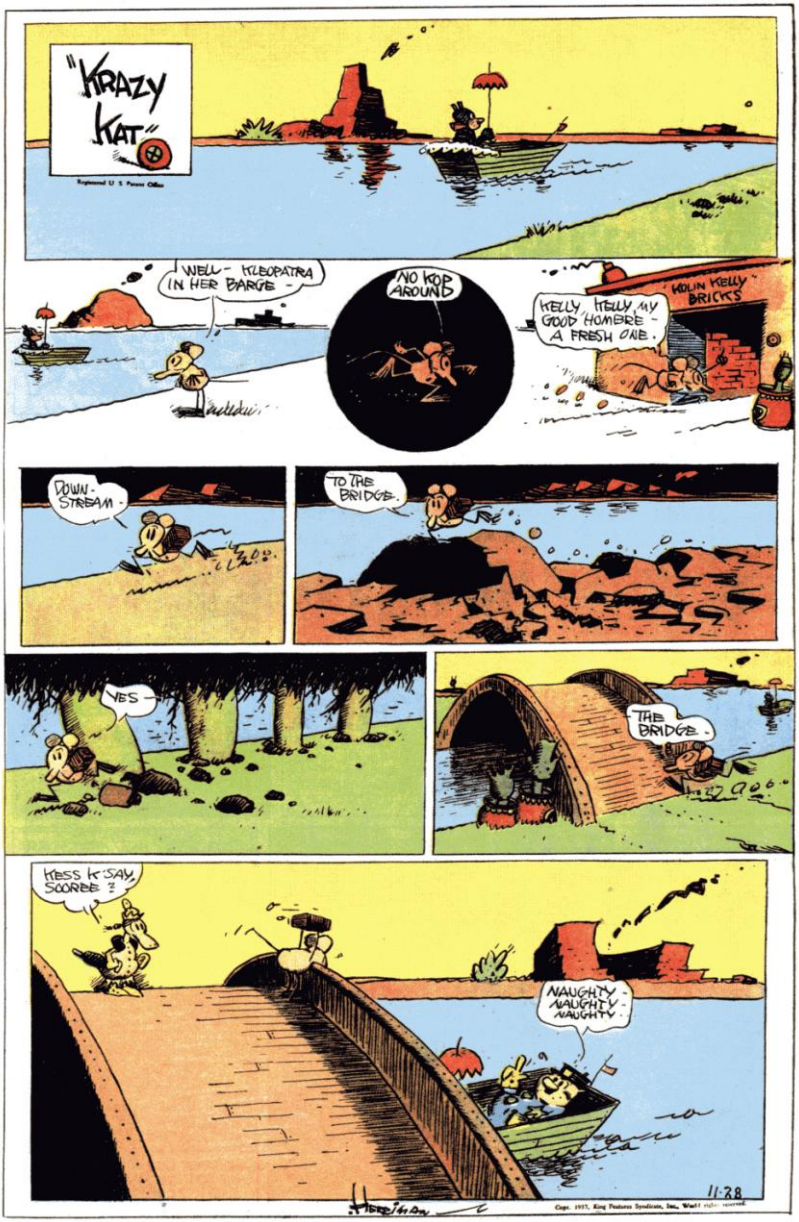
[1] e.e. cummings, 'Introduction', in George Herriman, *Krazy Kat*, ed. Joseph Greene and Rex Chessman (New York: Madison Square Press, 1977), p.10. cummings intentionally misspells 'burlesk', in keeping with Herriman's idiosyncratic spelling.
[2] 25/8/18. Although Krazy is androgynous, I will refer to her as feminine for the sake of consistency, and to differentiate her from Ignatz and Offissa Pupp, who are both male. Dates for strips reproduced in the following pages are as follows: p. 24: 28/11/37; p. 30: 18/1/42; p. 33: 6/10/35; p. 37: 22/6/35; p. 42: 12/3/44; p. 45: 21/12/41; p. 48: 2/8/42; p. 50: 11/9/38.
[3] 6/10/23.

metamorphosis' of mesas, cacti and other abstract landforms derived from the Arizona Desert.[4]

George Herriman's comic strip *Krazy Kat* never enjoyed the popularity of its contemporaries like Bud Fisher's *Mutt and Jeff*, George McManus' *Bringing Up Father* or Elzie Segar's *Popeye*. The indeterminacies of its heroine, her apparent masochism, the inverted food chain of the dog-cat-mouse love triangle and the scratchy, childlike way in which it was all rendered alienated most readers. And whereas other strips generally treated language and dialogue as incidental to the visual narrative, Herriman augmented the surreality of his premise with an extensive vocabulary and mastery of imagistic, if confounding, wordplay. The theatrical way in which his characters interact points to the tradition of the love triangle in Shakespeare and the commedia dell'arte. 'Wretch, I see you bear no brick', says Pupp to Ignatz, 'can it be that you are innocent of evil intent today? Tell me!!!' 'Brick, have I none—my dear kop', replies Ignatz, 'but may I with humility pray that you lay your pretty eye upon my new hat?'[5] And when Krazy talks, her multiethnic accent and phonetic and onomatopoetic reinterpretation of language prefigures Joyce's portmanteau words.[6] 'Hokk', says Krazy, sighting water gushing from the ground, 'jetz wot I tott—a bebblin' spring—an' me, so Thursday. Now will I skwench my thirtz—wed my witzil—mersin my poached lips'.[7]

Hearst admired *Krazy Kat* and kept it in print until Herriman's death on April 25, 1944. In spite of its small audience, the strip's reputation amongst intellectuals, literary figures and artists grew to attract the likes of Gilbert Seldes, e.e. cummings, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Gertrude Stein, Walt Disney, Frank Capra, Ernest Hemingway, Pablo Picasso, H.L. Mencken, Deems Taylor, Jack Kerouac, William de Kooning and Umberto Eco. Seldes' 1924 book *The Seven Lively Arts* includes the first literary analysis of the strip, 'The Krazy Kat that Walks by Himself', in which he states, 'with those who hold that a comic strip cannot be a work of art I shall not traffic.'[8] Then in 1946, shortly after Herriman's death, cummings wrote an

[4] cummings, 'Introduction', *Krazy Kat*, p.10.
[5] 28/7/35.
[6] Miles Orvell, *After the Machine: Visual Arts and the Erasing of Cultural Boundaries* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1995), p.131-132.
[7] 17/4/38.
[8] Gilbert Seldes, 'The Krazy Kat That Walks by Himself', in *The Comic Art of George Herriman*, ed. Patrick McDonnell, Karen O'Connell and Georgia Riley de Havenon (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 2004), p.15.


"KRAZY KAT"
WELL - KLEOPATRA IN HER BARGE -
NO KOP AROUND
KELLY, KELLY, MY GOOD HOMBRE - A FRESH ONE.
KOLIN KELLY BRICKS
DOWN STREAM -
TO THE BRIDGE.
YES
THE BRIDGE.
KESS K SAY, SCORBE ?
NAUGHTY NAUGHTY NAUGHTY
11-28

essay portraying the strip as political and psychoanalytical allegory, wherein Krazy, Ignatz and Offissa Pupp become embodiments of democracy, anarchy and fascism, and ego, superego and id, respectively.[9]

Subsequent analyses have been coloured by sociologist Arthur Asa Bergman's discovery in 1971 that Herriman was himself 'coloured', according to his 1880 birth certificate. Bergman's finding instigated a trend toward reading *Krazy Kat* as racial allegory, beginning with Ishmael Reed, who dedicated his 1972 novel *Mumbo Jumbo* to 'George Herriman, Afro-American'. Further biographical research by journalist and comics commentator Jeet Heer has revealed that Herriman was born into the Louisiana Creole community known as 'gens de couleur libres', or free persons of colour, before his family moved from New Orleans to Los Angeles when he was six to avoid growing persecution in the South.[10]

Many critics have cited this information, along with certain episodes in which Krazy and Ignatz invert their relationship by changing their complexion, to surmise *Krazy Kat* as Herriman's externalised and satirical narrative of passing. Other readings of the strip have seen it in terms of its 'postmodern anticipations', utopianism, conservatism, and even Biblical parallels. All interpretations are applicable. Yet none of them do justice to *Krazy Kat* as a whole, nor do they examine in detail how the strip belongs to the tradition of slapstick, and how, in demonstrating the mechanics of that tradition, it is arranged in such a way as to simultaneously invite and resist comprehension.

2

Krazy contemplates cheese and crackers. 'Chizz & kreckers, wot a iffinity, Ignatz, oy, wot a iffinity'—drawing an 'iffinity' between affinity and infinity—'it has come down immong the ages like thunda—if I can be so bowl, I'd like to tell you about a iffinity wot is nice, nobil & moril.' 'I had no idea such an affinity existed –,' says Ignatz, 'tell me, what is it?' 'Me & you', answers Krazy, 'and the brick, switt hot, dun't forget the brick.'

[9] Cummings, 'Introduction', *Krazy Kat*, p.14.
[10] Jeet Heer, 'The Kolours of Krazy Kat', in *Krazy & Ignatz 1935-1936*, ed. Bill Blackbeard (Seattle: Fantagraphics Books, 2005), p.9-10; M. Lynn Weiss, introduction to *Creole Echoes: The Francophone Poetry of Nineteenth-Century Louisiana*, ed. and trans. Norman Shapiro (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004), p.xxiii.

Ignatz prepares to throw the brick accordingly, when Offissa Pupp intervenes. 'And then, there's me, Mouse—gosh, yes, there's me…and the jail.' The episode concludes with Ignatz behind bars, Offissa Pupp satisfied, and Krazy perplexed: 'It commenced so simpil—and finished so intriggit.'[11]

Self-reflexivity of this kind punctuates *Krazy Kat*, intimating at dual 'simpil-icity' and 'itriggitness.' As Mrs Kwak Wakk remarks at the end of one 1939 Sunday strip, 'It all smacks a trifle Confucian to me, Krazy.' The blurred line between 'Confucian' and 'Konfusion,' as Krazy insightfully mishears it, is perpetuated by the compromises of the love triangle. Krazy welcomes violence in lieu of affection. Ignatz seeks only 'good hunting', in spite of Krazy's fondness for being hunted and the inevitable pursuit and imprisonment by Offissa Pupp, who disregards the complexities of Krazy and Ignatz's relationship, jailing Ignatz and convincing himself 'all's well.'[12]

The brick stands neutrally at the centre of this 'frank frenzy', where the agendas of each protagonist intersect.[13] It is the medium of compromise, a symbol set in perpetual motion by continuously lending itself to each character's illusion. To Krazy, it is a valentine. 'Brick—ah-h—br-r-rick—*the rhapsody of thee—the extissy of thou—the fentissy of you*—and yet—thee is but dust, brick—dust—*dream dust—moon dust—soul dust* –.' Ignatz dotes on the brick as the culmination of his art: 'My pet—my beautiful!!! My sweet.' And Offissa Pupp rues it as the vessel of wrongdoing, the 'baleful brick', the 'irk of irks', 'sin's most sinister symbol.'[14]

The profound neutrality of the brick is betokened in the cream pie, the 'democratic tool' of slapstick. The pie crosses class boundaries, 'an equalizing force' dignifying its victims through paradoxically undignified means, its horizontal and diagonal trajectory prefiguring its impact, which demolishes vertical hierarchies and notions of pride. The metonymic multifariousness of the brick and the pie follows in the tradition of slapstick's allegorisation—or animation—of the inanimate. Jean Baudrillard says that the object

[11] 8/7/28.
[12] 7/5/39; 8/9/40.
[13] Cummings, 'Introduction', *Krazy Kat*, p.10.
[14] 20/4/30; 19/9/37; 17/12/39; 17/10/37.

> can fascinate and seduce the subject…because [they] radiate no sustance or meaning of [their] own. The pure object is sovereign because it is what breaks up the sovereignty of the other and catches it in its own trap.[15]

The sovereignty of the object becomes apparent in modernity because of the proliferation of commodities, and their subsequent fetishism.[16] Esther Leslie points out that in modernity, the object or commodity 'acts according to its own laws as an actor on a shadow stage. It attains 'ghostly objectivity' and leads its own life'.[17]

Indeed, when Krazy confronts a telephone for the first time, she presumes sovereignty over it. 'At last I have a telefoam at my mercy and I will talk among it for the first time in the history of my life.' Having already confused its function and its character in wishing to talk 'among' it, she is soon confounded by its intricacies. She addresses 'Mrs Telefoam' directly, and mistakes the 'resivva' and the handle for bodily parts that must be arranged according to the telephone's preference. In doing so, she refigures the telephone as a sovereign object, instead of an object-medium. By contrast, she perceives the most unlikely object, the brick, as a medium through which an emotional exchange between subjects can occur. This is typical of the way the object's seduction of the subject is played out in the comedic struggle between the slapstick protagonist and their inanimate surroundings. Telephones are well equipped for this struggle because their rebellion interrupts communication, isolating the subject. As sovereign objects, their seductive quality allows them to assume innumerable guises. Chaplin plays a telephone receiver like a trumpet and peers through it as though it were a telescope in *Easy Street* (1917). Groucho Marx cracks walnuts between the receiver and handle of a telephone, and Harpo Marx hits the jackpot by inserting a button into a telephone in *Horse Feathers* (1932).

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[15] Jean Baudrillard, *Fatal Strategies*, quoted by Lisa Trahair, 'Fool's Gold: Metamorphosis in Buster Keaton's *Sherlock, Jr*', in *Falling For You: Essays on Cinema and Performance*, ed. Lesley Stern and George Kouvaros (Sydney: Power Publications, 1999), p.218-219.

[16] Karl Marx, *Capital*, in Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, Mass.; London: Belknap Press, 1999), p.195.

[17] Esther Leslie, *Hollywood Flatlands: Animation, Critical Theory and the Avant-Garde* (London; New York: Verso, 2004, first published 2002), p.6.

Leslie attributes this animation of the inanimate in slapstick to commodity fetishism, the way the protagonist 'empathizes with the manufacturing machines, with its 'fetishistically driven objects', so much as to supplant its own self as their 'soul'.'[18] The brick, with its featureless, unassuming guise hiding its multifaceted symbolism, represents commodity fetishism taken to a satirical extreme. Indeed, bricks are apparently the only commodity produced in Coconino. Kolin Kelly's brickyard is the only example of industry. Each protagonist fetishises the brick in a different way. Pupp abhors the brick as a weapon and an indicator of evil intent. Krazy appreciates the brick for the devotion implied by its continual delivery to the back of her head. Ignatz dotes on the brick itself and the ritualism involved in the act of acquiring and delivering it, for he is a connoisseur of bricks and the artistry they represent:

> It's a pretty thing, Kolin, it sparkles with the virtuous value of valor, but—uh-h—still—mmm-m—yet—you have baked better, blither, bolder, buxomer, and more brilliant bricks—you know that—the bouquet so usual in your previous efforts is not in this one—isn't that so –? Its appeal, Kolin, is to the bourgeoisie, the hoi, the polloi—the this, the that.[19]

Ignatz—and more abstractly, Herriman—behave in a way that Benjamin identifies as characteristic of the 'collector,' someone who detaches the object 'from all its original functions' in 'an attempt to overcome the wholly irrational character of the object's mere presence at hand.' [20] In this respect, Herriman—as he is represented through his protagonists—resembles an imagist poet, separating words and pictures from their context so as to reveal their essence. 'For the collector,' says Benjamin, 'the world is present, and indeed ordered, in each of his objects'.[21] At first glance, *Krazy Kat* seems to be an arrangement of non-sequiturs, with an ambiguous heroine, inverted food-chain, angular appearance and amorphous setting. Like Ignatz, faced with the 'wholly irrational character' of Krazy, the reader desires clarification. Yet upon further inspection, it is through the suitably stoic brick and how the brick reflects whomever it comes into contact with, that order is reinstated.

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[18] *ibid*., p.6.
[19] 18/12/32.
[20] Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, p.204-205.
[21] *ibid*., p.207.

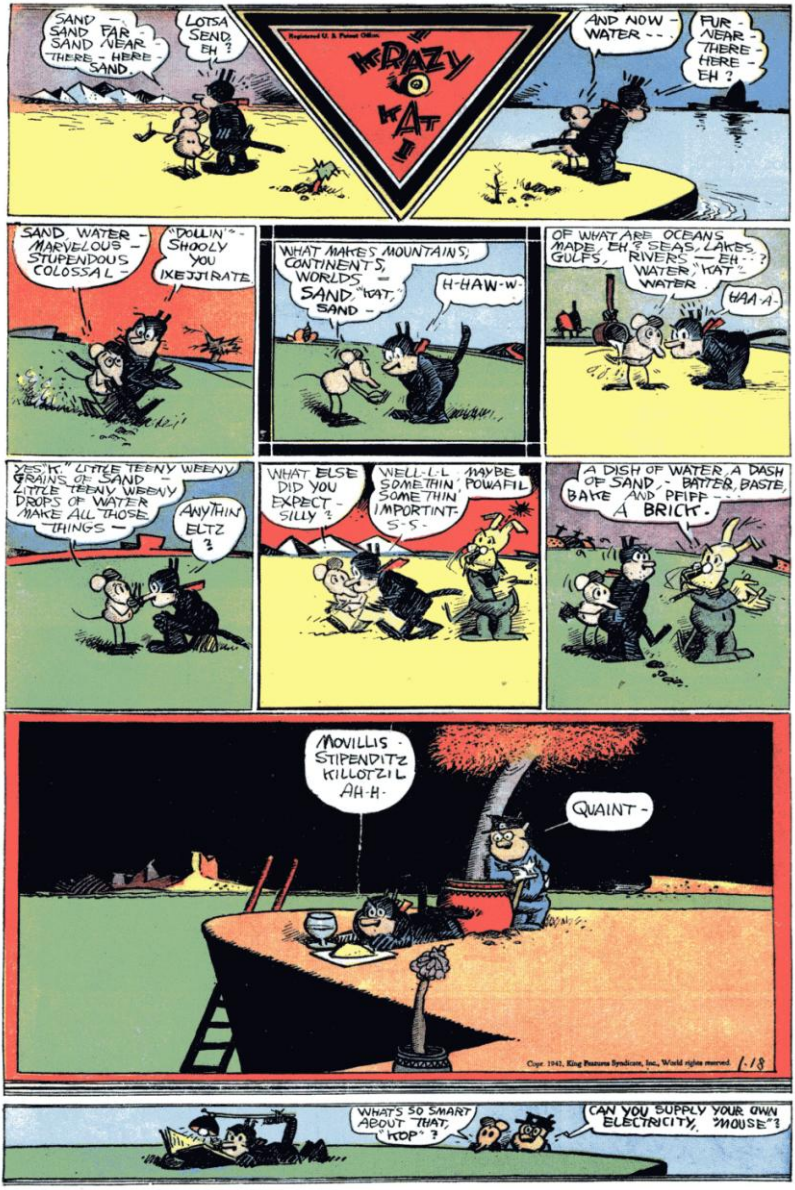
Benjamin states that 'the most deeply hidden motive of the person who collects can be described this way: he takes up the struggle against dispersion.'[22] In this respect, Krazy and Ignatz resemble another collector in the slapstick tradition, Harpo Marx. On one hand, Harpo disperses meaning inasmuch as his muteness prohibits conventional means of communication, in the same way that Krazy reinterprets language and metaphor phonetically. Like the refigured telephone, Krazy and Harpo rupture interaction between subjects, between the signifier and the signified. On the other hand, Harpo, like Ignatz, 'takes up the struggle against dispersion,' through objects. He compensates for his inability to speak by utilising a vocabulary of 'spirited things'—trumpets, gag horns, scissors, alarm clocks, blowtorches, axes, ropes, playing cards, pinup posters, coffee, cigars, mousetraps, flypaper, flowers, muzzles and bananas inside zipped-up banana-shaped leather wallets—that augment his gestures, creating an aural and visual sign language, and initiating a dialogue throughout the inanimate.

Similarly, Ignatz cannot express his attachment to Krazy by any means other than the brick. Like Harpo, he is mute, in an emotional rather than literal sense. The brick, as an archetype of the object in slapstick, articulates that which cannot be articulated, becoming its physical manifestation, its individuation (in psychoanalytical terms), enacting what Trahair refers to as the

> short circuiting of representation by presentation. The object, like a gift which cannot be reciprocated, is inserted into the system of exchange, but cannot itself be exchanged. Rather, its power precipitates an excess of emotion, an overwhelming.[23]

The brick also precipitates Krazy's 'mimetic convulsion,' the point at which subject and object fuse, and the protagonists and the brick unite.[24] Objects then perpetrate a synaesthetic 'overwhelming,' in which emotions, senses and physicality intermingle. Objects come to represent pure, palpable thought, for as Krazy points out to Ignatz, 'Ideas come hard to me, especially your ideas, your ideas come to me in the shape of bricks.' 'Have another idea with me', replies Ignatz, tossing the brick. Even when hit with

[22] *ibid*., p.211.
[23] Trahair, 'Fool's Gold', *Falling for You*, p.221.
[24] Jayamanne, 'A Slapstick Time', *ibid*., p.126.


SAND — SAND FAR SAND NEAR THERE - HERE - SAND.
LOTSA SAND, EH?
KRAZY KAT
AND NOW — WATER — .
FUR - NEAR - THERE - HERE - EH?
SAND, WATER - MARVELOUS - STUPENDOUS - COLOSSAL -
"DOLLIN" - SHOOLY YOU IXEJJIRATE
WHAT MAKES MOUNTAINS, CONTINENTS, WORLDS — SAND, "KAT," SAND —
H-HAW-W-
OF WHAT ARE OCEANS MADE, EH? SEAS, LAKES, GULFS, RIVERS — EH — ? WATER, "KAT," WATER
HAA-A-
YES "K" LITTLE TEENY WEENY GRAINS OF SAND — LITTLE TEENY WEENY DROPS OF WATER MAKE ALL THOSE THINGS —
ANYTHIN ELTZ?
WHAT ELSE DID YOU EXPECT - SILLY?
WELL-L-L SOMETHIN SOMETHIN IMPORTINT-S-S-
MAYBE POWAFIL
A DISH OF WATER, A DASH OF SAND, - BATTER, BASTE, BAKE AND PFIPF — A BRICK.
MOVILLIS - STIPENDITZ KILLOTZIL AH-H-
QUAINT -
Copr. 1942, King Features Syndicate, Inc., World rights reserved. 1-18
WHAT'S SO SMART ABOUT THAT, "KOP"?
CAN YOU SUPPLY YOUR OWN ELECTRICITY, "MOUSE"?

an iron brick, Krazy maintains that 'the ida was gloria, dough.'[25]

Krazy's interpretation of the brick as an idea and valentine can be attributed to her childlike imagination, which is an aspect of the collector apparent in Harpo, but not Ignatz. Children are inclined to the 'world of new manifestations' produced by the 'dissolution' of forms by the imagination, says Benjamin. These new manifestations can be found in the banal and everyday, 'a bit of wood, a pinecone, a small stone—however unified and unambiguous the material is, the more it seems to embrace the possibility of a multitude of figures of the most varied sort.'[26] Just as Harpo demolishes a piano with childish glee, unearthing an elegant harp from its rubble, so Krazy imaginatively dismantles and reshapes the brick, the most unambiguous of materials, to reveal a 'missil of love, and iffection.' She becomes the 'child-clown who stumbles into modernity [and] has to convert ritual objects into toys,' inasmuch as progress, and therefore modernity, can be denoted by the brick.[27]

3

The brick exists in perpetual motion, literally and symbolically. It therefore mirrors the amorphous character of Krazy, as well as the surrounding landscape. Alchemising the brick into a valentine points to the sublime character of Krazy, in attempting to reconcile contradictory emotions of love and contempt. The sublimation makes an expansion and rearrangement of perception necessary, in order to accommodate this paradox. Since the pursuits involved in the love triangle are endlessly re-enacted, sublimation becomes a continuous process, requiring constant rearrangement. Krazy, like the brick and the setting, achieves a state of infinite non-identity, in which aspects of her personality, such as gender and race, that would otherwise be definitive, are subsumed into a cycle of renewal and reinvention. Moments in which these aspects appear to be

[25] 12/11/18; 22/4/34.
[26] Benjamin, 'Imagination', in *Selected Writings Volume 1: 1913-1926*, ed. Michael Jennings et al., trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, Mass.; London: Belknap Press, 1997), p.280; Benjamin, 'The Cultural History of Toys', in *Selected Writings Volume 2: 1927-1934*, ed. Michael Jennings et al., trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, Mass.; London: Belknap Press, 1999), p.115.
[27] Jayamanne, 'A Slapstick Time', *Falling For You*, p.106.

defined are brief, but not untrue, for 'all non-identity is infinite,' says Benjamin, 'but this does not imply that all identity is finite.'[28]

The reader must then concede to 'nonchalant uncertainty' regarding assertions of finite identity, especially where Krazy's gender is concerned.[29] Just as Chaplin and Buster Keaton are positioned against gargantuan villains and overbearing father figures, so Krazy is fought over by rival masculinities—the rambling, vagrant Ignatz and the omnipresent, patronising Offissa Pupp. Like Chaplin and Keaton, Krazy is infantilised, and therefore pre-sexualised, allowing her to seek sexual gratification in unusual places, such as a brick thrown by a mouse. Chaplin pacifies his own 'gamy' masculinity by flirting with a man in *The Immigrant* (1917) and affecting feminine modesty when posing in his bathing suit in *The Cure* (1917). Both Keaton and Harold Lloyd play characters named 'Lamb'.[30] In *Go West* (1925), Keaton falls in love with a cow named 'Brown Eyes', and in the Marx Brothers feature *Animal Crackers* (1930), Harpo claims he is five years old and in love with a horse.

Herriman follows in this tradition, portraying Krazy as the archetype of the infantilised, sexually ambiguous slapstick comedian who avoids definition. In an early poster from 1916 advertising the animated *Krazy Kat* cartoons (with which Herriman had little involvement other than illustrating the poster), Krazy is accompanied by the caption, 'leadink ladyman.' A daily strip from the same period sees Krazy claiming simultaneously to be married, with both a husband and a wife, as well as being a bachelor and a spinster. She voices masculine sentiments, as in, 'think of the time when a fella could spend ten nights in a bar-room—now he's lucky if he can afford to spend ten minutes in one,' and proves capable of misogyny when Ignatz asks, 'don't a lady look her best in the gloaming, fool', to which Krazy responds, 'that's just it—if only she looked the same in the bright morning time.' Yet Krazy can also appear maternal. When Ignatz's children want to adopt her into their family, they are unsure of whether to call her 'aunt' or 'uncle'. They call 'Uncle Krazy' and are met with silence, whereas 'Aunt Krazy' prompts a friendly, 'collin' me, dollins?'[31]

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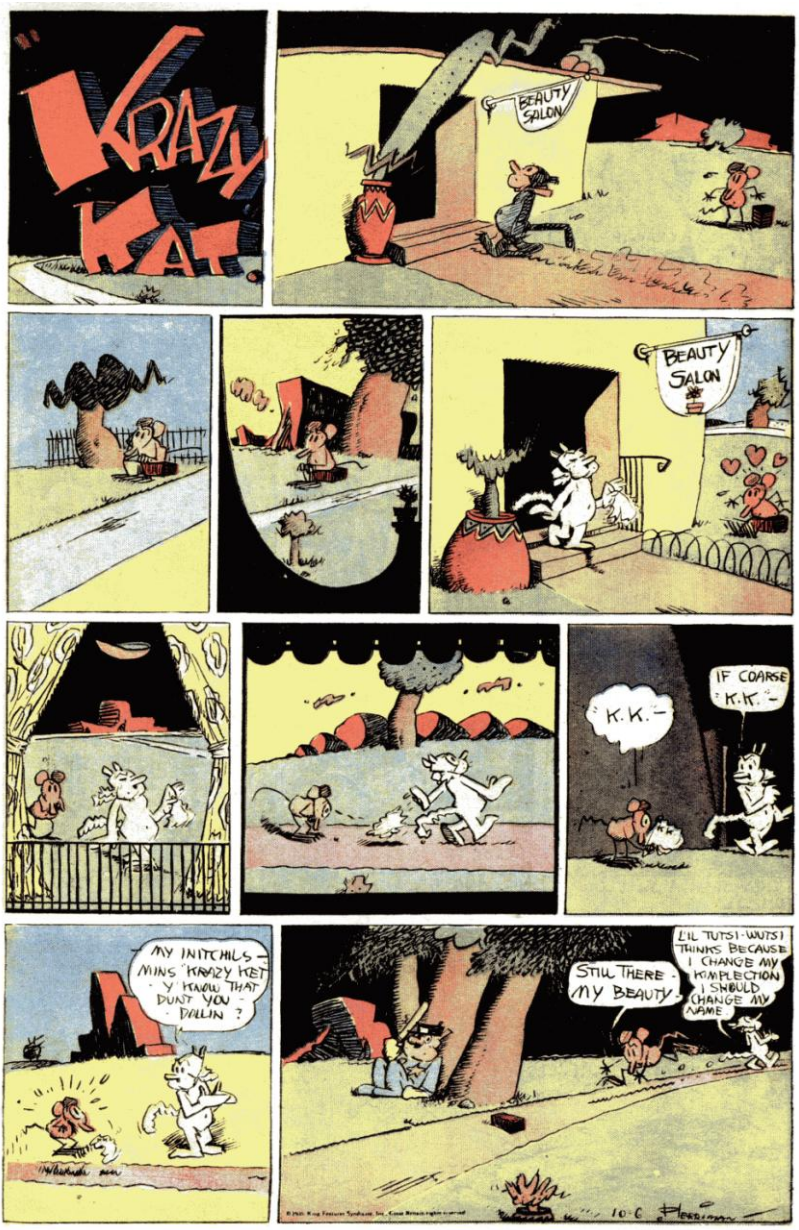
[28] Benjamin, 'Theses on the Problem of Identity', in *Selected Writings Vol.1*, p.75.
[29] Orvell, *After the Machine*, p.131-132.
[30] Alan Dale, *Comedy is a Man in Trouble: Slapstick in American Movies* (Minneapolis; London: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), p.60.
[31] In *The Comic Art of George Herriman*, p.66; unknown date, c.1915; 11/11/18; 7/12/18; 1/2/36.


KRAZY KAT.
BEAUTY SALON
BEAUTY SALON
IF COARSE K.K.
K.K.
MY INITCHILS MINS 'KRAZY KET · Y KNOW THAT DUNT YOU · DALLIN ?
STILL THERE MY BEAUTY
LIL TUTSI-WUTSI THINKS BECAUSE I CHANGE MY KOMPLECTION I SHOULD CHANGE MY NAME

Krazy's gender is impressionistic and impressionable, shifting in contrast to how she is perceived in any given situation. Feminisation makes her rebel. When chivalrous Offissa Pupp offers to carry her luggage, she puts up a struggle, and when Pupp asks if he might sit with Krazy under her umbrella—'Do you mind if I share in this delight?'—she shrugs, 'Delights dunt care who shares them—help y'self.' Yet when Ignatz yearns to punish *male* Krazy—'Oh, that Krazy Kat were here, that I might smite him with this brick!'—Krazy thinks she is being romanced, and remarks, 'A loose thought ippon a wagrant brizz, how fency!'[32]

Krazy's understanding of gender is reflexively subversive. Women's suffrage becomes a celebration of masochism, as when Ignatz shouts, 'three cheers for Woman Suffrage, hooray—hooray—hooray!!!', and Krazy remarks, 'li'l dahlink, he's in fava of woman's suffering, bless his soft blue eye.'[33] Misinterpretation perpetuates her sexual and racial ambiguity, her infinite non-identity. When Herriman was asked by Frank Capra to define Krazy's gender, he responded:

> I get dozens of letters asking me the same question. I don't know. I fooled around with it once; began to think the Kat is a girl—even drew up some strips with her being pregnant. It wasn't the Kat any longer; too much concerned with her own problems—like a soap opera. Know what I mean? Then I realised Krazy was something like a sprite, an elf. They have no sex. So the Kat can't be a he or a she. The Kat's a sprite—a pixie—free to butt into anything. Don't you think so?[34]

4

Krazy's racial identity follows similar logic, allowing her to 'butt into anything.' Her phonetic speech, though indefinable, contains Brooklyn Yiddish inflections:

> A soff ensa will offin toin away a rat. Music hat a chomm to suit any sevage bress. Two heads is betta than one, for a hebba desha. Dun't lay all your eggs in one beskit. A wolf in

[32] 11/10/31; 1/8/27; 29/9/29.
[33] 25/4/20.
[34] In *Krazy Kat: The Comic Art of George Herriman*, p.54.

> cheap kloting is jessa sap. A boid in the hend is woit two in the bushes, but he ain't so choipy about it.[35]

She can also speak and understand Spanish, yet is baffled by Mexican accents. In one strip, she sings in Herriman's approximation of Chinese. Like her gender, her race—as signified by her accent—shifts in and out of focus.

On the other hand, the racial aspect of Krazy's personality is the one area in which Herriman appears to have made conscious and consistent—if sporadic—socio-political commentary. The introduction of Krazy's relative, the tellingly named 'Uncle Tomm Katt,' is an instance of such commentary. Uncle Tom appears early on as a white cat with stripes. When he reappears in 1932, he has been transformed into a black, bearded cat with stereotypical, African-American traits and mannerisms, after the protagonist of Harriet Beecher Stowe's anti-slavery novel from 1852, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. The allusion is blatant, for as Herriman narrates, 'nestling in the fleecy fluff of the only cotton field within the canny confines of Coconino is Uncle Tomm Katt's cabin.' Uncle Tomm communicates almost entirely through the kind of early country-blues made popular at the time by musicians like Charley Patton, Blind Lemon Jefferson, Bukka White and Son House: 'Bugs is in the taties—weevils in the kottin—weasels in the hen koop—honey, time is rottin'.' Just as the brick reflects and articulates the personalities of those who observe it, so Uncle Tomm—who is neither a stereotype nor a parody of a stereotype, so much as an imagistic phenomenon, like the brick, removed from its context—makes Offissa Pupp and Ignatz 'white' by comparison, where before their race was irrelevant. Uncle Tomm hates white Offissa Pupp for patronising him—'a big, strong person like you, in the flush of kophood—shedding tears—many foowies'—and hates Ignatz, yet is attracted to Ignatz's wife, parodying the common perception of black hyper-sexuality.[36] Uncle Tomm sheds light on Krazy in the same way. As Heer points out, 'with the introduction of Uncle Tom, some features of Krazy look slightly different: we can see for example that his/her banjo is part of the minstrel tradition'. Whether Herriman knew it or not, the banjo is originally an African instrument. According to Heer, Uncle Tom then signifies Krazy as 'not just a cat with black fur but also, in a profound way, an African-American cat.'[37]

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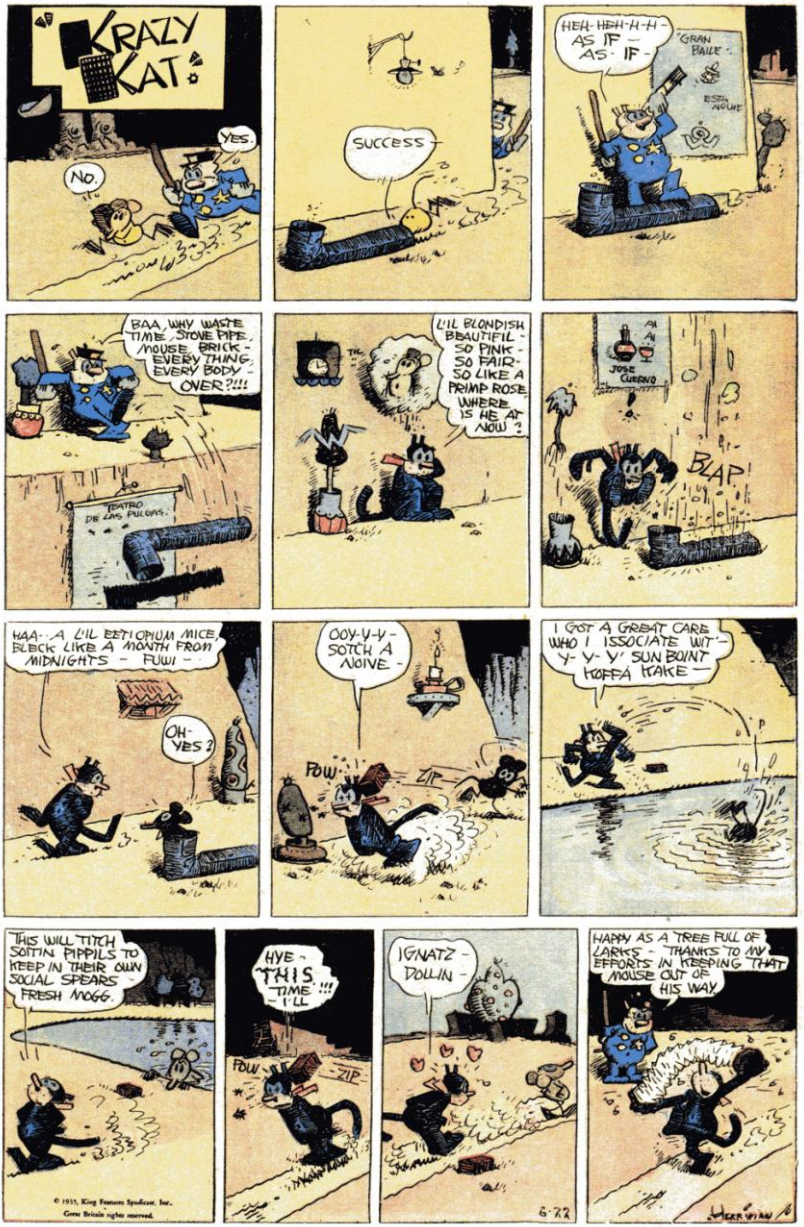
[35] 8/5/32.
[36] 26/8/32; 11/9/32.
[37] Heer, 'The Kolors of Krazy Kat', *Krazy & Ignatz 1935-1936*, p.12.

Episodes in which Krazy or Ignatz change their complexion then gain new significance. After lying in the sun, a deeply tanned Ignatz spots Krazy and throws the brick at her, and Krazy, unable to recognise black Ignatz, throws it back: 'Dagnabya!!! Dunt think I'm no 'Desdemonia,' you 'Otello'.' Ignatz falls into a stovepipe and is covered head to toe in soot. Krazy, who is pining for white Ignatz, 'so blondish beautiful—so pink—so fair', ridicules black Ignatz: 'Haa—a li'l Eetiopium mice, bleck like a month from midnights.' Ignatz conks Krazy with the brick. 'Ooy, sotch a noive,' she exclaims, kicking Ignatz into a pond, 'I got a great care who I issociate wit'—y-y-y'sunboint koffa kake—this will titch soitin pippils to keep in their own social spears.' White Ignatz emerges from the pond, having washed off the soot, and Krazy is overjoyed. Likewise, when Krazy lightens her complexion, Ignatz is enchanted. 'White as a lily, pure as the driven snow,' he muses after Krazy, covered in white paint, dives into a river to wash the paint off, 'ah, cold river, you shall let die the ripples her lovely form hath made upon your bosom—but in my warm heart they shall undulate forever.'[38]

In light of Bergman's discovery of Herriman's coloured ancestry in 1971, critics have argued that at least in these instances, Herriman is using *Krazy Kat* to portray the incongruities of race relations in American culture at the time, and in particular, of passing. Krazy, hostile to black Ignatz yet, in many ways, black herself, becomes Herriman's self-portrait, especially when one considers that Herriman never publicly admitted his ethnicity, even going so far as to partake in the pervasive racial stereotyping of the time in his earlier comic strip, *Musical Mose*. Yet even in *Mose*, Herriman demonstrated self-awareness, conveying the sadness and irony inherent in passing. Mose, a pitch-black, thick-lipped caricature, angers two Scottish women by playing bagpipes and 'impussanating' a Scotsman. As they beat him and kick him, he laments, 'I wish mah color would fade.' 'Why didn't yo impussanate a cannibal,' asks his wife.[39]

Some critics, using these instances of racial and socio-political commentary as examples, have implied that there is a ubiquitous 'black aesthetic' governing *Krazy Kat*. As mentioned earlier, Ishmael Reed dedicated his 1972 novel *Mumbo Jumbo* to 'George Herriman, Afro-American', and David Dault portrays the strip as an externalised narrative

[38] 26/7/21; 22/6/35; 6/10/35.
[39] Unknown date, c.1902.


KRAZY KAT
YES.
NO.
SUCCESS
HEH-HEH-H-H-
AS IF —
AS IF —
GRAN BALLE
BAA, WHY WASTE TIME, STOVE PIPE, MOUSE, BRICK - EVERY THING, EVERY BODY - OVER?!!!
TEATRO DE LAS PULGAS
LIL BLONDISH BEAUTIFIL - SO PINK - SO FAIR - SO LIKE A PRIMP ROSE. WHERE IS HE AT NOW?
JOSE CUERVO
BLAP
HAA - A LIL EETIOPIUM MICE BLECK LIKE A MONTH FROM MIDNIGHTS - FUWI -
OH-YES?
OOY-Y-Y-SOTCH A NOIVE -
POW
ZIP
I GOT A GREAT CARE WHO I ISSOCIATE WIT - Y-Y-Y' SUN BOINT HOFFA HAKE —
THIS WILL TITCH SOTTIN PIPPILS TO KEEP IN THEIR OWN SOCIAL SPEARS FRESH NOGG.
© 1935, King Features Syndicate, Inc. Great Britain rights reserved.
HYE - THIS TIME !!! I'LL
POW
ZIP
IGNATZ - DOLLIN -
6-22
HAPPY AS A TREE FULL OF LARKS - THANKS TO MY EFFORTS IN KEEPING THAT MOUSE OUT OF HIS WAY.
HERRIMAN

of passing and blackness. None of these arguments have articulated what the traits of such an aesthetic should be. Yet *Krazy Kat* does fit snugly into black folklorist Zora Neale Hurston's contemporaneous 'Characteristics of Negro Expression', from 1934. Drama and adornment typifies black speech, writes Hurston, 'his very words are action words. His interpretation of the English language is in terms of pictures. One act described in terms of another. Hence the rich metaphor and simile … the Negro thinks in hieroglyphics.'[40] The same thing can be said of Krazy, who turns 'restaurants' in 'retsa runts,' 'horse' into 'horts,' 'people' into 'pippils' and 'reading' into 'riddin.'[41]

All black arts are angular, continues Hurston, 'Everything that he touches becomes angular. In all African sculpture and doctrine of any sort we find the same thing.'[42] *Krazy Kat* is angular in more ways than one. The narrative, landscape and dialogue are punctuated by sharp twists and turns, and Herriman's drawing style has more in common with cubism and primitivism than with the styles of other comic strips from the time. One episode sees Krazy on roller skates, striking one angular pose after another, while white, round Offissa Pupp flails. 'Anyone watching Negro dancers will be struck by the same phenomenon,' says Hurston. 'Every posture is another angle. Pleasing, yes. But an effect achieved by the very means which an European strives to avoid.'[43] Thus, Pupp staggers and fumbles while Krazy, the 'Negro dancer', conveys angularity with grace and poise. It is telling that F. Scott Fitzgerald, Pablo Picasso and Ernest Hemingway, who were all admirers of *Krazy Kat*, also adopted Josephine Baker as their muse.

Krazy Kat can therefore be read, in certain instances, as racial allegory, and as an example of 'Negro art', as defined by Hurston. Reading the strip in its epic entirety in this way is problematic, since Krazy's character, echoing the character of the strip as a whole, is indeterminate. To depict passing through comic-strip characters is itself a re-enactment of passing, creating another degree of separation through caricature. The examples in which Herriman comments on the incongruity of race relations can just as easily be interpreted as Herriman observing the superficiality of

[40] Zora Neale Hurston, 'Characteristics of Negro Expression', in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, ed. Vincent Leitch (New York; London: W.W. Norton, 2001). p.1146.
[41] 20/11/38.
[42] Hurston, 'Characteristics', *Norton*, p.1149.
[43] *ibid*., p.1149.

race, comparing it to ink on paper, as when an ostrich steals all the ink in Coconino and paints himself black with it, leaving all the other characters colourless and pale. As Benjamin notes, 'complication becomes simplicity, fate freedom. For the character of the comic figure is not the scarecrow of the determinist; it is the beacon in whose beams the freedom of his actions becomes visible.'[44] In other words, any interpretation is bound to resonate. Logic, or the desire for logic—like the brick, or the unsuspecting victim of slapstick—are invited in by the apparent clumsiness of the slapstick comedian and the improvisational nature of the larger text that he represents, only to be sent reeling. In this way, what appears to be an inverted food chain in *Krazy Kat*, with mouse pursuing cat, is actually perfectly natural. Krazy invites Ignatz in by desiring the brick, yet comes out on top, having accumulated more meaning with each brick, while remaining consistent in her inconsistency.

5

Coconino County mirrors these changes in Krazy's character, as well as the sublimations and subterfuges involved in the love triangle. Mesas, mountains, rivers, huts, chimneys, trees, cacti, shrubs, flags, towns, canyons, ziggurats, pyramids, bungalows and archways appear and disappear in an arbitrary, disjunctive, juxtaposed fashion. Angular motifs on the surfaces of landforms and in the foliage accentuate the vibrancy of these transitions. Trees turn into houses, houses into moons, clear skies burgeon into psychedelic patchworks. Rocks shaped like rattlesnakes become colossal, skewed sunflowers. Bushes grow pots, their curvature turns angular, one bush becomes many that merge into a lampshade, which in turn becomes another pot-plant perched atop an archway.[45]

The undulating milieu of Coconino is made conspicuous by its lack of interaction with the foreground narrative, which it reflects, but does not interfere with. The two enjoy a paratactic relationship. The protagonists continue their pursuits, unaffected by their surroundings, un-agitated by its 'continual agitation.'[46] Only outsiders notice, as when an exhausted chameleon complains of 'this krazy kwilt country of yours that has so fatigued me—my travels through it have been a series of one violent

[44] Benjamin, 'Fate and Character', in *Selected Writings Vol. 1*, p.205.
[45] 5/12/26; 30/8/31; 23/9/28.
[46] Seldes, 'The Krazy Kat That Walks by Himself', *The Comic Art of George Herriman*, p.17.

change of color after another' (this chameleon could potentially be analogous to the majority of readers who were dumbfounded by *Krazy Kat*'s surrealism).[47]

Like Keaton chasing his train and his girl across the American South in *The General* (1926), the protagonists of *Krazy Kat* stage motile domestic conflict against an equally transitive frontier-land.[48] Ignatz doesn't notice a tree becoming a raddish and growing a moustache, or a pair of bushes wearing a top hat and a vest. The only constant is the log on which he sits, his soliloquising unperturbed by the locale shifting around him. One instance sees him and Krazy sitting on a wall, behind a tree, peeping out of two potholes, inside wooden boxes, all within four panels. Another sees Krazy waiting for Ignatz, unmoved by a cactus that changes into a rock, a wall that materialises, a clock on a cliff face, or a couch transforming into a miniature house. Like the paradoxes of the love triangle, or the multifaceted brick, Coconino presents itself as an imagistic continuum, as though it were comprised of mirages that have been cemented, by the sheer tenacity with which they reappear, into truth-illusions.

As in Robert Weine's *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1919), there is no 'realistic motivation' of the 'uppity', expressionist setting by the events taking place in the foreground. Instead, Coconino's perpetual motion resembles the process put forward by Freud by which 'dream-thoughts' are rearranged and enciphered by 'dream-work.' Dream-thoughts, says Freud, are comprised of the unresolved accumulation of a day's events, which resurface at night when one is on the verge of sleep:

> A tissue of thoughts, usually a very complicated one, which has been built up during the day and has not been completely dealt with—'a day's residue'—continues during the night to retain the quota of energy—the 'interest'—claimed by it, and threatens to disturb sleep. This 'day's residue' is transformed

[47] 1/1/28.

[48] Daniel Moews, *Keaton: The Silent Features Close Up* (Los Angeles, CA; London: University of California Press, 1977), p.218. Moews' description of *The General* bears striking resemblance to the love triangle comprising Ignatz, Krazy, Offissa Pupp and between them, the brick: 'Boy, girl, and machine have been structured into an amiable and slightly fantastic triangle, one in which differences between the human and the mechanical…have been visually erased'.

> by the dream-work into a dream and made innocuous to sleep.[49]

Ruskin, prefiguring Freud, portrays the imagination hovering 'over the unindexed and immeasurable mass of treasure [of remembrances]…broody and wandering, but dream-gifted, so as to summon at any moment exactly such groups of ideas as shall justly fit each other.'[50] Moreover, says Freud, that which resides on the periphery of the dream-thought can be displaced from isolation and centrally transposed by the dream-work, 'appearing with great sensory intensity in the manifest dream.'[51]

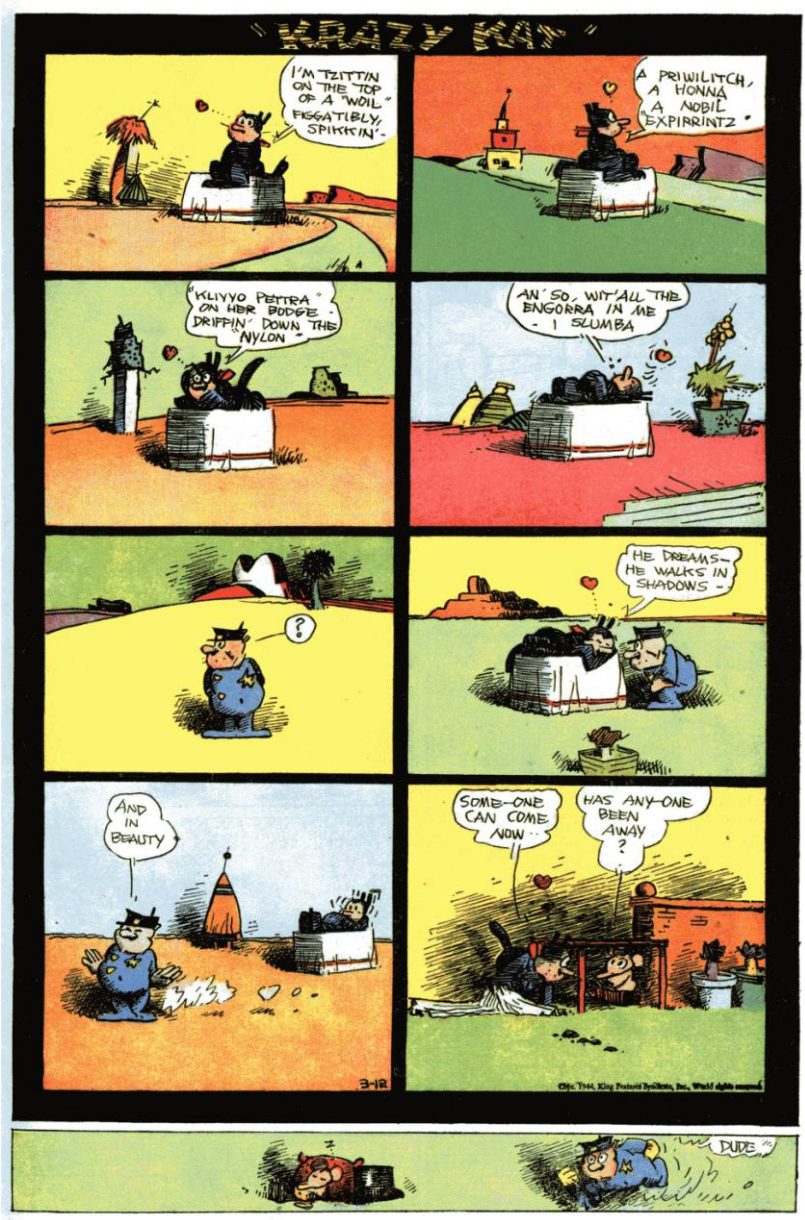
Coconino County can then be read as the dream-work pertaining to the 'manifest dream' of *Krazy Kat* as a whole. The ripples caused by the sublime, paradoxical love triangle accumulate on the periphery of the setting, like dream-thoughts, whereupon dream-work subjects them to perpetual rearrangement, for they are perpetual paradoxes, unresolved by one or an infinite number of daily or Sunday pages. So they reappear 'with great sensory intensity in the manifest dream,' undulating behind the foreground in a regulated sequence of enciphered forms. According to Ruskin,

> If we insist on perfect intelligibility and complete declaration in every moral subject, we shall instantly fall into misery and disbelief. Our whole happiness and power of energetic action depend upon our being able to breathe and live in the cloud.[52]

The ability to navigate the 'cloud' of ambiguity is necessary for *Krazy Kat*'s readers as well as its protagonists. The 'happiness' of the former and 'energetic action' of the latter depend on it. Freud says:

> Not only does [the dream] not need to set any store by intelligibility, it must actually avoid being understood, for otherwise it would be destroyed; it can only exist in masquerade. For that reason it can without hindrance make

[49] Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, ed. and trans. James Strachey (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1963), p.160.
[50] John Ruskin, *Modern Painters*, v.4, pt.5: 'Of Mountain Beauty', London: George Allen, 1904, p.42.
[51] Freud, *Jokes*, p.164.
[52] Ruskin, *Modern Painters*, p.89.


KRAZY KAT
I'M TZITTIN ON THE TOP OF A "WOIL" FIGGATIBLY SPIKKIN'.
A PRIWILITCH, A HONNA A NOBIL EXPIRRINTZ.
"KLIYYO PETTRA" ON HER BODGE DRIFFIN' DOWN THE NYLON.
AN' SO, WIT'ALL THE ENGORRA IN ME - I SLUMBA
?
HE DREAMS— HE WALKS IN SHADOWS.
AND IN BEAUTY.
SOME-ONE CAN COME NOW..
HAS ANY-ONE BEEN AWAY?
3-12
DUDE

> use of the mechanism that dominates unconscious mental processes, to the point of a distortion which can no longer be set straight.[53]

Indeed, when Krazy asks Ignatz, 'efta all…what's it all about anyhow?', Ignatz responds, 'only a dream, I'd say.' Krazy persists, 'yes—and what's a drim?', to which Ignatz replies, along with the brick, 'Ahh-shux—you want to know too dern much.'[54] When Krazy tells Ignatz in another instance that, 'It's wot's behind me that I am…it's the idea behind me, 'Ignatz' and that's wot I am,' she is acknowledging the role of the landscape, as Ruskin's 'cloud' and Freud's 'masquerade' and dream-work, in further obscuring the already elusive 'idea' implied by *Krazy Kat*'s surrealism. As Seldes points out, 'In an attitude of a contortionist Krazy points to the blank space behind him, and it is there that we must look for the "Idea".'[55]

6

Perpetual metamorphosis and indeterminacy govern Krazy's dialogue in the same way that it does her identity and the setting. Just as instances of her racial and sexual identity appear and disappear out of context like the landforms of Coconino, so images swell, subside and circumvent the visual parameters of the speech bubble, as well as the limits of correct syntax and grammar. Hyphens abound, resembling both the diagonal trajectory of the brick between Krazy and Ignatz, and the proclivity of *Krazy Kat* in general towards suspense and suspension—of time, logic and disbelief—in place of conventional punctuation of sentence or story. 'Insupportable nil, plus nul –', says Pupp, watching Ignatz, 'he has in his head, a 'thought'—and I can't see what it is - - - and he knows I can't - - - - -g-g-gripes me - -.'[56] Similarly, the excess of quotation marks—as in every time a character's name appears—mirrors the implication, perhaps purposely perpetuated by Herriman, that meanings are 'nested' within every aspect of the strip.

In the case of language, this pervasive, paratactic aesthetic makes each phrase or cluster of words between words of quotation marks appear

[53] Freud, *Jokes*, p.179.
[54] 25/2/19.
[55] Seldes, 'The Krazy Kat That Walks by Himself', *The Comic Art of George Herriman*, p.17.
[56] 11/2/41.

contemplative, as though it weighed on syntax itself. This staggering of meaning is accentuated by Herriman's theatrical staging of dialogue and narration. Each of the protagonists are prone to soliloquising. Krazy, noticing Ignatz is not in jail, muses:

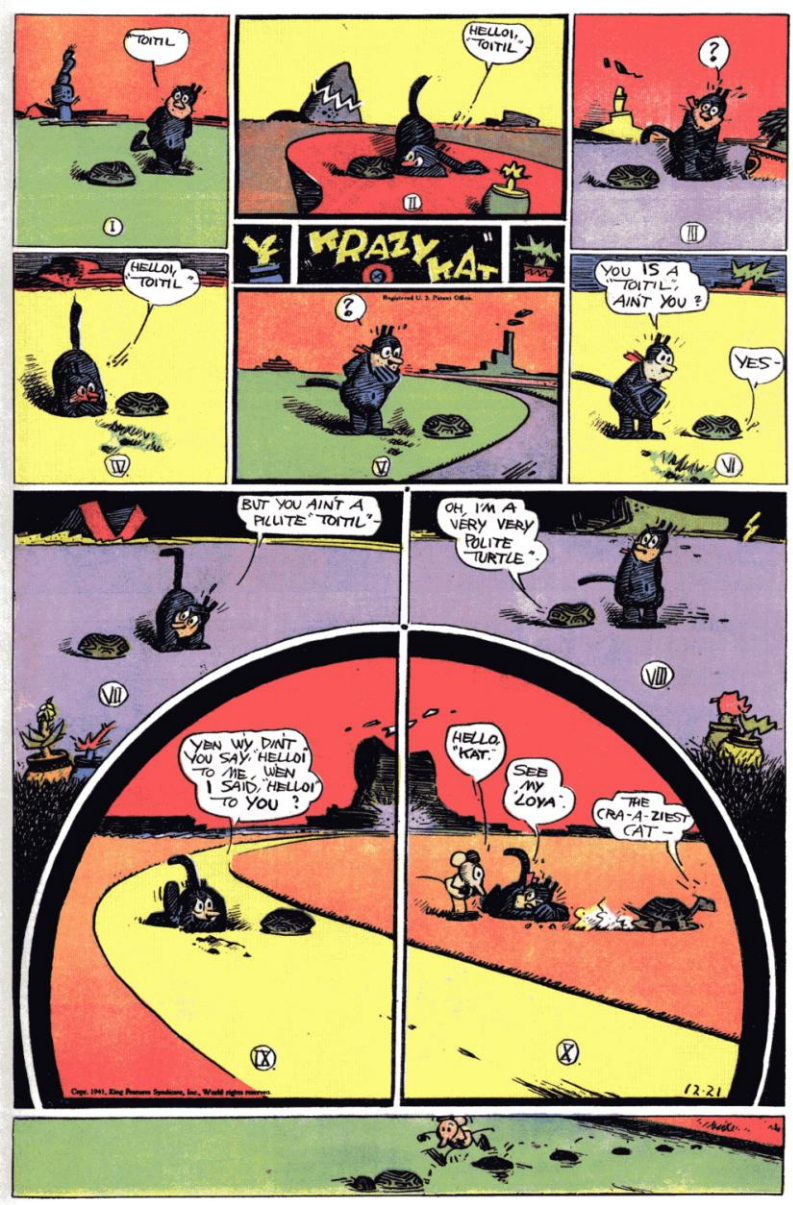
> Out? And yet, he ain't always out—there is sometimes when he's in—is it fate, I wunda?—is it a hebit –? Is it a game?—Who can ansa me that? It all smex so much of a puzzil—or why is it all so thus?—I can't figga it out—sometimes—ah, yes, sometimes I sispech Offissa Pupp of having a hend in all this.[57]

Krazy's existential wondering puts her in the place of the reader, unsure of the exact meaning of the continuously re-enacted drama, which 'smex' alternatively of 'fate,' a 'game,' 'hebit' and a 'puzzil.' Ignatz, who is incidentally the most well-spoken of the three, sees his purpose in the drama romantically:

> The crescent moon looms upon the horizon of 'Red Lake', it will rise, and wax aflame, so that when Krazy comes to keep his tryst with me I will have clear vision in which to smite him—and while it is in process of arising, I will give way to slumber, and to rest—an added aid to my arm, and aim.[58]

Ignatz's poetic ability contrasts with Krazy's in that it is intentional. Krazy is the archetypal 'fool', in that she is perceived as such by others who, like her, are unaware of her accidental insights. Her hieroglyphic and phonetic perception of words allows her to reinterpret them, making them assume new guises. Sometimes these new guises are non-sequiturs, as when 'whistle' becomes 'witzil'—more often, they comment on the paradox of the love triangle, as when 'violets' become 'wiolence' and 'weep' becomes 'wipp', or when 'idea' becomes the sublime gap in logic that is 'ida.' Like the brick imbued with new purpose, unassuming words are animated and made multifaceted. 'Palaces, cathedrals and kings' castles have been built of them', says Pupp of bricks, 'great baronial halls, and mansions of mighty mandarins…peoples the world over have fashioned them, and builded with them the humble hut of them the peasant.' Krazy retorts and

[57] 14/7/29.
[58] 25/3/28.


"TOITIL"
I
"HELLOI, "TOITIL"
II
?
III
KRAZY KAT
"HELLOI, "TOITIL"
IV
?
V
YOU IS A "TOITIL", AINT YOU ?
YES
VI
BUT YOU AINT A PILITE "TOITIL"
VII
OH, I'M A VERY VERY POLITE "TURTLE"
VIII
YEN WY DINT YOU SAY "HELLOI" TO ME, WEN I SAID "HELLOI" TO YOU ?
IX
HELLO, "KAT"
SEE, MY LOVA
THE CRA-A-ZIEST CAT
X
12-21

distorts, 'Pellissis, kiddeedrils, mentions for mendolin, king's kessels—huts for pheasints—golla, I wunda wot else you can build with a brick—if any?'[59] The remark is self-reflexive, for while Krazy is 'wunda-ing' what can be done with a brick, she is showing what can be done with a word.

7

Within the elasticity of *Krazy Kat*'s aesthetic, language, race, gender, time and setting are stretched to accommodate endless improvisation on Herriman's part, and interpretation on the part of the reader. The kind of violence enacted on these concepts to reveal their malleability is the same as that which is conveyed through the brick and experienced by Krazy, and by all cartoon characters and slapstick comedians in one form or another. In Leslie's words, it is 'painless, dreamlike, as if it were more of a utopian transfiguration of actuality's discord.'[60] In early episodes, when Krazy responds to being hit by the brick by singing, 'there is a heppy land, fur-fur away,' she is echoing this sentiment.[61] The 'fantastic biologies' of Krazy and other slapstick comedians, and the narratives they generate, are utopian in that they sublimate violence into physical 'transformation, or metamorphosis, of the self,' disseminating it throughout their many facets to create a resonant whole.[62]

The influence of this utopian, sublimated violence and of *Krazy Kat* in particular on Walt Disney can be seen in early Disney cartoons. Disney admired Herriman, and wrote to Herriman's daughter when her father died, stating that, 'as one of the pioneers in the cartoon business, his contributions to it were so numerous that they may well never be estimated.'[63] In *Steamboat Willie*, the first Mickey Mouse cartoon in sound, loosely based on Keaton's *Steamboat Bill Jr*, anthropomorphised animals and objects are stretched, knotted, inflated, lifted, pulled, deformed and violated in an anarchic, inconsequential way. Benjamin observed that, 'here we see for the first time that it is possible to have one's own arm, even one's own body, stolen.'[64] Teeth slide open like windows to spit out

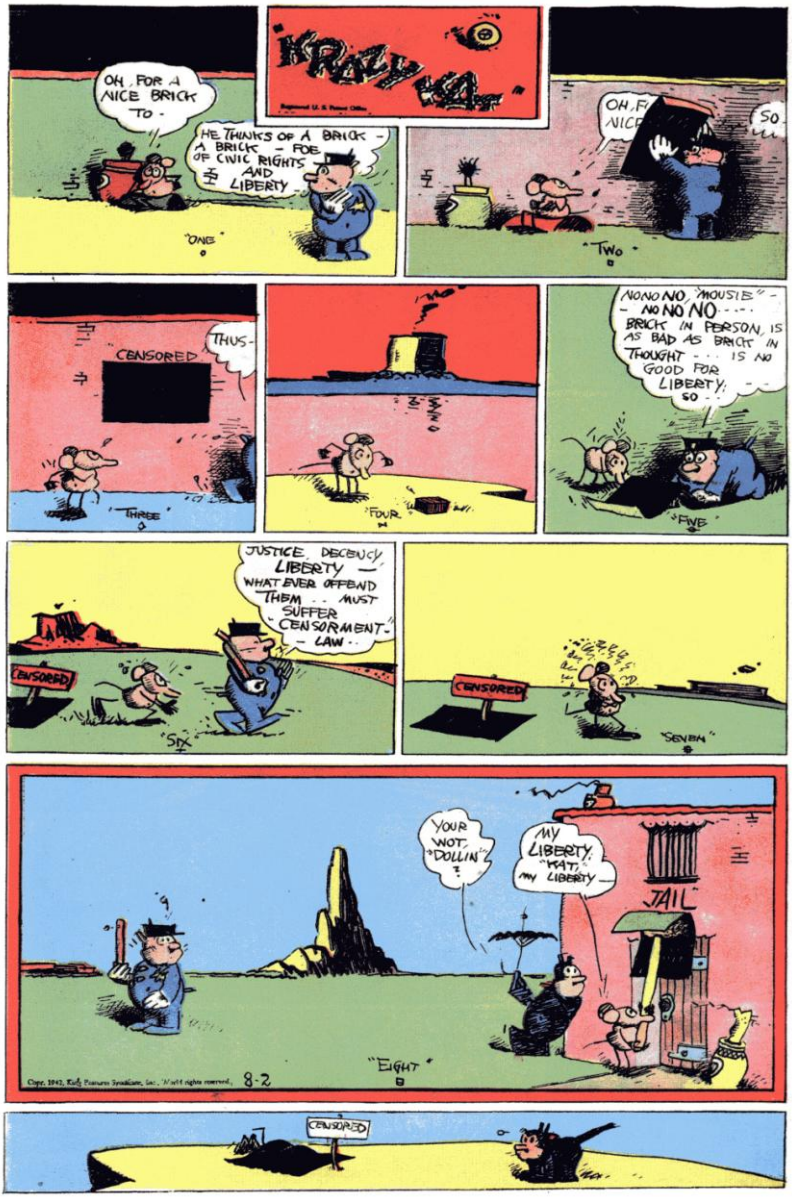
[59] 6/12/36; 5/7/25; 16/8/25.
[60] Leslie, *Hollywood Flatlands*, p.2.
[61] 1/2/25.
[62] Orvell, *After the Machine*, p.29.
[63] In *The Comic Art of George Herriman*, p.26.
[64] Walter Benjamin, 'Mickey Mouse', *Selected Writings Volume 2: 1927-1934*, p.545.

chewed tobacco. The backs of boats move like tails. A crane lifts up Minnie's dress so as to grab her by the bloomers and yank her aboard. At the same time, her suitcase falls open on the deck, revealing the sheet music for 'Turkey in the Straw,' a well-known folk song made up of double entendres. A goat eats the music, his mouth is fixed open and his tail is cranked like a gramophone. Mickey plays along with his tail as well as his hands. In a moment that almost breaks the 'painless, dreamlike' quality of cartoon violence, he pushes down on a cat with his leg while pulling its tail, creating rhythmic yelps that are disturbing and comic. He then swings the cat around and throws it headfirst into a pan. The sequence of cruelty continues with Mickey squeezing a goose like a bagpipe, pulling the tails of suckling piglets so they squeal in time, and playing the teeth and tongue of a cow like a xylophone. Like Krazy, the animals augment the violence that is being enacted upon them by their indifference to it.

Such turmoil was eerie enough for Benjamin to declare that, 'in these films, mankind makes preparations to survive civilization…[Mickey] disrupts the entire hierarchy of creatures that is supposed to culminate in mankind.'[65] Baudrillard adds that Disney was, 'that inspired precursor to a universe where all past or present forms meet in a playful promiscuity, where all cultures recur in a mosaic (including the cultures of the future, which are themselves already recurrent).'[66] Similar rhetoric applies to *Krazy Kat*. In Orvell's words, Coconino is, 'a self-contained aesthetic universe largely impervious to history.'[67] Carrier states that

> like an Arcadia, Coconino County…lies outside history and 'civilization'…Krazy Kat is infantile or (is this perhaps the same thing ultimately?) posthistorical… History is not over so much as not yet started. Herriman is conservative or, if you will, utopian.[68]

[65] *ibid*., p.545.
[66] Baudrillard, from *The Illusion of the End*, trans. Chris Turner, in *The Postmodernism Reader*, ed. Michael Drolet (London; New York: Routledge, 2004), p.275.
[67] Orvell, *After the Machine*, p.131-132.
[68] Carrier, *The Aesthetics of Comics* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000), p.97.


KRAZY KAT
OH, FOR A NICE BRICK TO -
HE THINKS OF A BRICK - A BRICK - FOR CIVIC RIGHTS AND LIBERTY -
ONE
OH, F NICE
SO
TWO
CENSORED
THUS -
THREE
FOUR
NONONO, MOUSIE. - NO NO NO - BRICK IN PERSON, IS AS BAD AS BRICK IN THOUGHT - IS NO GOOD FOR LIBERTY. - SO -
FIVE
JUSTICE, DECENCY, LIBERTY — WHATEVER OFFEND THEM - MUST SUFFER CENSORMENT - LAW -
CENSORED
SIX
CENSORED
SEVEN
YOUR WOT, DOLLIN'?
MY LIBERTY, WOT MY LIBERTY -
JAIL
EIGHT
8-2
CENSORED

The sublimation of violence places *Krazy Kat*, and therefore Disney, in the realm of pre- and post-modernity, as well as pre- and post-history. Temporality becomes staggered. 'Well, Kop,' says Ignatz, in the first panel of a Sunday page, 'as usual—in this picture we gather, me, you, kat. In this picture—we plot—in this one—what ho, Kelly? — brick! Like a bud—the plot—swells—unfolds—and flowers—into this beautiful—climax –we call it 'finale',' as he throws the brick at Krazy. 'And I call it, 'overture'—don't we, 'K'?' says Pupp, pouncing on Ignatz, 'and now, mousie, guess what we do—in the next picture.' 'We rehearse,' replies Ignatz.[69] The 'finale' comes halfway through, followed by the 'overture', and the ending signifies that it is time for a 'rehearsal.' Utopianism is conveyed as temporal rearrangement, through increments of time presented like the panels of a comic strip, the order in which they are read being entirely up to the reader.

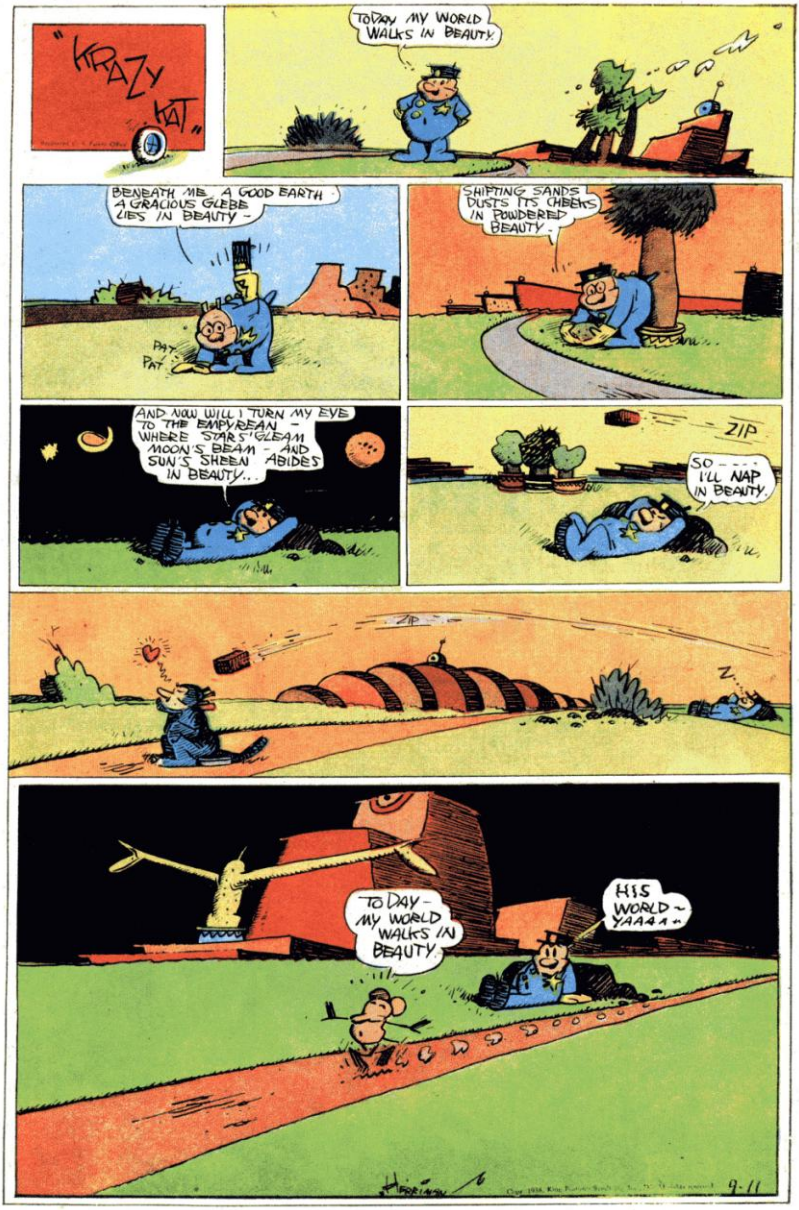
8

When Chaplin's *The Gold Rush* was released in 1925, the editor of *Movie Classics Magazine* asked Herriman if he would like to review the film. Herriman had previously stated that Chaplin was one of his two favourite 'Chorleses', the other being Dickens. Herriman obliged, downplaying not only his own 'kritical' ability but the practice of criticism in general, in the printed review. 'Me, make kritical remarks, me analyze, me krack wise animadversions about holy shux, I should be so loose with my language, I should be so kareless with my khirography, I should get so free with fustian.' He portrays Chaplin in terms easily applicable to Krazy—'the magic of transmutation takes place … there is no question of why he is here, slipping, sliding or scampering … we have waited long to katch this sprite at play'—and concludes by declaring:

> Let all the kobblers of earth fashion flat shoes, all awry—and all the tailors trim trousers as loose as gunny sacks, put all the reeds of the world into kanes, and let the hatter go mad making Derbies—then pour into them the genius of another Chaplin. It is as easy as writing kriticism—mes amis—Twice as easy!!!!! And now, Ignatz!! The BRICK!!![70]

[69] 25/1/42.

[70] Herriman, ' 'The Gold Rush' as Seen by Krazy Kat', in *Krazy & Ignatz 1925-1926*, p.9.


"KRAZY KAT"
TODAY MY WORLD WALKS IN BEAUTY.
BENEATH ME A GOOD EARTH A GRACIOUS GLEBE LIES IN BEAUTY -
PAT PAT
SHIFTING SANDS DUSTS ITS CHEEKS IN POWDERED BEAUTY -
AND NOW WILL I TURN MY EYE TO THE EMPYREAN - WHERE STARS GLEAM MOON'S BEAM - AND SUN'S SHEEN ABIDES IN BEAUTY..
ZIP
SO - - - - I'LL NAP IN BEAUTY.
ZIP
TO DAY - MY WORLD WALKS IN BEAUTY
HIS WORLD - YAAAA..
9-11

'Kriticism' is therefore as easy as replicating genius—that is, impossible—and deserving of the brick. At the same time, intellectualism—as demonstrated by the variety of interpretations applicable to *Krazy Kat*—also resembles Ignatz's perpetual brick-throwing in its continuous attempts at definition. Krazy then mirrors not only the text in which she appears but the slapstick text in general, inasmuch as she invites and avoids clarification, alchemising the analytical brick into hagiography, a 'missil of love and iffection.' Slapstick is characterised by, amongst other things, impulse and the deflating of pomposity. *Krazy Kat* is therefore an archetype of slapstick in that it impels the pompous act of criticism, the unthinking urge to *think* something through, yet it ultimately avoids all efforts to that end.

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The Wire and Realism

JULIAN MURPHET

…to teach…

Cicero once proposed that a true orator capable of explaining 'forensic disputes' was characterized by 'a style of speaking calculated at once to teach, to delight, and to move.' At some point in the rhetorical tradition, this three-pronged formulation of the use value of forensic speech was transposed to the literary work of art, and during the Renaissance it was common to say with Sir Phillip Sidney that poetry is 'a speaking picture, with this end: to teach and delight.'[1] In the main line of modern aesthetics descending from Kant, however, the first of these use values of the literary text was subtracted from its appreciation, which was henceforth to be conducted under the sign of 'disinterest' and 'impersonality'—qualities scarcely to be associated with the didactic drive of the rhetoric of instruction. As Michael McKeon notes, 'modernity conceived pleasure and instruction, the 'aesthetic' and the 'didactic', as essentially incompatible ends.'[2] Indeed, so thorough had been the Kantian disengagement of the pedagogic function from the aesthetic contract that Fredric Jameson could write, in the mid-1980s, that the imperative 'to teach' had 'virtually been eclipsed from contemporary criticism and theory.'[3] Inasmuch as that was the case, it could simultaneously be proposed that, if there was any sub-tradition within aesthetics that ought never to cede on its commitment to

[1] Sir Phillip Sidney, *An Apologie for Poesy*, in James Harry Smith and Edd Winfied Parks (eds), *The Great Critics: An Anthology of Literary Criticism*, 3rd ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1951), p. 196.
[2] Michael McKeon, from Prose Fiction: Great Britain, selection in McKeon (ed), *Theory of the Novel: A Historical Approach* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), p. 611.
[3] Fredric Jameson, 'Cognitive Mapping,' in Lawrence Grossberg and Cary Nelson (eds.), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1988), p. 347.

the didactic principle, it was the Marxist one: 'the pedagogical function of a work of art seems in various forms to have been an inescapable parameter of any conceivable Marxist aesthetic.' Contrary to the Kantian problematic, Marxism has always insisted on what Jameson follows Darko Suvin in calling a 'cognitive aesthetic'—an imperative to 'make known' from within the protocols and conventions of artistic production; to represent the unrepresentable social object (its totality or systemic nature) by way of tactical figural devices that 'map' it allegorically; without at the same time abandoning those other imperatives—to move, and to delight—without which the aesthetic can hardly distinguish itself from routine instruction.

Marx himself is known to have admired the Royalist Balzac ('a novelist who is in general distinguished by his profound grasp of real conditions'[4]), a preference that informed Engels' later enthusiasm: '*There is* the history of France from 1815 to 1848, far more than in all the Vaulabelles, Capefigues, Louis Blancs *et tutti quanti*. And what boldness! What a revolutionary dialectic in his poetical justice!'[5] Then there is Marx's extraordinary valuation of the mid-nineteenth century flowering of English realism, in one of his dispatches for the New York *Tribune*: 'The present splendid brotherhood of fiction-writers in England, whose graphic and eloquent pages have issued to the world more political and social truths than have been uttered by all the professional politicians, publicists and moralists put together, have described every section of the middle class from the 'highly genteel' annuitant and Fundholder who looks upon all sorts of business as vulgar, to the little shopkeeper and lawyer's clerk.'[6] Here the claims on behalf of literature's cognitive yield approach the hyperbolic, and it was through rhetorical gestures such as this that the relationship between Marxism and realism would be cemented into a critical convention—the kind that imagines it knows what Georg Lukács has to say without ever having to read him. Subsequent generations of Western Marxists would attempt to reroute Marxist aesthetics away from their association with realism (and graft them on to the modernist trunk), but it would be fair to say that there remains an inescapable gravitational pull between a critical political economy geared towards a cognitive

[4] Karl Marx, *Capital, Vol. 3*, trans. David Fernbach (London: Penguin, 1991), p. 130.
[5] Freidrich Engels, Letter to Laura Lafargue, December 13, 1883. Reprinted in *Marx Engels on Literature and Art* (Progress Publishers, 1976), p.
[6] Karl Marx, 'The English Middle Class' , August 1, 1854, *Dispatches from the New York* Tribune, ed. James Ledbetter (London: Penguin, 2007), p. 143.

disambiguation of capitalism, and a literary aesthetic similarly invested in a pitiless anatomization of the bourgeois social terrain. The perverse thing about realism being that, precisely where it is most distorted and unlikely, most given to caricature, there it is most truthful, as Terry Eagleton has proposed of Dickens:

> Dickens's bunch of grotesques, perverts, amiable idiots and moral monstrosities … are realistic … they are true to a new kind of [urban] social experience. Dickens's grotesque realism is a stylistic distortion in the service of truth, a kind of astigmatism which allows us to see more accurately. …[H]is imagination is inherently biased and partisan, seizing on a few salient features of a situation rather than giving us a rounded portrait.[7]

This is, indeed, how the contemporary Marxist tends to settle his debts with the realist tradition: reading it against itself in order to show how it comes closest to the truth where it deviates most strongly from the plausible. It is a version of this very manoeuvre that I will be trying out on our own representative realist text, somewhat later in this essay.

Dissing Dickens

But not before introducing its author, David Simon, who has been heard to insist that (like Marx) 'I'm not a Marxist,' even though, on the basis of his masterpiece, the five-season HBO sleeper-hit crime series *The Wire*, 'I'm often mistaken for a Marxist.'[8] And there are good reasons, given the ongoing conventional relationship between Marxism and the kind of realism for which his show is generally celebrated, why the label continues to be applied; though it pays to attend to Simon's fateful words, 'We're stuck with [capitalism] and hey, thank God we have it.' For *The Wire* concerns itself with the same kind of social canvas as was assayed by that 'splendid brotherhood of fiction-writers in England' whose members (Thackeray, Dickens, Gaskell, etc.) first began to make of their contemporary social space a proper object for aesthetic pedagogy—via a diversity of character types; an extensive narrative duration allowing for an analysis of the causes of social change; a journalistic commitment to the

[7] Terry Eagleton, *The English Novel: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), p. 149

[8] Quoted in an interview for *Vice*, p. 2.

minutiae of everyday life, including mimetic fidelities with regard to speech patterns, dress styles, and gestures; the incorporation of real-life urban figures; a more or less comprehensive survey of a selected urban domain; a critical analysis of various social institutions; and perhaps above all, realism's modern touch, a critical and negative relationship with previous exercises in a genre. That all of this now takes place on television, rather than a triple-decker novel, is the signal innovation of a program that patently advertises itself, and tends to be discussed, in terms usually reserved for literature. Indeed, the cultural barometer being what it is right now, the time has never been more auspicious for a novel conceived along precisely these lines—critical fortune today favoring the 1989 call of Tom Wolfe for

> the big realistic novel … a highly detailed realism based on reporting … a novel *of the city*, in the sense that Balzac and Zola had written novels *of Paris*, and Dickens and Thackeray had written novels *of London*.[9]

But *The Wire* is a TV series, a fact that could not render the relationship between it and its fictional forebears more fitting, since for most of that 'splendid brotherhood' of realists, their novels' publication occurred first of all in serial format, installments arriving each month (twenty for *Bleak House*) just as Simon's show went to air on HBO in ten-to-thirteen weekly episodes per season, over five years.[10]

The parallels appearing inescapable, it is then instructive to note that Season Five (aired in 2008) is strewn with references to Charles Dickens. In the second episode, the executive editor of *The Baltimore Sun*, James Whiting, following a story about inner-city children being failed by the state education system, asks that his journalists attend to the situation in a

[9] Tom Wolfe, 'Stalking the Billion-Footed Beast: A Literary Manifesto for the New Social Novel,' *Harper's Magazine* (Nov., 1989): 45-56.

[10] Mark Bowden observes that 'Some years ago, Tom Wolfe called on novelists to abandon the cul-de-sac of modern 'literary' fiction, which he saw as self-absorbed, thumb-sucking gamesmanship, and instead to revive social realism, to take up as a subject the colossal, astonishing, and terrible pageant of contemporary America. I doubt he imagined that one of the best responses to this call would be a TV program, but the boxed sets blend nicely on a bookshelf with the great novels of American history.' See *The Atlantic* (Jan/Feb, 2008), http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2008/01/the-angriest-man-in-television/6581/, accessed on 30.9.10.

literary register: 'The word I am thinking of is Dickensian. We want to depict the Dickensian lives of city children, and then show clearly and concisely where the school system has failed them.' When the attention of the city is redirected, later in the season in episode six, to the plight of Baltimore's homeless, he returns to the epithet, now encouraging staff to highlight the 'Dickensian aspect' of that growing army of indigents. The knee-jerk contempt with which this suggestion is met by city desk editor Gus Haynes (our moral exemplar) sends a clear signal to the viewer that the word is loaded with pejorative connotations, which on first pass appears an odd thing. Indeed, Dickens seems to have hovered to this point like a totem over the entire series, as commentators and critics were swift to argue during the first run. A *New York Times* editorial referred to the show as 'Dickensian,' for instance, and *Atlantic* writer Mark Bowden proposed that ''*Wire*-world', as [creator David] Simon calls it, does for turn-of-the-millennium Baltimore what Dickens's *Bleak House* does for mid-19th-century London.'[11]

Simon himself, however, while acknowledging that *The Wire* was conceived and executed along the lines of a nineteenth-century novel (it is 'sort of a visual novel,' he suggests, written in chapters that are not self-contained[12]) has insisted that Dickens was not his elected model.

> I understood what [the critics] meant by Dickensian when they said it. You get this sort of scope of society through the classes, the way Dickens would play with that in his novels. But that's true of Tolstoy's Moscow. That's true of Balzac's Paris. … I'm just saying if you use those tropes you can go to a lot of places other than Dickens.[13]

Literary realism, international in scope but rooted in a nineteenth-century horizon, has always remained the unimpeachable standard for Simon, but Dickens fails one specific ideological test that this hard-nosed journalist's sensibilities will supposedly not sanction: sentimental and providential humanism.

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[11] Mark Bowden, *The Atlantic* (Jan/Feb 2008).

[12] See Ian Rothkerch, 'What Drugs Have Not Destroyed, the War on Them Has,' June 29, 2002, Salon.com; and Raphael Alvarez, *The Wire: Truth Be Told*, with David Simon (New York: Grove/Atlantic, 2010), pp. 28, 35-39.

[13] Interview with David Simon for *Vice* magazine, reprinted at http://www.nyccine.com/2009/12/interview-with-wires-david-simon-and.html; accessed 28 September, 2010.

> Dickens is famous for … showing you the fault lines of industrial England and where money and power route themselves away from the poor. He would make the case for a much better social compact than existed in Victorian England, but then his verdict would always be, 'But thank God a nice old uncle or this heroic lawyer is going to make things better'. In the end, the guy would punk out.

So it turns out that the overuse of 'Dickensian' by the executive 'suit' James Whiting 'was a little bit of tongue-in-cheek satire on the show directed at people who were using Dickens to praise us.'[14] Such, it would seem, is televisual realism today: incorporating its own critical canonization, and satirically deflating it for getting the cardinal terms wrong (one can not imagine the words 'Tolstoyan' or 'Balzacian' being subject to such ridicule in *The Wire*: there isn't a character who could utter them in the first place).

Realism and the Urban Object

There are realisms and realisms, as Simon suggests. If the irreducible quality of a realist work of fiction is its abiding commitment to the cognitive yield, to what can be 'learned' through its offices, then clearly for Simon the pedagogical techniques of Dickens (sentimental affect-manipulation; a providential and Christian reward system) no longer apply to the social object with which *The Wire* is concerned—the post-industrial American city. 'It's an accurate portrayal of the problems inherent in American cities,' says Simon, in a formulation that raises many more questions than it answers.[15] What are the criteria of 'accuracy' as regards the cultural representation of as large social object as this one? Why are Dickens's aesthetic solutions for 'portraying' mid-nineteenth-century London no longer applicable to the post-industrial dereliction of early twenty-first-century Baltimore? What aesthetic strategies suggest themselves, and how do these partake of the ongoing critical relationship with exhausted representational paradigms on which Realism rightly prides itself? As for this last point, George Levine has observed that, just like Modernist texts, Realist ones

[14] Ibid.
[15] Ibid.

> struggle to reconstruct a world out of a world deconstructing … all around them. With remarkable frequency, they are alert to the arbitrariness of the reconstructed order toward which they point as they imply the inadequacy of traditional texts and, through self-reference and parody, the tenuousness of their own. But they proceed to take the risk of believing in the possibility of fictions that bring us at least a little closer to what is not ourselves and not merely language.[16]

That being the case, it is worth suggesting that Simon's realism is the result of a critical relationship with the established ways of seeing the American city enshrined in shows such as *Hill Street Blues*, *Law and Order: Los Angeles*, and *C.S.I. Miami*—there being little question that if realism survived the modernist and postmodernist maelstroms, it did so in part by migrating into such sub-generic precincts as crime fiction, where the attempt to 'map the urban totality' could go ahead without any interference from those high-aesthetic tribulations of form.

And here I simply want to single out one factor distinguishing *The Wire*'s 'realism effect' from that of previous crime series—and that is that the urban object at issue is precisely *not* New York, Los Angeles, or Miami. It is *not* a city of spectacle, an over-exposed American cosmopolis or 'world city,' but what Baltimore geographer David Harvey calls

> a mess. Not the kind of enchanting mess that makes cities such interesting places to explore, but an awful mess. … [A] metropolitan world of chronically uneven geographical development.[17]

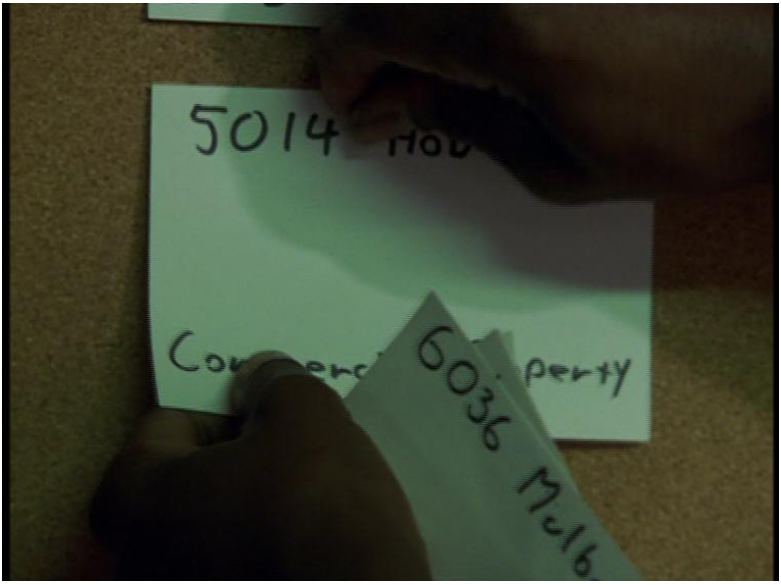
This 'Third World in the First', a decimated urban fabric of 40,000 abandoned homes, epic concentrations of homelessness and unemployment, and lamentable divisions of social access to health and education, is far indeed from the glamorous locations where most TV crime drama continues to be shot; and to the extent that Baltimore is (or was, prior to *The Wire*'s success) effectively 'off the map' of America's spatial

[16] George Levine, from *The Realistic Imagination: English Fiction from Frankenstein to Lady Chatterley*, selection in McKeon (ed.), *Theory of the Novel*, p. 614.
[17] David Harvey, *Spaces of Hope* (Berkeley, LA: University of California Pres, 2000), pp. 133, 148.

imaginary, it offers a strong node of generic resistance and negativity within the still very active generic constraints of a serialized crime drama. It is vital, for this reason, that the show exploit wherever possible the sense of disconnection from the national grid that Baltimore's residents and officials feel, despite the fact (and increasingly because of it) that it lies only forty miles from Washington, D.C., and the greatest concentration of economic and political power in world history. The uneven geographical development that Harvey notes as characteristic of Baltimore's local topography is made to be allegorical of the grotesque uneven development of urban nodes within the national distribution of wealth and power in the USA. Throughout the whole series, not only the local drug dealers and users, with their neo-feudal battles over street turf, but the police force, teachers, stevedores, journalists, civil servants and elected officials, are in turn confronted with the invisible wall separating them from the high-speed capital transfers and labor mobility that dictate the flows of investment and accumulation in an unevenly developed capitalist urban landscape. Throughout Season Three, for instance, Detective Jimmy McNulty (the series' primary protagonist) conducts a frustrating, long-distance affair with a high-octane political strategist from Washington—the point of the failure of their relationship being that Baltimore cannot understand Washington, and Washington does not even see, let alone recognize, Baltimore. 'The only way these guys [Washington in general] would know where West Baltimore is,' grumbles McNulty, 'is if Air Force One had to crash land in the district.' (Season 3, ep. 9) The corner kids whose plight is so achingly evoked in Season Four are made to feel that, Baltimore being effectively destiny, there is nowhere but back to the corner to take their labor power; the rest of Maryland, let alone America or the world, has receded to some fabulous and inaccessible distance that cannot be traversed. One boy, in Season Five, asks the boxing instructor, Cutty, 'How do I get from here to the rest of the world?'—to which the only conceivable answer is, 'I wish I knew,' since Cutty himself has been unable to force an opening in the iron curtain of Baltimore's existential penitentiary for the African-American male. The stevedores in Season Two are bitterly bearing witness to the decline of Baltimore's shipping industry, and the migration of local dock-work out of Maryland; Frank Sobotka raises funds illegally in order to bribe city officials enough to convince them to dredge the Chesapeake and Delaware canal, and reverse the laws of uneven geographical development; but the union is beaten, shipping moves inevitably up and down the coast, and the informal economy swallows up the dignity of organized labor.

Benefits of Uneven Development

But by far the most pressing of the series' engagements with uneven geographical development, and the visibility/invisibility dialectic that underpins it, concerns the agencies of law enforcement—a fact that allows the 'invisibility' trope to migrate into the very apparatuses of surveillance with which the show is preeminently fascinated. For it is a recurrent theme that the Baltimore City Police Department is, to all intents and purposes, not only not a twenty-first century institution, but not yet a twentieth-century one either, and off the map of national policy making and federal funding. The equipment with which a cash-strapped and chronically understaffed police department is obliged to track the street-level operations of the Barksdale and Stanfield crime syndicates, in order to follow the chain of command up the ladder of pawns, lieutenants, and generals, ultimately to the bosses themselves, is ludicrously antediluvian by the future-fetishistic standards of *CSI* and *Dexter*-style technophilia. Season One's definitive figure for this is a prehistoric corkboard onto which mug-shots of the various dealers and soldiers are pinned with rusty thumbtacks.



Even when the first wiretap finally gets up, in episode six, the phones being tapped are fixed public telephones, relics of the 'plain old telephone service' (POTS), using a bi-directional voiceband path with limited frequency range, not that dissimilar from the one Alexander Graham Bell invented. Moreover, the device used to tap them (even though it is monitored on a computer terminal interface) is an analog bugging instrument, as we are informed in Season Three. And to add further insult to the injury of this pre-digital fate, any tapping conducted under these conditions has to be supplemented by a full portfolio of analog corroborations: clandestine 35mm photographs taken by hidden officers of every call made from the tapped booths; hand-written notes; and first-person testimony in the painstakingly type-written police reports (shots of Jimmy McNulty single-digit typing on what looks like a 1976 machine exude the full aroma of period nostalgia, even though the show is set in the early 2000s).

Although the detectives working the Barksdale case are constantly complaining about the superannuation of their equipment, and appealing to the FBI and other agencies for technological assistance, in fact the very 'authenticity' and ultimate success of their investigations, their reliance on antiquated analog machines and manual labour, turns on this period anachronism. Old, analog technology functions figurally in *The Wire*, just

as Baltimore does more generally, as a centre of ideological gravity, a critical negation of the fully computerized crime-scene analyses of the glitzier cop shows. If realism depends for its aesthetic modus operandi on a tactical resistance to the conventions governing a genre, then paradoxically the 'realism effect' can now and then operate via figural regression, a return to an apparently exhausted device for representing the acquisition of knowledge, which is after all the holy grail of this aesthetic. In a situation where, nearer the epicenter of the system, digital technology largely does the thinking for its subjects (and thus deprives them of the 'realism effect'), perversely the reliance of the peripheries on outcast and superseded technology charges them with the capacity for a genuine rush of cognitive pleasure—as when Detective Pryzbylewski cracks the Barksdale crew's 'dumb' telephone code in Season One simply by flipping the three-by-three grid of the touch-tone phone pad on its head. Just as the show affiliates itself with the old-fashioned aesthetic equipment of realism, so too it nostalgically locates the figuration of cognitive labour in pre-digital techniques of knowledge production: manual code breaking, film photography, analog telephony, note-taking, etc.

Defunct technology operates as a working allegory for the geographically uneven development within Baltimore and the USA more widely—the uneven distribution of technology and information 'maps' the unequal national and international distribution of power and finance capital, and in this situation it is the underdeveloped regions that (unexpectedly) retain the capacity for *knowledge* of a system that remains opaque to those nestled closer to its centre of operations. But only, to be sure, if they use their relative subalternity to 'think back' at that other America, whose cracked mirror and Dorian Gray portrait they unsuspectingly 'are'; the supermodern USA, after all, has no particular need to know anything about its underdeveloped zones, its interiorized 'Third World,' let alone the real one. But

> the third world obviously cannot *not* know about the first world. The third world *has* to know. The periphery must be aware at every moment that everything that happens to it is somehow determined by absent forces elsewhere.[18]

[18] Fredric Jameson, Interview with Sara Danius and Stefan Jonsson, in Ian Buchanan (ed.), *Jameson on Jameson: Conversations on Cultural Marxism* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007), p. 160.

And it is here, at this reflexive disjuncture between an obsolete and a futuristic America, that we can detect and isolate the symptomatic ideological fault-line in the series as a whole, and diagnose it as such.

For it will not do to 'choose' between the two Americas:

> the junk or Third World side of American life today—the production of poverty and misery, people not only out of work but without a place to live, bag people, waste and industrial pollution, squalor, garbage, and obsolescent machinery. All this is surely a very realistic truth, and an inescapable fact, of the most recent years of the superstate. The cognitive and representational problem comes when we try to combine that palpable reality with the equally unquestionable other representation of the United States that inhabits a different and unrelated compartment of our collective mind: namely, the postmodern United States of extraordinary technological and scientific achievement; the most 'advanced' country in the world, in all the science fictional senses and connotations of that figure, accompanied by an inconceivable financial system and a combination of abstract wealth and real power in which all of us also believe, without many of us ever really knowing what that might be or look like.[19]

Jameson's striking formulation makes it above all imperative for a contemporary 'cognitive' aesthetic worth its name to strike some sort of paradoxical synthesis between a commitment to the 'palpable' 'realistic truth' of underdevelopment, and an acknowledgement of 'inconceivable' overdevelopment and postmodernization, neither of which have proved particularly amenable to realism's antiquated mapping devices. A genuine 'realism effect' would therefore have the obligation somehow to mediate between an aesthetics of the real, where nothing is yet adequately represented, and an aesthetics of the 'hyperreal,' where everything is already saturated by its own representation. There are clear indications that such an aesthetic synthesis would be unlikely to take place adequately within the domain of narrative art, since narrative, while it is supremely suited to 'mapping' the coordinates of an individual or group existence

[19] Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London & New York: Verso, 1991), p. 128.

within the 'known community' of some smaller area or region,[20] seems ill-equipped to deal with the inevitably global perspective from which (as we have seen) even the small-scale local operations of a Baltimore drug dealer or a surveillance detail henceforth need to be viewed. Old-style narrative machinery, like that adopted by *The Wire*, even as it is defensively allegorized by the heavy emphasis on obsolete technology, must experience a crisis the moment it attempts to traverse the yawning ontological chasm between its preferred local territory, and the complex social matrices of national and international uneven development by which that locality is ultimately defined. It is at points like this, diegetically, that the fog of unknowing seems to descend, and the program itself evinces all the topographical anxiety of the child who asks 'How do I get from here to the rest of the world?' The show rarely does, and, true to his own lights, Simon admits as much about the decision to choose between the two Americas on offer:

> Are there other parts of those cities that are economically viable? Of course. You can climb higher up on the pyramid that is capitalism and find the upper-middle-class neighborhoods and the private schools. You can find where the money went. But *The Wire* was dissent because of its choice to center itself on the other America, the one that got left behind. That was the overall theme and that worked for all five seasons.[21]

Realism or Naturalism?

It may be worth our while, in that case, to call the bluff on Simon's various protestations about his mid-nineteenth-century literary allegiances, and their alleged realist credentials. My sense is that they are not particularly realist at all. Georg Lukács once wrote of the critical turning point in literary history associated with the aftermath in France of 1848, and whose principal protagonist and theoretician was Emile Zola, that Zola's completion of 'the transition from the old realism to the new, from realism proper to naturalism' depended on his unequivocal sense that, in the new

[20] See Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (London: Hogarth Press, 1993), pp. 165-181.
[21] Interview with David Simon for *Vice* magazine, http://www.viceland.com/int/v16n12/htdocs/david-simon-280.php?page=2#, accessed 30/9/10.

dispensation, 'the writer no longer participates in the great struggles of his time [like Balzac and Stendhal], but is reduced to a mere spectator and chronicler of public life.'[22] For Lukács, the 'liberal positivism' of Zola led him, and the institution of the novel itself under his leadership, into an artistic zone where 'a mechanical average takes the place of the dialectical unity of type and individual; description and analysis is substituted for epic situations and epic plots,' and in general 'tiny, haphazard people move to and from and live their haphazard lives' against the 'gigantic backdrop' of the brilliantly rendered 'outer trappings' of modern industrial life.[23] Naturalism, the aesthetic still-birth of realism's attempted transcendence of its romantic and melodramatic proclivities (all those Dickensian 'punkings out'), ends up as a 'monotonous commonplace,' deriving from its 'direct, mechanical mirroring of the humdrum reality of capitalism.' (93) And while it is this latter-day narrative positivism that wins out over all rivals at the end of the nineteenth century, ultimately spreading far and wide across imperial vectors to become probably the world's most successful literary formal export, to the extent that it could be said (in its affirmation of verisimilitude, data-sets, and painstaking research) to have supplanted the very definition of realism from within, nevertheless it carries within itself an inherent epistemic 'falsity' towards the social object it professes to have mirrored faithfully in its prose. For whereas that 'object' of its own nature must move and change according to the balance of power within the social antagonism, the naturalist work of art freezes that object over into a series of tableaux. From within what Zola himself called a 'hypertrophy of detail,' the work, rather than sink into its own quicksand, is therefore obliged to 'leap to the stars' via an oratorical supplement of grandstanding 'social monumentality' and 'great social significance'.[24]

It would be unfair, and inaccurate, simply to level this same criticism at David Simon's television series, since it is hard not to agree that, even if there is a strong naturalist cast to his presentation of the social fabric, it is leavened by an openly humanist ethics at the level of characterization (which therefore has a good deal more in common with Dickens than it does with Zola). As Simon once put it, *The Wire* is

> cynical about institutions, and about their capacity for serving the needs of the individual. But in its treatment of the actual

[22] Georg Lukács, *Studies in European Realism* (London: Merlin, 1978), p. 89.
[23] Ibid., pp. 91. 92.
[24] Georg Lukács, 'Narrate or Describe?' , in *Writer and Critic* (London: Merlin, 1978), pp. 116, 115.

> characters, be they longshoremen or mid-level drug dealers or police detectives, I don't think it's cynical at all. I think there's a great deal of humanist affection.[25]

Now, this may be perfectly true, but even so the alibi does not exonerate the program itself from the charge of naturalist 'falsity,' since there is one aspect in which, no matter how 'humanist' its commitment to investing the 'tiny, haphazard lives' it depicts with credible and complex motivations, a reification of the environment glacially forecloses any tendencies to realistic totalization. And that is simply its maintenance of an inflexible perspectival frame—the very commitment to Baltimore itself as a principal subject and condition of visibility, the 'main character' of the series and its enigmatic hero.[26] With this perpetual deference to an unblinking 'gigantic backdrop' constituted by an interpenetrating series of cynically conceived inhuman institutions, and thus to a blanket 'pessimism' of which Simon has spoken repeatedly, the centre of gravity inevitably shifts away from the characters and towards a clearly recognizable naturalistic topos. The show is irradiated by a grim fascination with the abundant social cruelty, poverty, racism, crime, prostitution and drug use that supposedly 'defines' modern existence. Yale sociologist Elijah Anderson, a chronicler in his own genre of black inner-city life, has suggested that *The Wire*'s 'bottom-line cynicism' trumps whatever flimsy humanism is trotted out on its treacherous boards.[27] One of Simon's recent lectures, to Georgetown University, was entitled 'The Audacity of Despair,' in satiric reference to the best-selling book by President Obama, and carried the subtitle 'The Decline of American Empire, and What's In It for You.' All of this is perfectly consistent with a Zola-eqsue naturalism in temperament and aesthetic proclivities.

The show dovetails with yet another naturalist propensity that I can characterize by reprising some of Raymond Williams's discussion of 'Region and Class in the Novel'. Here Williams attends to a late naturalist deformation of the novel which, at first pass, seems progressive and defensible—the limitation of the novel's scope to a neglected 'region' in

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[25] Interview with David Simon at Reason.com, http://reason.com/archives/2004/10/01/david-simon-says accessed on 30/9/10.

[26] In an interview for *Rolling Stone*, Simon was asked which of the characters he would miss writing for the most, to which Simon answered simply, 'I think I'll miss writing about Baltimore.'

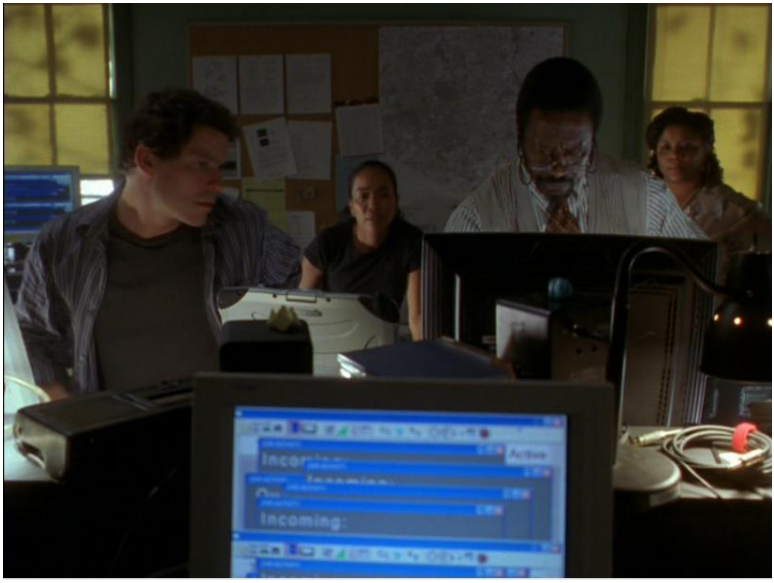
[27] Quoted in Mark Bowden, 'The Angriest Man in Television,' *The Atlantic*, op. cit., p. 2.

isolation from its broader social environment, and correlatively the working-class novel as a form that treats of that class's overlooked experiences in abstraction from the class struggle more generally. But far from being progressive, these developments mire themselves in aesthetic backwaters to the tune of a pedagogic diminuendo. The 'truly regional novel,' writes Williams, 'has initially so isolated its region, and thus projected it as internally whole—'organic'—that it is unable to recognize the complex internal processes, including internal divisions and conflicts, which factually connect with those wider pressures.' Similarly for the working-class novel, 'the central creative problem is still that of finding forms for a working-class fiction of fully developed class relations. The problem has in some ways become more objectively difficult. Further tendencies in monopoly capitalism have removed to an even greater distance the decisive individuals and functions and institutions by which most working-class life is formed.'[28] To be sure, *The Wire* is a finely, internally differentiated narrative product with a great deal to say about those 'individuals and functions and institutions' affecting working-class life; but it is also fair to say that these are determinedly *local* individuals, functions and institutions, and that the principal decision-making agencies with greatest impact on proletarian and lumpenproletarian existence in West Side Baltimore are shrouded in a veil of unrepresentable foreignness whose true face we are unlikely to glimpse simply by reloading back-episodes of *The West Wing* or *The Apprentice*. No, for as long as Baltimore remains the inescapable horizon of *The Wire*'s narrative, we are trapped in a naturalistic aesthetic that is an analogue of the 'geography is destiny' fate of those 'tiny, haphazard people' swallowed up in the season-finale montage of Season Five. We are back at the irresolvable aesthetic conundrum of Jameson's 'two Americas,' one of which calls for a naturalism of surface detail and palpable realities, the other of which, meanwhile, spins us off on an altogether different trajectory of high-tech postmodernity, hyperreality and simulation. Opting for one pole at the expense of the other, Simon commits his project to a kind of aesthetic dead-end, immensely provocative at the level of its critical engagement with dominant genre conventions, but unlikely to inspire work in the same vein; or at least, so it would appear, though in my concluding section, I would like to explore a determinate 'return of the repressed' at the level of technological figuration, where that 'other America' of postmodern cultural excess can be glimpsed and reframed.

[28] Raymond Williams, 'Region and Class in the Novel,' in *Writing in Society* (London & New York: Verso, 1991), pp. 231, 237.

Digital Processes

Here it needs to be said at once that as a show shot (according to IMDb) on 35mm film stock, its basic narrative dimension is constantly being affected, aesthetically and figurally, by its visual drive—a drive which, in David Bordwell's estimation, cannot be identified with the cinematography per se, since the show is 'uninspiringly shot.'[29] Rather, the visual drive is to be associated with a certain fetishism of regard, a fateful tendency within the *mise-en-scène* to abandon itself to a fascination with the computer screen. The cameras that shoot *The Wire* are increasingly (over the five seasons) drawn to the apparatus and digital technology of postmodern surveillance, and one of the most familiar visual tableaus is a medium shot of a small group of detectives hunched, absorbed, around a small laptop computer as one of them (usually Freamon or Pryzbylewski) explains the consequences of what they are seeing or hearing.



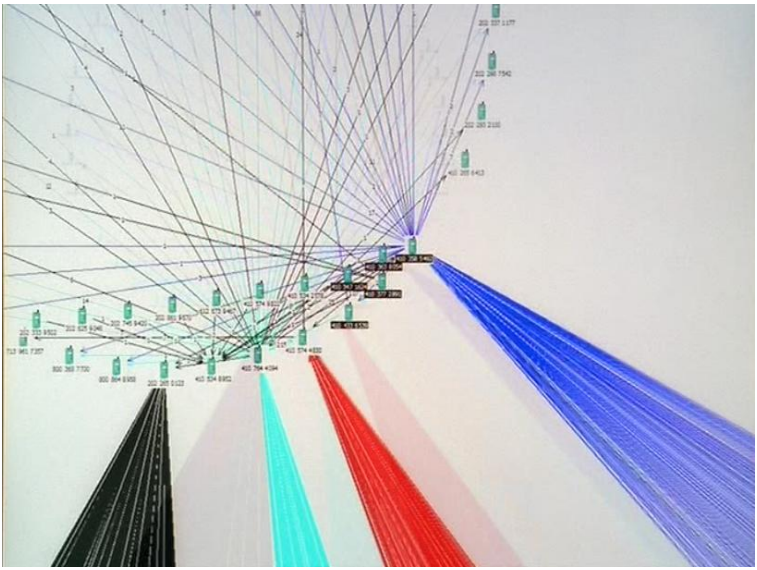
[29] David Bordwell, 'Take It from a Boomer: TV Will Break Your Heart,' *Observations on Film Art* at http://www.davidbordwell.net/blog/?p=9977, accessed 1/10/10.

For as long as this tableau is still oriented principally around analog bugging devices (in Season One), it remains stunted in its capacity to generate a frisson of real visual pleasure with cognitive overtones. In that season, it is the hand-written notes of Prez and Freamon, and the exhaustive manual paper trail erected to 'follow the money' of the Barksdale empire and its links to Senator Clay Davis, that fashions figures of epistemological capture and mastery.

In Season Two, however, we experience the first real departure from an analog epistemological frame, when the investigation into the stevedore union takes a decisive step forward by accessing its computers. The primitive visual interface that charts the unloading, carriage and collection of international freight canisters generates a sudden jolt of cognitive pleasure across the detail, since it displays via crude colour icons the sheer extent of theft and embezzlement on the docks, and simultaneously makes cracking Bunk's case of the twelve dead Eastern European 'white slaves' possible in the first place.

For the first time, computer technology is placed at the centre of the frame, not for its relaying of analog information, but for its graphic rendering of digitally coded data, the knot in which both major crimes will be solved. It is a point of no return in the series as a whole, since Season Three will

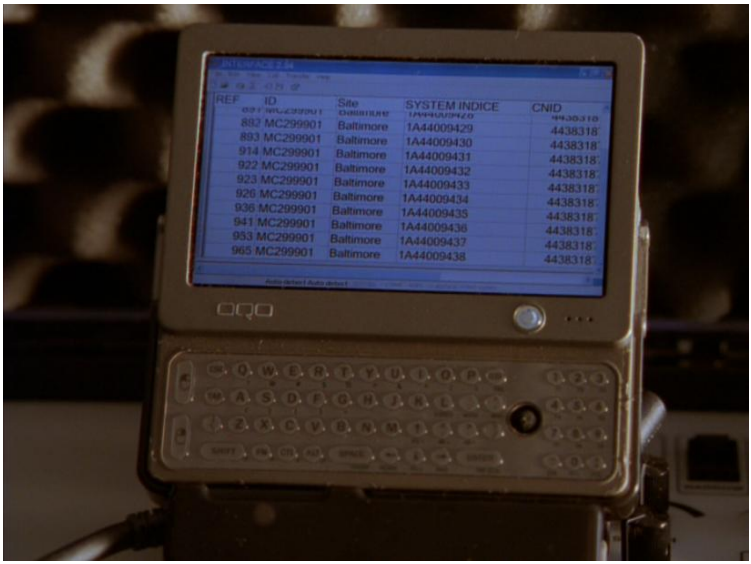
concern itself with the rash of disposable digital mobile telephones with which the Barksdale gang is now organizing its re-ups across the West Baltimore corners—even as Stringer Bell is looking to 'sublate' this micrological criminal operation into a legitimate business enterprise. The technical and legal challenges of tapping mobile telephones in use for a week or less (the titular 'wire' is only a vestigial and metaphorical one in this instance) occupy the better part of the season's history lessons for us; the premier obstacle only being overcome when Freamon and McNulty conspire to sell the syndicate pre-tapped phones in an elaborate scam. But we should not overlook the quantum leap in investigative labour required in the passage from POTS bugging to mobile and disposable digital telephony, and the consequent transformation of the cognitive yield involved—since in the first case, as in Season One more generally, the point was to 'map' a series of trunk calls between vertically arranged members of a static system, whereas now the effort involves the 'mapping' of a dispersed and integrated network of users.



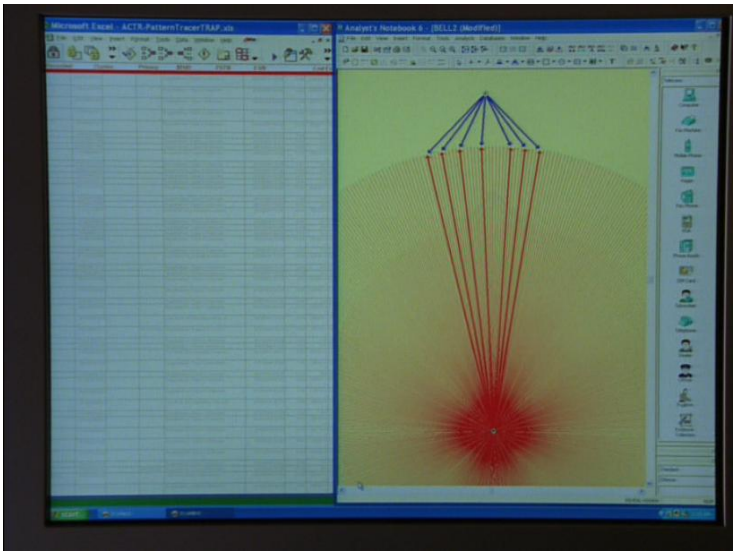
And if, in that earlier dispensation, it was enough to have recourse to a corkboard and some stick-it notes, here only a fully computerized tracking system will do. The borrowed technology of the FBI, the 'trigger fish' pattern tracer, allows the detail to read all the calls being routed by the cell tower nearest to Stringer Bell's cover business, and thus by progressive

computer-managed elimination, to deduce his 'secret' cell number. The dialogue and accompanying imagery ensnare us in the epistemological pleasures of digital surveillance:

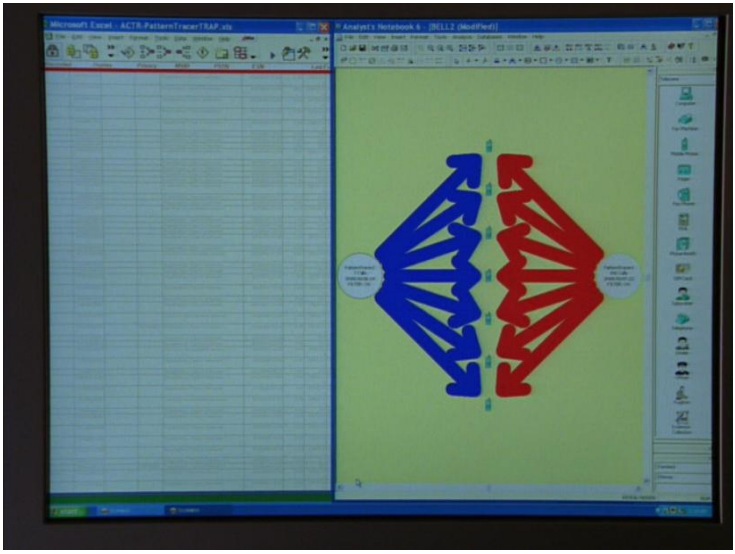
> **Freamon**: So. We aim this at the nearest cell tower. The one that will be a conduit for the calls coming to and from our boy Bell. And… we let rip.
> **McNulty**: Fucking hell.



> **Freamon**: Looks like Baltimore White Pages without any names. But the pattern tracer will pull that down. You know, if we know the approximate time of Bell's call we could start just by pulling calls off that tower at that time.

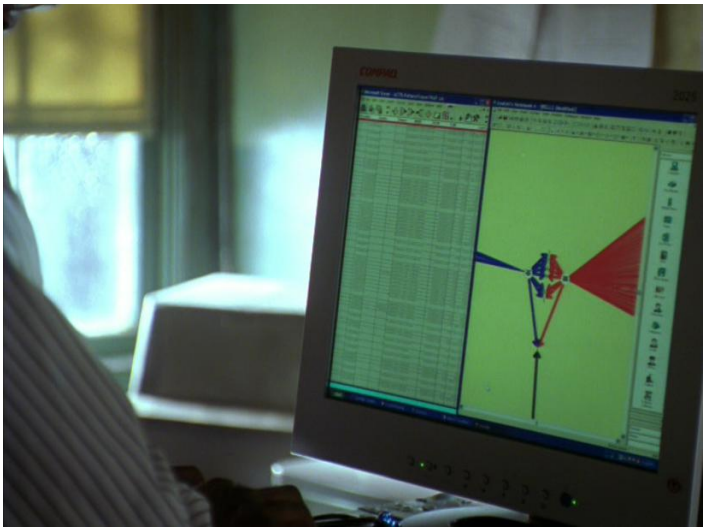


McNulty: There could be thousands.

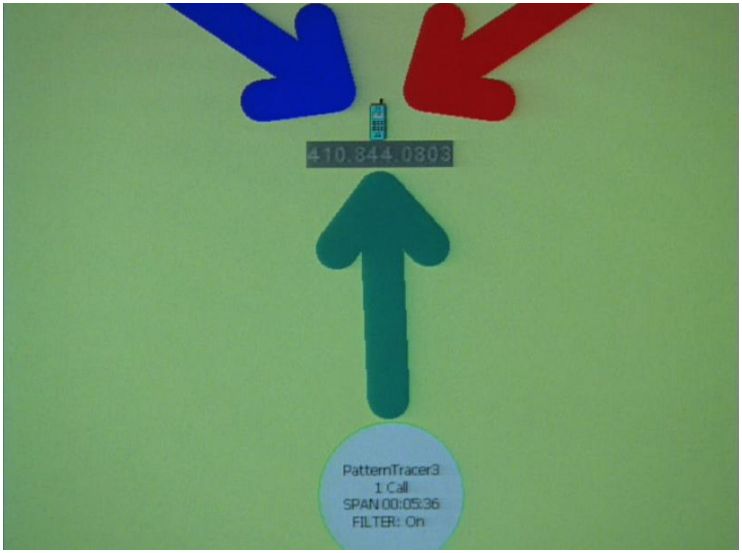


Freamon: Yeah, that's the base-line, but we get a second hit and that list comes down to dozens.

McNulty: And a third or fourth…



Freamon: And then we got his number.



So it is that the team, and the visual pleasure of the series, is dragged kicking and screaming into the early twenty-first century epistemological frame that it has been explicitly denying having any real part of.

But nothing can quite compare with the sheer exorbitance of this pleasure in Season Five, where it is to be felt pushing up against precisely the army of dereliction, homelessness, and despair that best characterizes the 'Third World' qualities of post-industrial Baltimore. For Season Five develops a devious juxtapositional logic, according to which the sudden disambiguation of the vast indigent population of the inner city is exploited (by McNulty and Freamon, of course) as a media *representation* in order to motivate an injection of police funds that can be used to 'map' the elusive communications network of the Stanfield syndicate using state-of-the-art computerized mobile-hacking technology. That is to say, in this scenario, homelessness is already 'homelessness,' its own media imago and stereotype, its 'Dickensian aspect' preceding its actuality in a satisfying squaring of the 'two Americas' circle—given that the institutional focus of this series is the print media itself, a flailing Baltimore paper on the verge of a digitally-enhanced extinction (overseas bureaus closing, management tightening the screws, all journalistic responsibility sacrificed for the bottom line and the whiff of a Pulitzer), which puts in train a series of sensational accounts of homeless 'killings' (themselves the artificial product of police misrepresentation) in order to achieve syndicated copy and attain national attention (needless to say, though it is said often here, Baltimore does not feature much in the national news). At the same time, the Machiavellian 'young white hope' of the political scene, Mayor Carcetti, with his eyes on the gubernatorial prize, exploits the same news in order to enhance his own profile and win the notice of Washington Democrat heavyweights. Simon surely doesn't want to suggest that homelessness is nothing but a spectacle (there are copious naturalistic details relating to the 'issue'), but he has at last managed to approach local immiseration through the optic of its spectacularization and postmodernization, in a nesting of three institutional frames, each with its own reasons for wanting it to 'go national.'

The pay-off for this dizzying excess of 'simulation,' as far as our detail is concerned, is the sudden availability of city funds and up-to-the-moment mobile wire-tapping technology to crack the code whereby Marlo Stanfield now controls the totality of heroin distribution in the West Baltimore region. The usual audio-signal tapping is useless, since the SMS messages arranging re-ups turn out not to be verbal at all, but visual.

Cryptic digital photographic images of old analog clock faces are distributed across the network, in a manner that stymies the capacities of the detail's initially ageing technology to tap into and map the information, let alone crack the code. In the seventh episode, thanks to the ever-escalating notoriety of the fictional 'homeless serial killer,' the unit finally gets the two computers and software it needs from a better-equipped neighboring county, to hack into the visual images and begin bearing down on the clock-face code; meanwhile McNulty deploys a combination of land-line public and mobile digital telephones to convince his superiors that the homeless killer is a real individual, by staging a series of fake calls, and (as the Department tracks the signals) attracting a massive police response using GPS technology.

In all of this, technology is being used as an allegorical figure in which, at last, the series can genuinely feel its way through the 'two Americas' problematic, and nowhere so exhilaratingly in cognitive terms as when Detective Sydnor finally cracks the Stanfield code. For what this ingenious deduction discloses is that the digital images of analog clock faces ('Definitely a code, and definitely not having much to do with time,' 5.7:46) make use of a very old and analog means of *spatial* orientation (in that sense, the antithesis of the police force's GPS tracking system): the hour hand, minute hand, and second hand refer numerically to the page numbers, y-axis and x-axis coordinates of city locations represented in an old paperback Baltimore street directory. When Stanfield wants to meet with his troops and advisers he does so (in typically underdeveloped and post-industrialized city spaces) by distributing a visual hypostasis of a grid coordinate to his people, each of them with a tattered street directory to hand. It is as ingenious a means of rendering the contradictions between futuristic technology and underdeveloped social space in a single figure as could be imagined—for in these pixilated palm-sized images of the twelve-hour analog clock dial, we recognize the acute torsion of an unevenly developed social imaginary, where time morphs into space (in a logic of postmodernization), and space ineluctably senses its own nature as temporal congealment and stasis (in a logic of sheer Naturalist despair). And it is as though, after five seasons, the series has truly learned how to 'teach' what it began by not even admitting or wanting to know, but which, by the ineluctable logic of prolonged narrative development, it has had to confess: that a knowledge of the present is best conveyed not by a singular aesthetic, but by a paradoxical synthesis of the irreconcilable.

Most fans have tended to discount Season Five as the most far-fetched and weakest, as McNulty's eccentricities and the overarching absurdity of the serial-killer conceit dissipate the concerted atmosphere of 'realism' built up so immaculately over four years. But I cannot help feeling that, as Eagleton wrote of Dickens, it is just where such 'realism' (in truth, a very heavy Naturalism) touches on its own inner absurdity that it attains to a truth that is inadmissible within its own representational matrix. Such 'grotesque realism is a stylistic distortion in the service of truth, a kind of astigmatism which allows us to see more accurately';[30] and it only remains to say that the 'astigmatism' of Season Five, its paradoxical focusing of two distinct aesthetic frequencies, cashes in the ethical gravity of its 'realism' in order to map an altogether more elusive object than that Baltimore which the series believes to be its true 'subject.' Baltimore undergoes an anamorphic distension here and, in symptomatic visual figures of digital-analog knowledge production, gives on to a farcical domain where the utmost poverty and wretchedness flip over into the highest levels of affluence and privilege; a paradoxical and comical kingdom of topsy-turvy registers and distributions of the visible; a place where the decisive struggles are as much about culture as they are about class. Call it 'America.'

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[30] Eagleton, op. cit.

An Apollonian Scream: Nathaniel Mackey's Rewriting of the Coltrane Poem in 'Ohnedaruth's Day Begun'

LUKE HARLEY

In early December 1965, Nathaniel Mackey, then eighteen years old, walked into New York's Village Gate jazz club, on the corner of Thompson and Bleecker streets in Greenwich Village, with a few friends from Princeton University. He had brought them on this particular evening to hear John Coltrane, who since November had been hired for a month-long residency alongside comedian/social activist Dick Gregory and singer Carmen McRae.

Mackey's party arrived late, after Gregory and McRae had already performed. Trane was up on stage with what seemed an unusually large band: four saxophonists, two drummers, double bass and piano. His 'classic' quartet (Elvin Jones on drums, McCoy Tyner on piano, Jimmy Garrison on bass), to which Mackey had been an avid listener on albums such as *Coltrane Live at Birdland* (October-November 1963), *Crescent* (April and June 1964), and *A Love Supreme* (December 1964), were all there, but had been noticeably augmented.[1] On drums, Jones had been joined by Rashied Ali, an expert at playing the multidirectional, pulseless rhythms to which Coltrane (although Mackey didn't know it at the time) was becoming increasingly interested. Out front, Trane had been joined by three other saxophonists, all distinctive post-bebop voices and members of the 'New Thing' experimental brigade that was making a stir in New York jazz circles: the tenor saxophonists Archie Shepp and Pharoah Sanders, and the alto saxophonist Marion Brown.

[1] *Coltrane Live at Birdland*: Impulse! 051198-2; *Crescent*: Impulse! 051200-2; *A Love Supreme*: Impulse! 051155-2.

For Mackey, as he recalled in our interview in his office at the University of California, Santa Cruz on 19 May, 2008, all of this came as a shock. A lag between the recording of Coltrane's albums and their release by Impulse! Records meant that the last record he had heard was in fact *A Love Supreme*, Coltrane's 'spiritual conversion' narrative that went on to become the highest-selling jazz album of all time up until that point. But *A Love Supreme* was a far cry from what Coltrane had been recording throughout 1965, most notably on *Ascension* (25 June).[2] As free jazz musicologist Ekkehard Jost has noted, the former was ostensibly modal music, noteworthy for its use of motive as a structural tie between sections (a new feature in Coltrane's work), its proclamation of a new, outwardly spiritual attitude, and its intensely concentrated quartet playing. *Ascension* was something different. Described by reviewer Bill Mathieu as 'possibly the most powerful human sound ever recorded', it was free (rather than modal) jazz and featured a much expanded ensemble to that encountered in recent Coltrane recordings: the 'classic' quartet joined by two alto saxophones (Marion Brown and John Tchicai), three tenor saxophones (Coltrane plus Shepp and Sanders) and two trumpeters (Freddie Hubbard and Dewey Johnson).[3] Moreover these soloists, when required to play above the rhythm section (rather than in passages of 'collective improvisation'), adopt a very different method to what was traditional in jazz improvisation. Rather than develop their solos melodically, via pitch, rhythm, dynamics and so on, they give far greater priority to timbre, producing what Jost calls 'a-melodic structures primarily delineated by changes in colour and register'.[4] Coltrane, for instance, makes extended use of overblowing ('screaming') in the highest register, split-tones, multiphonics and rapid successions of related phrases to sound as if he is in some kind of acute self-dialogue (Amiri Baraka likened it to a 'grown man learning to speak'[5]); Shepp, adopting a 1930s-style vibrato, avoids fixed pitch as much as possible by bending and stretching his notes with smears and glissandos; Brown employs extremely rapid tremolos and trills to give an impression of playing multiple sounds at once; while Sanders

> plays hardly any lines that have a recognisable melodic context. Predominant in his improvising are multiple sounds—some sustained, some given a speechlike cadence—all without

[2] *Ascension*: Impulse! 543413-2.
[3] Qtd. in Ekkehard Jost, *Free Jazz* (New York: Da Capo, 1994), p.86.
[4] Ibid, p.95.
[5] Amiri Baraka, *Black Music* (New York: William Morrow, 1967), p.59.

> clearly definable pitches. Breaking up these sounds are extremely fast runs through the range of the saxophone. But the runs must not be taken as melodic elements either. Their purpose is kinetic.[6]

As Mackey recalled, there was something of this 'kinetic', timbre-prioritising approach to improvisation on display when he entered that night at the Village Gate. Coltrane's large ensemble, most of whom had performed on *Ascension*, were working their way through familiar material: the Mongo Santamaría composition 'Afro Blue', an F minor blues first recorded by the Carl Tjader Sextet (with Santamaría on percussion) in April 1959 and made famous as a quartet performance on *Coltrane Live at Birdland*. But Mackey quickly noticed that this version, exploring harmonic, rhythmic and timbral tangents almost unrecognisable from the main tune ('head'), was 'much wilder' from what he had heard previously.[7] (Later, he realised it was more like the forty-minute version heard on Coltrane's July 1966 recording *Live at Japan*.[8]) After the piece finished, Mackey noticed that Coltrane had sat himself by the bar, drinking scotch, on a chair not far from where his Princeton group were sitting. Sensing an opportunity to meet a musical idol, Mackey decided to go up to him.

> I walked over and said hello, shook his hand, and told him I really loved his music. And I made a request [laughter], I asked if he would play [the Coltrane original] 'Equinox' in the second set, and he said 'Well, no, we've got something else planned'. And they came out for the second set and they played [the Harold Arlen standard] 'Out of this World', and that was the whole set. They played an hour-long version of 'Out Of This World', an hour plus. It was wild.[9]

Twelve years later, while teaching in the English department at the University of Southern California, Mackey began writing a poem that attempted to capture something of that 'wildness' of Coltrane's hour-long performance of 'Out of This World' in language.[10] A. B. Spellman—who

[6] Jost, *Free Jazz*, p.90.
[7] Nathaniel Mackey, 'Interview by Luke Harley', no pagination.
[8] *John Coltrane Live in Japan*: Impulse! GRD-4102.
[9] Mackey, 'Interview by Luke Harley', no pagination.
[10] In an email correspondence dated 20 October, 2010, Mackey claims that it was 'toward the end of 1977 (November or December)' that he started writing

had attended the Coltrane engagement at the Village Gate and been similarly impressed—said that 'trane's horn had words in it', and Mackey began contemplating what these words might be.[11] But Mackey, of course, was far from alone. In fact nearly a decade before Mackey composed the poem that was to become 'Ohnedaruth's Day Begun', the Coltrane poem, as Kimberly W. Benston notes, had fast been emerging as a recognisable subgenre in black poetry, to the extent that Henry Lacy proclaimed it 'an expected piece in the repertoire of the black poet'.[12] Hundreds, if not thousands of poems were being written in Coltrane's honour, most of them between 1967 and 1969, in the two years following his passing. Yet not all African American poets clamoured to eulogise the saxophonist in verse, Sam Greenlee for instance, in his 1971 poem 'Memorial for Trane', observing: 'Yeah, man, / I'll help out / with the / memorial for/ Trane. / But, I wonder / how come / a people / who dig life / so much / spend / so much / time / praising the dead?'[13]

Among jazz poetry anthologies, Stephen Henderson's *Understanding the New Black Poetry* (1972) included a number of Coltrane poems; likewise Sascha Feinstein and Yusef Komunyakaa's *The Jazz Poetry Anthology* (1991), compiled nearly two decades later, and their follow-up volume *The Second Set* (1996). Mackey and Art Lange's *Moment's Notice: Jazz in Poetry & Prose* (1993) takes a less mainstream stance, its editors aiming to 'better represent the experimental end of the spectrum'.[14] Despite prohibitive permission-to-reprint fees, they include seven such examples: Michael S. Harper's 'A Narrative of the Life and Times of John Coltrane: Played by Himself' and 'Peace on Earth', David Henderson's 'A Coltrane Memorial', John Taggart's 'Giant Steps', Wanda Coleman's 'Cousin Mary', Amus Mor's 'The Coming of John', and Mackey's own '"John Coltrane Arrived with an Egyptian Lady"'.

'Ohnedaruth's Day Begun' and that it 'might have taken me until early 1978 (January or February) to finish it'. Given it was over thirty years ago, he adds that 'those details are pretty fuzzy'.

[11] A. B. Spellman, 'Did John's Music Kill Him?', in Sascha Feinstein and Yusef Komunyakaa (eds.), *The Jazz Poetry Anthology: The Second Set* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: UP of Indiana, 1996), p.168, l.15.

[12] Kimberly W. Benston, *Performing Blackness: Enactments of African American Modernism* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), p.117.

[13] In Sascha Feinstein and Yusef Komunyakaa (eds.), *The Jazz Poetry Anthology: The Second Set*, p.65, ll. 1-14.

[14] Art Lange and Nathaniel Mackey, Editor's Note to *Moment's Notice: Jazz in Poetry & Prose* (Minneapolis: Coffee House Press, 1993), p.ii.

Conspicuous in their absence are those by black nationalists, poets who interpreted Coltrane's wailing saxophone as the angry cry of their own growing militancy, a rebellious holler against longstanding oppression by the white establishment. Forsaking the quiet understatement of so many poems by their African American predecessors, such writers offered a form of direct literary analogy for the intense timbres being heard by orthographically mimicking Coltrane's overblown 'scream' on the page.

> the blues exhibited illusions of manhood.
> destroyed by you. Ascension into:
> scream-eeeeeeeeeee-ing sing
> SCREAM-EEEeeeeeeeeee-ing loud &
> SCREAM-EEEEEEEEEEEEE-ING long with
> feeling
> —Don L. Lee, 'Don't Cry, Scream'[15]

> A LOVE SUPREME
> scrEEEccCHHHHH screeeeEEECHHHHHHH
> sCReeeEEECHHHHHHHH SCREEEECCCCHHHHH
> SCREEEEEEEECCCHHHHHHHHHHHHH
> a lovesupremealovesupremealovesupreme for our blk
> people.
> —Sonia Sanchez, 'a/Coltrane/poem'[16]

For Lee, in 'Don't Cry, Scream', Coltrane's 'unruly wail', as Mackey goes on to call it in 'Ohnedaruth's Day Begun', on recordings such as *Ascension* was not simply an exploration of new sounds, previously unheard-of sounds, but an extolment of black suffering.[17] Yet this suffering did not manifest in a weeping, despondent lyricism; indeed Lee wants his audience not to 'cry' but to 'scream' with rage, the rage that Coltrane was supposedly articulating on his saxophone. This was in 1969. Sanchez's poem meanwhile, published in *We a BaddDDD People* (1970), begins calmly enough, the poet invoking the lullaby 'are u sleepen / are u sleepen / brotha john / brotha john'—parenthetically requested by its author, in the poem's margin, 'to be sung softly'. The tone of the poem then shifts

[15] Feinstein and Komunyakaa (eds.), *The Jazz Poetry Anthology: The Second Set*, p.121.
[16] Feinstein and Komunyakaa (eds.), *The Jazz Poetry Anthology* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: UP of Indiana, 1991), p.184.
[17] Mackey, *Eroding Witness* (Urbana and Chicago: UP of Illinois, 1985), p.70. Hereafter cited as *EW*.

dramatically as Sanchez reflects on 'the quiet / aftermath of assassinations' and 'the massacre / of all blk/musicians' before unleashing the graphic depiction of Coltrane's overblown 'scream' seen above. The poet then changes tone again, rather aggressively aligning Coltrane's music with many black nationalists' anti-white, anti-capitalist sentiment:

BRING IN THE WITE/MOTHA/fuckas
ALL THE MILLIONAIRES/BANKERS/ol
MAIN/LINE/ASS/RISTOCRATS (ALL
THEM SO-CALLED BEAUTIFUL
PEOPLE)
WHO HAVE KILLED
WILL CONTINUE TO
KILL US WITH
THEY CAPITALISM/18% OWNERSHIP
OF THE WORLD.
YEH. U RIGHT
THERE U ROCKEFELLERS. MELLONS
VANDERBILTS
FORDS.
yeh.
GITem.
PUSHem/PUNCHem/STOMPem. THEN
LIGHT A FIRE TO
THEY pilgrim asses.[18]

Scott Saul has noted that, for the Black Arts writers, Coltrane's music, such as that heard on *Ascension*, suggested hope not only for a 'new world, a world without ghettoes' but also a 'wilful turn away from reasoned argumentation, patient analysis, and the whole regime of nonviolent direct action'.[19] Mackey, like many of the young black writers that followed in the aftermath of the black nationalists, identified with this desire for an 'immanent elsewhere', a non-racial, non-discriminatory world, as he calls it in 'Song of the Andoumboulou: 56', a poem published in his most recent volume, the National Book Award-winning *Splay Anthem* (97). His longstanding interest in the Atlantis and 'mu' myths derives from this same theme of utopian longing that lured the black-nationalist artists to imagine

[18] Ibid, pp.184-85.
[19] Scott Saul, *Freedom Is, Freedom Ain't: Jazz and the Making of the Sixties* (Cambridge, Mass.: UP of Harvard, 2003), p.245.

a world beyond the injustices of that in which they existed. Part of this imagining involved differentiating black culture from what was considered the worst aspects of Western culture, including its worshipping of reason at the expense of what Baraka calls 'actual feelings'.[20] The new black society of the future would need to 'emancipate our minds from Western values and standards', as James T. Stewart put it.[21] Yet, although Mackey understood the thinking behind such opinions, and warmed to John Henrik Clarke's appeal for black scholars to reclaim a 'rich and ancient African heritage' from 'distorted' Western perceptions, he was troubled by the black-nationalist insistence on retreating into a black monoculture and studying only black art.[22] 'The models must be non-white,' Stewart opined.[23] Yet Mackey, like Baraka before him (during his Greenwich Village days, at least), was an avid reader of white avant-garde poetry—especially work by Williams Carlos Williams, H.D., Charles Olson, Robert Duncan and Robert Creeley—and to him the notion of ignoring such writers for political reasons was utterly anathema. As he said in our interview:

> If only writing on black writers and only referencing black material was a hoop that was being held up, it wasn't a hoop I was jumping through… which is not to say that I was not engaged with black material. But if it meant being engaged with that material to the exclusion of all else, no, I'd never been in that place. And there was no reason for me to all of a sudden to step into that place.[24]

Moreover Mackey had identified a worrying tendency among some of the black nationalists to construct awkward dialectics between reason and 'feelings'. He considered over-exuberant praise for the emotionally (rather than rationally) expressive to be anti-intellectual—and an especially odd position for writers purporting to uphold the finest African American intellectual traditions to take. Where, after all, did this leave the reflective,

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[20] Baraka, liner notes for *Four for Trane* (Impulse A-71). *Black Music*, pp.160-61.
[21] James T. Stewart, 'The Development of the Black Revolutionary Artist'. In Amiri Baraka and Larry Neal (eds.), *Black Fire: An Anthology of Afro-American Writing* (Baltimore, MD: Black Classic Press, 2007), p.3.
[22] John Henrik Clarke, 'Reclaiming the Lost African Heritage'. In Baraka and Neal (eds.), *Black Fire: An Anthology of Afro-American Writing*, p.11.
[23] Stewart, 'The Development of the Black Revolutionary Artist'. In Baraka and Neal (eds.), *Black Fire: An Anthology of Afro-American Writing*, p.3.
[24] Mackey, 'Interview by Luke Harley', no pagination.

the intellectual, the Apollonian? Should art merely be the product of instinct? After renouncing Greenwich Village bohemia and converting to black nationalism in 1965, Baraka began pushing arguments such as these, prompting Mackey to rebuke his jazz-poetry predecessor in an important 1978 essay. He quotes a passage from Baraka's 'New-Sense' (1966) that, as a young artist-intellectual, caused him particular discomfort:

> The thinkers try. The extremists, Confucius says, shooting past the mark. But the straight ahead people, who think when that's what's called for, who don't when they don't have to. Not the Hamlet burden, which is white bullshit, to be always weighing and measuring and analyzing, and reflecting. The reflective vs. the expressive. Mahler vs. Martha and the Vandellas. It's not even an interesting battle.[25]

Why this opposition between the 'reflective', which was 'white bullshit', and the 'expressive', Mackey wondered? Was it really necessary for artistic impulses to be separated along racial/cultural lines? Baraka, whom Benston has called 'Coltrane's most sublime critic', had embarked on a misguided course; driven by an irrational need to banish any traces of white influence from what he was constructing (rather exclusively) to be 'black America', he was in fact denying himself the right, as an artist, to think critically and rationally about his own work.[26] Mackey couldn't let the matter pass. Many years later, in a 2005 interview with Sarah Rosenthal, he defined himself in opposition to this anti-rational tendency. While many others had gone (and were still going) to great lengths to construct Coltrane's 'scream' as the signature sound of black collectivity, a Dionysiac rage against white oppression, Mackey had heard in it a more cerebral sound, and different opportunities for poetic expression.

> The word 'scream' is interesting. Coltrane got to the point in some concerts where he would take the horn from his mouth and just start yelling. Rashied Ali … talks about an occasion on which that happened. Ali was rather taken aback, and asked

[25] Baraka, *Tales* (London: MacGibbon and Kee, 1969), p.96. Qtd. in Mackey, 'The Changing Same: Black Music in the Poetry of Amiri Baraka'. *Discrepant Engagement: Dissonance, Cross-Culturality, and Experimental Writing* (Cambridge, Mass.: UP of Cambridge, 1993), p.42.

[26] Kimberly W. Benston, 'Late Coltrane: A Re-Membering of Orpheus'. *A Chant of Saints: A Gathering of Afro-American Literature, Art, and Scholarship*, eds. Michael S. Harper and Robert B. Stepto (Urbana, IL: UP of Illinois, 1979), p.420.

> Trane about it later. Trane said, 'I ran out of horn'. I've heard people who do in poetry something that emulates what Coltrane does. They'll actually scream, do things of that sort. Certainly relative to that I'm very Apollonian. My screaming is going on in a different way. It's the fraying of meanings; it's the colliding of sounds that create certain consternations of meaning that might be the counterpoint of the scream, analogous to the scream.[27]

Mackey didn't want to stymie the imagination in art; far from it. Rather, he simply insisted upon the necessity of intellect, technique and craftsmanship in the artistic process, which in Baraka's 'New-Sense' he felt to be under threat. But it was a craftsmanship that upheld indeterminacy, rather than explicitness, as a crucial aesthetic goal. Mackey's 'scream' is reflective and self-interrogative; as a poet, his aim is to trouble, perturb and complicate what he calls 'the unequivocal referentiality taken for granted in ordinary language'.[28] Over the course of his career he has resisted any semblance of political sloganeering, instead aiming to restore to language its manifold resonances, to reinstate the rich overtones and undertones of meaning that are too often neglected within propaganda language of the kind sometimes employed by Sanchez, Lee, Rodgers and others. In his essay 'Sound and Sentiment, Sound and Symbol' he borrows a quote from Mexican poet Octavio Paz that provides a theoretical underpinning for his own attempts to 'fray' meanings:

> Each time we are served by words, we mutilate them. But the poet is not served by words. He is their servant. In serving them, he returns them to the plenitude of their nature, makes them recover their being. Thanks to poetry, language reconquers its original state. First, its plastic and sonorous values, generally disdained by thought; next, the affective values; and finally, the expressive ones. To purify language, the poet's task, means to give it back its original nature. And here we come to one of the central themes of this reflection. The word, in itself, is a plurality of meanings.[29]

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[27] Sarah Rosenthal, 'The Atmosphere is Alive: An Interview with Nathaniel Mackey'. *New American Writing* 24 (Mill Valley: Oink Press, 2006), pp.49-50.
[28] Mackey, 'Sound and Sentiment, Sound and Symbol'. *Discrepant Engagement*, p.233.
[29] Qtd. in 'Sound and Sentiment, Sound and Symbol'. *Discrepant Engagement*, p.233.

If a 'tone', or series of tones, can connote a vast field of reference, Mackey has attempted to bring back to language something of its multivocal meaning and connotative richness. Steven Feld, an important theorist for Mackey, uses a different phrase, describing the poet's task as to 'amplify, multiply or intensify' the relationship of the word to its referent.[30] Discussing the Kaluli people of Papua New Guinea in *Sound and Sentiment: Birds, Weeping, Poetics and Song in Kaluli Expression*, Feld notes the clear delineation in that society between highly assertive, conversational discourse (what the Kaluli call *to halaido*, or 'hard words') and polysemous poetic language ('bird sound words').[31] Poetic language is 'bird-language', a highly metaphoric style of discourse that laments the rupturing of tribal kinship and strives to bring about, through song, some spiritual solace.[32] Feld's is a text to which, in essays ('Sound and Sentiment, Sound and Symbol', most notably), interviews, lectures, and his own poems, Mackey repeatedly refers. In 'Song of the Andoumboulou: 18' for instance, from his third poetry volume *Whatsaid Serif* (1998), Mackey speaks of a 'we' in search of a 'thrown obliquity': a music/language zone of in-betweenness where word-intent has been amplified and multiplied to such an extent that the nondenotative (or less-denotative) realm of tones is achieved:

> voice,
> thrown obliquity, bled. Sound so
> abstruse
> we struck our heads, 'Where did it
> come from?' Point song. Point-
> lessness. Words not wanting to be
> words…
> (*WS* 16)

Coltrane's sound, his 'unruly, agonistic' wail, was indeed 'abstruse': a bird-language of his own. But black-nationalist treatments of Coltrane, in Mackey's view, all too often responded to his abstrusity with a mind-numbing simplicity. The 'scream', as it was called, was interpreted to mean one thing only, political rage; those 'plastic and sonorous' values in

[30] Steven Feld, *Sound and Sentiment: Birds, Weeping, Poetics and Song in Kaluli Expression* (Philadelphia, UP of Philadelphia, 1990), p.17.
[31] Ibid, p.34.
[32] Ibid.

language to which Paz refers being very much suppressed. Furthermore Mackey was not at all convinced that Coltrane's 'scream' was the cry of political rage, a call-to-arms against white oppression, that many black nationalists supposed—or hoped—it to be.[33] Coltrane, after all, had spent most of the late fifties and early sixties rejecting suggestions that he was an 'angry tenor', and had long since refused to be pushed into a corner on the subject of black politics. While violence flared up on the streets, he had kept his thoughts on Martin Luther King, Malcolm X and others to himself, rarely speaking on matters other than music.

For some critics, such as Frank Kofsky, this proved more than a little frustrating. Kofsky, a white Jewish Marxist, had heard in Coltrane's scream a counterpoint to Malcolm X's politics, a cry of the black masses in uprising against longstanding persecution. In one interview, published later in *Black Nationalism and the Revolution in Music* (1970), he asks the saxophonist about the relationship between his music and Malcolm X, whom he previously identified, with more than a whiff of presumption, as of 'great symbolic significance for the new generation of black musicians'.[34] Coltrane, avoiding the ringing endorsement his interviewer so desperately sought, instead replied,

> Well, I think that music, being an expression of the human heart, or of the human being itself, does express just what is happening. I feel it expresses the whole thing—the whole of human experience at the time that it is being expressed.[35]

Although Kofsky neglected to ask Coltrane about music and spirituality, it was a topic that Trane was normally more than willing to discuss. Like

[33] Tempering this argument somewhat is the fact that on 28 March, 1965 Coltrane had appeared at a benefit concert for Baraka's soon-to-be-established Black Arts Repertory Theatre/School (BARTS) in Harlem. Although, in order to gain a sufficient audience, it was held downtown at the Village Gate, the concert was marketed under the nationalist rubric 'New Black Music', apparently with the go-ahead from Impulse! producer Bob Thiele (who had agreed to record the event). In addition to Coltrane's quartet, Baraka had put together a program featuring Albert Ayler, Charles Tolliver, Billie Higgins, Marion Brown, Bobby Hutcherson, Grachan Moncur III, and Sun Ra. For Coltrane to agree to perform, especially given Baraka's growing reputation as an anti-white agitator, was something of a coup.
[34] Qtd. in Nisensen, *Ascension: John Coltrane and His Quest* (New York: Da Capo, 1995), p.179.
[35] Ibid.

Kirk, Sanders, Ayler and Sun Ra, among many others in the jazz community, he was a deeply religious person; Baraka called him a 'God-seeker' whose music 'is a way into God. The absolute open expression of everything.'[36] After studying non-Western music, particularly Indian, East Asian, and African music, he came to believe that music had a great spiritual purpose, that it was not mere entertainment, that it could positively effect change upon society. Coltrane had been raised a Christian, regularly attending church on Sundays. But his beliefs gradually changed and became more eclectic. In 1957, after coming into contact with Islam through his first wife Juanita Naima Grubb, he underwent a 'spiritual awakening' concomitant with his overcoming drug addiction. This was followed in the late fifties and sixties by study of Sufism, Buddhism, the Kabbala, the Torah, yoga and other books on science, the occult and esoteric mysticism. Nisensen lists Paramahansa Yogananda's *Autobiography of a Yogi*, a blending of Eastern and Western spirituality, as a text that held pride of place in Coltrane's library, while Lewis Porter, in his biography *John Coltrane: His Life and Music*, mentions Einstein's mixing of science and mysticism, as well as Mabel Collins' *Light on the Path*, a 'treatise written for the personal use of those who are ignorant of the Eastern Wisdom', as crucial influences.[37]

Mackey's wide-ranging study of texts on spirituality and mythology during the sixties and seventies echoed Coltrane's own search for 'other ways of knowing, multiple ways of knowing'.[38] Growing up in California, Mackey too had been raised a 'God-seeker', dutifully attending Baptist services every Sunday in Rodeo (Northern California) at the behest of his mother. But, in his teenage years in Santa Ana (Southern California), he had begun drifting away from organised religion after he started feeling that it was

[36] Baraka, 'The Changing Same (R&B and New Black Music)'. *Black Music*, p.193.
[37] Lewis Porter, *John Coltrane: His Life and Music* (Ann Arbor: UP of Michigan, 1998), p.259.
[38] Mackey, 'Interview by Paul Naylor'. *Paracritical Hinge*, p.327. Texts encountered by Mackey during this period included *Mercia Eliade's The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (1959) and *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy* (1972), Victor Turner's *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (1967), Henry Corbin's *Avicenna and the Visionary Recital* (1960), and *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn 'Arabi* (1969).

> no longer necessary to maintain one's sense of spirituality. Of course as I was reading more as a teenager, especially learning more and reading more, learning philosophy and stuff like that. I had to deal with doubt and scepticism, atheism, that kind of thing.[39]

While he retained a 'metaphysical bent', it was a spirituality that found increasing outlet in esoteric, hermetic traditions (expressed mainly in music and poetry) rather than conventional Christianity.[40]

'Ohnedaruth's Day Begun,' the only Mackey poem published by Feinstein and Komunyakaa in *The Jazz Poetry Anthology*, is a work of strident originality, bespeaking of a young poet eager to leave his own personal imprint on the 'Coltrane poem' genre. Having witnessed faddish interpretations of the saxophonist in the late sixties as a mouthpiece for political rage, Mackey focuses on his preferred guise, as a mystic, striving to enunciate what Benston calls Coltrane's 'fierce and visionary *askesis*, [his] quest for cosmic knowledge and salvation'.[41] The poem takes its subtitle ('bright light of shipwreck') from George Oppen, within whose poetry lighthouses and shipwrecks appear as recurrent tropes; in *Of Being Numerous* (1968), for instance, Oppen associates shipwreck with individual disintegration in his seventh poem ('Obsessed, bewildered / By the shipwreck / Of the singular'). Since his days as a literature graduate at Stanford (1970-74) Mackey had become interested in Oppen's writing, and here appropriates his phrase to not only suggest Coltrane's artistic isolation, but also that his condition might somehow be curative ('bright light').

According to the simple mathematics required by the poem, 'Ohnedaruth's Day Begun' is set on 17 July, 1967, the day of Coltrane's passing (from liver cancer) at Huntingdon Hospital, Long Island, exactly sixty-eight days prior to what would have been his forty-first birthday.[42] *Ohnedaruth* (meaning 'compassionate one') was the Sanskrit name bestowed on Coltrane by his second wife, Alice, immediately after his

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[39] Mackey, 'Interview by Luke Harley', no pagination.
[40] Ibid.
[41] Benston, 'Late Coltrane: A Re-Membering of Orpheus'. *A Chant of Saints: A Gathering of Afro-American Literature, Art, and Scholarship*, p.413.
[42] In an email correspondence (23 March, 2009), Mackey recalled how, during the poem's composition, he counted on a calendar exactly how many days separated the two events.

death: Mackey's invocation of the word in his title indicates an immediate foregrounding of spirituality as well as a desire to explore the esoteric, recondite, non-centrist aspect of Trane's persona. In the following passage, Mackey depicts his spirit leaving his body and transcending to the afterlife, his voice, written in the first-person, arriving in the poem as a ghostly import.

> Sixty-eight days to my
> forty-first year, this endless
> dwelling on air the key to
> a courtyard filled with
> talkers, tongues in hand,
> bush fled
> by birds whose wings burn, air
> love's
> abrasive hush.
>
> (*EW* 70)

Mackey's imagining of 'a courtyard filled with / talkers, tongues in hand' in the third and fourth lines is a reference to Nat Hentoff's description of Coltrane and his protégé Sanders' innovative playing, their use of overtones, split-tones and multiphonics, as 'speaking in tongues'.[43] Glossolalia, or 'speaking in tongues', is the vocalising of fluent speech-like syllables, regarded by Pentecostals in particular, drawing upon evidence in the New Testament, as a 'gift of the spirit'.[44] Given Coltrane's religious upbringing in the South (in North Carolina), Hentoff interestingly suggests that the 'screaming' timbres both he and Sanders employed in their improvisations could be compared to the cadences of black preachers demanding salvation from their congregation. But the percussively alliterative figure that follows—'bush fled / by birds whose wings burn'—suggests other spiritual traditions as well. The first is ancient Egyptian mythology, where *ba*, the word most closely approximating 'soul', was represented in hieroglyphic as a small bird; in burial scenes it was also depicted departing from the body and flying up to the sky. In a following stanza this Egyptian allusion is confirmed, Mackey describing Coltrane's 'unruly wail' as a 'not / so thickly veiled prayer you / Anubic sisters' (*EW* 70). 'Unruly wail,' a timbre that seems to wildly deviate from conventional

[43] Qtd. in Kevin Stevens, 'Chasin' the Trane'. *The Journal of Music* (November-December 2007), http://thejmi.com/article/675.
[44] *Encyclopedia of Religion: Second Edition* (ed. Lindsay Jones), p.365.

strictures, suggests this same prolonged overblowing for intense emotive effects of the kind heard on *Ascension*. But in Mackey's handling it becomes prayer rather than scream; a spiritual gesture that is 'not / so thickly veiled', despite many Black Arts writers, such as Sanchez and Lee, misinterpreting it as political statement.

'Anubic sisters,' meanwhile, might refer to the prominent women in Coltrane's life: his step-daughter Syeeda, his first wife Naima, with whom he remained close friends, and his second wife Alice, whom he married in 1966—all guided by the Egyptian god Anubis in preparing his deceased body for the afterlife.[45] Anubis, also called 'Anpu', was the god of the dead in Egyptian mythology, normally represented in hieroglyph by a jackal. Responsible for escorting deceased souls into heaven, Anubis was also the reputed inventor of embalming, and attracted attention for exhibiting these skills at Osiris' burial. In the next section Mackey portrays Coltrane's spirit (*akh*) led by 'bird-gods' through the private rooms of an Egyptian tomb, undergoing a burial ritual normally administered for pharaohs.

These bird-gods
anoint me with camphor, escort me
thru each a more private room, the
chronic juices of lust flood an
ended earth
whose beckoned image
burns on

(*EW* 70)

Coltrane here watches on while his body, lathed in camphor, a millennia-old medicinal extracted from the camphor laurel tree, is healed; later in the poem, after the process is completed, he suddenly announces, '"Heal / dank world. Goodbye, I'm thru"' (*EW* 72). But the 'bird gods' to which Mackey refers quite possibly suggest another mystical tradition as well: shamanism. In the *Encyclopedia of Religion* birds are described as occupying 'a very important place in the spiritual world of hunters generally and of northern

[45] In an interview, Alice Coltrane said of her husband's choice of second wife: 'I think John could have just as easily have married another woman… Not myself and not because I was a musician but any woman who had the particular attributes or qualities to help him fulfil his life mission as God wanted him to' (Qtd. in Nisensen, *Ascension: John Coltrane and His Quest*, p.192).

Eurasia in particular, where shamanism has been a dominant magico-religious force'.46 Among the Altaic and the Uralic peoples of northern Russia, birds are traditionally symbolised, as in ancient Egypt, as divine spirits, as the departed souls of the deceased. Trane, as *Ohnedaruth*, becomes a bird-god among bird-gods; in the afterlife, glancing from afar upon the material world, he finds his spirit purged of desire ('chronic juices of lust'), ready for its final ascent to heaven. But it is an ascent that he recognises, ruefully, he will have to undertake without his closest spiritual companion, his wife (and band-member) Alice.

While Mackey complicates any sense of obvious meaning, preferring figuration rather than direct statement, familiarity with Coltrane's personal history assists interpretation. Early in 1966, a few months after the Village Gate performance, Alice Coltrane (née McLeod), whom John had met in 1963, replaced Tyner in her husband's band. Primarily an organist, she also played harp, an extremely rare instrument in jazz, and after her husband's death committed herself to playing music 'according to the ideals set forth by John', continuing to 'let the cosmic principle, or the aspect of spirituality, be the underlying reality behind the music as he had'.[47] She played harp on *Monastic Trio* (1969), with accompaniment by Sanders, Ali, Garrison and Ben Riley (on drums), and continued to employ it on her albums *Journey to Satchidananda* (title track) and *Ptah the El Daoud* ('Blue Nile').[48] For Alice Coltrane, the ethereal timbre of her harp conveyed her avowed spirituality, first and foremost, but also affirmed a unique, counter-mainstream musical aesthetic. In the following lines, where lineation becomes increasingly sparse, Mackey depicts her husband's spirit alone, isolated ('shipwrecked') without his wife.

not a harp no
fingers pluck played on by
wind
(*EW* 70)

At this nadir, hands are left nubbed, unable to pluck strings and ease the ache of spiritual rift. As with the neurological sensation of the phantom

[46] *Encyclopedia of Religion: Second Edition*, p.948.
[47] 'Alice Coltrane: Jazz Musician, Composer'. http://www.encyclopedia.com/doc/1G2-3430500020.html
[48] *Journey to Satchidananda*: Impulse! 051128-2; *Ptah, The El Daoud*: Impulse! 051201-2.

limb—that feeling of absence and presence which Guyanese novelist Wilson Harris compares with the experience of listening to music—the non-harp played by non-fingers, to borrow Mackey's words in relation to Harris' novel *Palace of the Peacock* (1960), 'reaches toward a wholeness to which it can only *refer*, the cosmic fulfilment we at once intuit and are "cut off" from'.[49] The personal thus becomes a microcosm for the universal: conjugal estrangement, as a result of Trane's death, morphs into African American spiritual estrangement at large, 'All the gathered / ache of our / severed selves', as Mackey puts it in 'Grisgris Dancer', another of the poems published in *Eroding Witness* (17). With 'augur's full to bursting / overload of sense' (*EW* 71), an intensity of emotion that threatens to overwhelm words themselves, Mackey then alters the voice of the poem, refusing to let meaning settle. The 'I' no longer speaks as Coltrane, but Mackey himself. Knowledge of personal history is again useful: in 1951, when Mackey was four, his parents, Sadie Wilcox and Alexander Mackey had separated, Sadie being left to raise her two elder sons, Thomas and Richard, her daughter Doloros ('Lois'), and her youngest son Nathaniel on her own. The following lines, Mackey admitted to Brent Cunningham, is 'some of my personal history bleeding into the figure of Coltrane. We share the "I"':[50]

my divorced mother
daddied me to death, my road is
wet,
shows Century City against
a futuristic sun.

(*EW* 71)

In his essays, most notably 'Cante Moro', Mackey comments on *duende*, an Andalusian word suggesting that 'inexplicable power of attraction' present among certain flamenco artists, bullfighters and poets that enables them, on rare occasions, to send waves of spine-tingling emotion through audiences.[51] Mackey writes after Federico García Lorca, who, in his various lectures from the twenties and thirties, attempts to define *duende*, recognising that to gain a better understanding of this 'mysterious power which everyone senses and no philosopher explains' (Goethe's words)

[49] Mackey, 'Limbo, Dislocation, Phantom Limb: Wilson Harris and the Caribbean Occasion'. *Discrepant Engagement*, p.176.
[50] Mackey, 'Interview with Brent Cunningham'. *Paracritical Hinge*, p.322.
[51] Christopher Maurer, preface to *In Search of Duende* (New York: New Directions, 1998), p.ix.

would go a long way towards better understanding the essence of art itself.[52] *Duende*, says Lorca, brings the artist face to face with death: it is a 'question of true, living style, of *blood*' and must be awoken 'in the remotest mansions of the *blood*' [my emphasis]. When commenting on this excerpt to Cunningham, 'bleeding' was thus a verb chosen quite specifically by Mackey as a reminder of this content—this sense of an art striving for what Robert L. Zamsky calls 'a metaphysical yet emotively powerful beyond'.[53]

Sadie's 'daddying' her son 'to death' suggests an over-caring mother's choking of a young man's independence, a stymieing of his spirit. But his critique of his mother, as the hyperbolic 'to death' indicates, is affectionate; the (self-deprecating) implication is that her 'daddying' might not have been as life-threatening to Mackey as it then seemed. The reference to Century City meanwhile, an exclusive suburb on the West Side of Los Angeles known for its skyscrapers, luxury hotels, and abundance of lawyers and executives, might well allude to Sadie's material aspirations for her son that, in adulthood, he earns enough money to move out of the working-class neighbourhood in which their family lived during the late fifties and early sixties ('futuristic sun', with 'sun' punning on 'son'). More likely is that Mackey, especially in the following stanza, is referring less to himself than to Coltrane, who, in 1953, then twenty-seven, found himself stranded in Los Angeles after a tour there with Johnny Hodges' band. Strung out on dope, it was only through the aid of a local stranger, Eric Dolphy, that Coltrane was able to pull himself together and find the money to make it home back east.[54]

So there I sit outside the
Heartbreak Straits at twenty-seven,
sad blackened bat-winged angel, my

[52] Qtd. in Federico García Lorca, 'Play and Theory of the Duende', in *Deep Song and Other Prose* (New York: New Directions, 1980), p.43.
[53] Robert L. Zamsky, 'A Poetics of Radical Musicality: Nathaniel Mackey's '-mu' Series'. *Arizona Quarterly*, Vol 62, No 1 (Spring, 2006), p.118.
[54] According to Nisensen, Dolphy was well known among musicians in Los Angeles for his altruistic behaviour. Despite enduring long periods without work, Dolphy would never shirk coming to the aid of fellow musicians, buying them groceries or helping them with accommodation. Coltrane never forgot Dolphy's help when he was at his lowest ebb in Los Angeles. When he was offered a lucrative new contract with Impulse! Records in 1961, he immediately enlisted Dolphy as a soloist and arranger for *Africa/Brass*, his first album for the new label (*Ascension: John Coltrane and His Quest*, p.104).

new day not of light but a watery
nest. My new day roots beneath
a basement of guts but also rises
in the flash of my falling there.
Though none
of its light comes down to me the ark of its
rising sails.
(*EW* 71)

'Heartbreak Straits' here functions as a trope for this low-point in Coltrane's life. Not only was he struggling with heroin and alcohol, artistically he was struggling to make an impression. In musical circles he was considered a journeyman hard-bopper, little more, 'better than most, but scarcely an original voice', as one critic described him.[55] Showing few signs of prodigious creativity, Trane was a long way from the major talent he was to be widely recognised as being after getting his start in Miles Davis' group in October 1955 and later, in 1957, playing alongside Thelonius Monk. Inspiration—*duende*—was lacking. As a result, Mackey might well imagine him as a 'sad blackened bat-winged Angel': *bat* symbolising both his nearness to death, burdened by his addictions; *winged* symbolising his hidden potential, that mysterious genius that emerged over the next fourteen years and appeared most spectacularly in works such as *A Love Supreme* and *Ascension*.

Yet Mackey means something more by 'Heartbreak Straits'—and its connotative secrets are tied up in textual hints offered elsewhere in *Eroding Witness*. In the third section of 'Song of the Andoumboulou: 7', the final instalment of Mackey's serial poem in his first poetry volume, N., Mackey's intermittently autobiographical narrator, tells Angel of Dust, his letter-correspondent, of a poem he had conceived (but not yet written) the previous evening in which 'the two of us were singing in some distant "church"'.

> A combination acoustic/electric 'church' in which the floorboards splintered while something like leg-irons gave our voices their weight. I call it the Heartbreak Church. It sits on an island known as Wet Sun, which itself sits only a mile or so southeast of the Heartbreak Straits. Henry Dumas wrote about it in that story of his, 'Ark of Bones'. (*EW* 54)

[55] Nisensen, *Ascension: John Coltrane and His Quest*, p.29.

'Ark of Bones,' published posthumously in Dumas' *'Ark of Bones' and Other Stories*, tells of two young men, Headeye and Fish-hound, who, after discovering a mojo bone, receive a 'call from the spirit' (*AB* 6). The mojo bone's strange powers of 'voodoo' lead them to the Mississippi's edge where they encounter a huge 'soulboat' that they initially think to be Noah's Ark. However, after noticing that no animals are on board, they step forth upon the soulboat and climb its stairs, each of which is numbered with a year: the last step dated 1977, the year, incidentally, that Mackey wrote 'Ohnedaruth's Day Begun' (7). Headeye and Fish-hound are then led into the Ark's bowels by its captain, and there encounter a vast quantity of cabins filled to the brim with bones of fellow African Americans, those victims of the slave trade and the brutalities of the Jim Crow South. Yet these bones are handled with the greatest of care, crews of black men carrying them 'like they… babies or something precious', according them the highest respect (9). As Headeye and Fish-hound return to the deck, overwhelmed by the sights they have seen, the bone-hauling continues, the Ark's boatmen all the while chanting an African-sounding dialect, 'Aba aba, al ham dilaba / aba aba mtu brotha…' as they go on pulling innumerable skeletons from the river (*AB* 9).

'Ark of Bones,' as its title suggests, is a tale of loss, of death, but also of communion with death, the spirits of the dead, those 'lost / voices' Mackey refers to in '"John Coltrane Arrived with an Egyptian Lady"', the other 'Coltrane poem' published in *Eroding Witness* (66). It is writing that, content-wise, courts what Lorca rather poetically calls 'the rim of the wound', the terrain of death prerequisite for the arrival of *duende*. (Indeed Headeye, by being 'ordained' by the old man on the ship, we discover later is being prepared for his own imminent death at the end of the story.) Yet, contrary to what N. writes in 'Song of the Andoumboulou: 7', there is no 'Heartbreak Straits' or 'Heartbreak Church' in Dumas' 'Ark of Bones': such places are purely of Mackey's invention. Rather than list real-life place-names, Mackey usually prefers to invest fictional places with symbolic resonances: the Heartbreak Church for example, where 'leg-irons' give voices their 'weight', is a 'house of generations', to borrow Dumas' phrase; it is a place where 'Every African who lives in America has a part of his soul' (*AB* 7). N.'s intimation, therefore, is that his creator and Dumas share aesthetic interests, that both seek an art that brings the past into a spiritually active present.

In 'Ohnedaruth's Day Begun', Coltrane receives a similar 'call from the spirit'. Sitting outside Heartbreak Straits, he imagines a 'new day' rooted in a 'basement of guts' (*EW* 71). Mackey is here referring to the millions of bones, scrupulously organised, that Headeye and Fish-hound discover in the belly of the Ark. After gaining a glimpse, at his life's lowest ebb, of the ark's 'rising sails', Coltrane sets forth to play with a newfound conviction. Atop this 'raft of tears', recalling Dumas' Ark of Bones, Coltrane's 'unruly wail' sings of his ancestors, reaching 'earthward' to their bones, the collective soul of the African American people.

So again I see my-
self afloat inside this Boat of
Years,
a raft of tears as Elvin's
drumset pretends to break
down. At the upper reach of
each run I
reach earthward, fingers blurred
while Jimmy's wrist-action
dizzies the sun. I see my ears cocked
Eastward eyes barely open,
beads
of sweat across my brow like rain.
(*EW* 71-72)

Mackey here is referring to Coltrane's 'classic' quartet (Elvin Jones, Jimmy Garrison, McCoy Tyner) whose performances had what Kevin Stevens calls

> the intensity of a revivalist meeting. Coltrane's horns sang with the force and cadence of a divinely inspired preacher, and tunes could literally last for hours, with members of the audience standing on chairs, shouting and waving their arms, as if touched by a supernatural force.[56]

At this moment of highest intensity, with sweat pouring off his brow 'like rain' (tears), Coltrane's playing perfectly weds body and soul; the 'intangible thrust' of his lines, rising towards the extreme upper register of his instrument, pointing 'earthward' yet remaining rooted in the shrieks,

[56] Stevens, 'Chasin' the Trane'. *The Journal of Music* (November – December 2007), http://thejmi.com/article/675

rasp and grunts of the material (*EW* 23-24). In doing so, Trane's soaring yet guttural saxophone is heard as a challenge to centuries of separation in Western culture, stretching back to Plato and before, of the immanent and transcendent, the physical and the nonphysical, the earthy and the astral. With 'ears cocked Eastward', he articulates not only a modern African American condition, and African American suffering, but a world condition at large, a *spiritus mundi* that finds its locus in Egyptian mythology:

> Quivering
> reed between implosive teeth, Nut's tethered son,
> I groan the ache of Our Lady's earth-
> encumbered arch, the bell of my axe
> become a wall whose bricks I
> dabble on in blood as if neediness,
> fed us
> (*EW* 72)

In Egyptian religion, Nut was a goddess of the sky and the heavens, often depicted as a woman arched over the earth god Geb ('Our Lady's earth- / encumbered arch'). Trane, with 'Quivering / reed', speaks of her 'ache', his timbre betraying recognition of man's suffering on earth as the 'Andoumboulouous we' referred to by Mackey in his preface to *Splay Anthem*, those 'rough drafts' of humanity created by an imperfect demiurge.[57] Elsewhere in *Eroding Witness* Trane's reed, which is made out of wood, is described as 'splintered' (46), so evoking the cracking floorboards of Heartbreak Church, born down by 'leg-irons'. Other images of forced, fraught migration throughout the volume are invoked as well, such as the 'sea-weary drift of boatlifted / Haitians' (*EW* 83) mentioned in 'Capricorn Rising', a poem written 'for Pharoah Sanders' (and named after the final cut on Sanders' 1967 recording *Tauhid*).[58] 'Splintered' suggests crack, rafts collapsing and occupants drowning: the travails and agonies of the Middle Passage. 'Encumbered' subsumes these images: it intimates a burdensome relation between Nut and earth, a 'blutopic' arrangement, to borrow a term coined by Duke Ellington in 1944, in which utopia is 'tinged with the blues', stained with memories of the past.[59] Earth's faults,

[57] Mackey, preface to *Splay Anthem* (New York: New Directions, 2006), p.ix.
[58] *Tauhid*: Impulse! AS-9138.
[59] Graham Lock, *Blutopia : Visions of the Future and Revisions of the Past in the Work of Sun Ra, Duke Ellington, and Anthony Braxton* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1999), p.5. 'Blutopia,' as Lock points out, was the title of a brief –

mankind's perennial suffering, weigh down 'Our Lady', who is 'tethered' to Geb, urgently seeking escape from his fraught embrace.

Coltrane too refuses to forget past suffering in his 'endless / dwelling on air'. His saxophone ('axe') constructs an auditory 'wall' of optimism-against-the-odds, a blutopian vision for the future with bricks 'dabble[d] on in blood as if neediness / fed us' (*EW* 72). Yet such gnostic enunciation of what Peter O'Leary calls a natural eschatology of 'fallenness' is more a feature of Sun Ra's aesthetic than Coltrane's: Ra's philosophies might be said to be bleeding into the saxophonist.[60] Whereas Coltrane tended to reference West Africa in his song titles—'Liberia', 'Dahomey Dance', for instance—Ra, who Mackey has 'long thought of as something of a latter-day gnostic', had been valorising and explicitly naming Egypt in his music since the early fifties.[61] As Graham Lock notes in *Blutopia* (1999), for Ra ancient Egypt was root of culture and truth, a longed-for but distant Other. Born Herman Blount in Birmingham, Alabama, by 1952 he had changed his name to the Egyptian sun-god as a means of differentiating himself from Christianity, which he regarded as a maleficent force in black America. Ra's particular quarrel was with Moses, 'a murderer, liar and deceiver' whose idealisation within Judeo-Christian mythology caused African Americans to identify with the Israelites rather than their true historical legacy, the black civilisation of Egypt.[62]

When it appeared in 1954, Ra closely read George G. M. James' *Stolen Legacy*, a work countering prevailing white scholarship on ancient Egypt that ignored its scientific, religious and philosophical impact upon Greece.[63] In following years he incorporated James' arguments as a basis for a reconfigured mythology that never tired of promoting the people of

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and musically unexceptional – composition by Duke Ellington, performed at his orchestra's Carnegie Hall concert in December 1944. For Mackey, 'blutopia' (a word he learnt from Lock's book) comes to stand for an 'optimism-against-the-odds', a utopian longing that nevertheless refuses to forget the atrocities African Americans have experienced in America (Mackey, preface to *Splay Anthem*, p.ix).

[60] Peter O'Leary, 'Deep Trouble/Deep Treble: Nathaniel Mackey's Gnostic Rasp'. *Callaloo*, Vol 23, No 2, Nathaniel Mackey issue (Spring, 2000), p.531.

[61] Mackey, 'Interview by Paul Naylor'. *Paracritical Hinge*, p.342.

[62] Lock, unpublished interview, 1990. The author claims that Ra 'referred to several biblical stories to substantiate his accusation against Moses. He also insisted that his antipathy to Moses was not fuelled by anti-Semitism' (Lock, *Blutopia*, p.224).

[63] The full title of James' book in its original form is *Stolen Legacy: The Greeks Were Not the Authors of Greek Philosophy but the People of North Africa, Commonly the Egyptians*.

ancient North Africa, especially their blackness, as a source of beauty. Hieroglyphics adorned Ra's record jackets, Egyptian costumes were a feature of his Arkestra concerts; his Saturn record label was renamed Thoth, after the two-headed Egyptian god; his song titles referred to Egypt: 'Tiny Pyramids', 'Sunset on the Nile', 'Ancient Aiethopia'. By the sixties, as Mackey observes in his essay 'Palimpsestic Stagger', Ra's efforts had caught on within the black studies revolts. Egypt became 'contested ground', scholars such as Cheikh Anta Diop, in *The African Origin of Civilisation*, E. A. Wallis Budge, in *Osiris and the Egyptian Resurrection*, and John G. Jackson, in *Introduction to African Civilisations*, attempting to reinstate the ancient nation, rather than Greece and Rome, as the cradle of Western civilisation.[64]

Ra, of course, wasn't the only post-bebop musician to reference ancient Egypt during this period. Cecil Taylor called his 1961 trio album *Nefertiti, The Beautiful One Has Come*; one of (Pharoah) Sanders' best-known tracks post-Trane was called 'Upper Egypt Lower Egypt' (the seventeen-minute opening to *Tauhid*); Albert Ayler performed a version of Sanders' composition, entitled 'Venus/Upper and Lower Egypt', on 21 January, 1968 (later collected on his album *Holy Ghost*).[65] Among the white avant-garde poets that Mackey was reading while at Stanford, valorisations of Egypt could be found as well. In Duncan's *Tribunals*, for instance, the poet sings of Egypt's Africanicity, her 'river out of Africa':

> … Egypt, the image of
> Heaven, Africa
> Her land, Her plants, Her animals,
> Osiris, the ever flowing
> returning river out of Africa…[66]

A black African civilisation, root of the world, ancient Egypt was 'some Other place', as Mackey calls it in the final lines of '"John Coltrane Arrived with An Egyptian Lady"' (*EW* 66). It was conceived as the site of an original African utopia, before armies arrived from Europe and cut a swath through her economic, cultural and spiritual progression. Yet the

[64] Mackey, 'Palimpsestic Stagger'. *Paracritical Hinge*, p.66.
[65] Cecil Taylor, *Nefertiti, The Beautiful One Has Come*: Revenant 202; Albert Ayler, *Holy Ghost: Rare and Unissued Recordings (1962-1970)*: Revenant 9CD box.
[66] Robert Duncan, *Tribunals: Passages 31-35* (Los Angeles: Black Sparrow Press, 1970), pp.7-8.

blackness of Egypt, and her status as the source of many religious, scientific and philosophical ideas associated with Hellenism, hadn't always been suppressed by Western society. In fact, as Martin Bernal argues in *Black Athena* (1973), a revisiting of James' thesis, it was only in the late eighteenth-century, as slavery was gathering pace and anti-black racism (the justification, if not by-product, of such a policy) began to grow, that Egypt's ethnicity began to be obscured through a process of collective historical denial among Western historians.[67]

'Truth' about Egypt, then, came to be one of the casualties on the journey through 'Heartbreak Straits', the route undertaken by slaves from West Africa to America during the Middle Passage. And it is out of this 'smoke' of obfuscation that Coltrane emerges in 'Ohnedaruth's Day Begun', approached by a 'kid' (the then eighteen-year-old Mackey) at the conclusion of the first set after just completing his performance of 'Afro-Blue':

> I grope thru smoke to glimpse New
> York City, the Village Gate, late
> '65. I sit at the bar drinking scotch between
> sets, some kid comes up and says he'd
> like to hear 'Equinox'.
> We play 'Out Of
> This World' instead, the riff hits
> me like rain and like a leak in my
> throat it won't quit. No reins whoa
> this ghost I'm ridden by and again
> I'm asking
> myself what 'climb' will Nut ask of
> me next? *ta'wil* to where?
>
> (*EW* 73)

[67] Martin Bernal, *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilisation: Vol 1* (London: Vintage, 1991), p.30. Bernal argues that the suppression of Egyptian blackness was the direct consequence of romantic ideology in the late eighteenth century that considered it 'undesirable, if not disastrous, for races to mix' (29). He observes how the tidal wave of nationalism that engulfed northern Europe during this period led to beliefs that creativity was premised upon racial purity. 'Thus it became increasingly intolerable that Greece – which was also seen by the Romantics not merely as the epitome of Europe but also as its pure childhood – could be the result of the mixture of native Europeans and colonizing Africans and Semites' (29).

Coltrane's performance of 'Out of this World' at the Village Gate, as Mackey remembers it, here becomes a cry for 'some Other place', what we might assume to be the longed-for utopia of Egyptian antiquity. Relentless, it starts 'like a leak' in Trane's throat and 'won't quit' (73). In this way it is not unlike *duende*, that tormenting, gremlin-like spirit which, according to Lorca, demands that the best flamenco singers (such as Pastora Pavón) sing with 'scorched throat', at the limits of their expressive power.[68] In 'Deep Song' Lorca writes how the Gypsy singer Manuel Torre had advised him, when queried about the definition of *duende*, 'What you must search for, and find, is the black torso of the Pharaoh'.[69] That night the 'black torso of the Pharaoh' was quite literally alongside Trane up on stage, Sanders 'screaming' into his tenor saxophone. But Torre was of course speaking metaphorically: as Mackey notes in 'Cante Moro', 'he meant that one has to root one's voice in fabulous origins, find one's voice in the dark, among the dead'.[70] In 'Ohnedaruth's Day Begun', these are victims of slavery, the vast multitude whose remains are found within the Ark of Bones.

As Mackey's tropes swirl with semantic potentialities, the poem's thematic focus shifts again—this time to the 'spiritual exegesis', as Norman Finkelstein puts it, of *ta'wil*.[71] 'What "climb" will Nut ask of / me next? *ta'wil* to where?' he imagines Trane thinking during his 'wild' performance, his 'climb' an ascension towards the heavens (the realm of Nut), towards artistic rapture and ecstasy (*EW* 73). But he is also being climbed upon, 'ridden by' (73) one of the *orishas* (divinities) associated with Haitian *vodoun*, Brazilian *candomblé*, and Cuban *lucumí* and *santería* rites. Within such traditions—all appropriations of West African religions brought over on slave ships—the spirit of a divinity is usually said to mount the host, who is characteristically likened to a horse. Maya Deren, in *Divine Horsemen*, explains possession as a 'psychic phenomenon' in which the *gros-bon-ange*—the soul, spirit, or psyche—is temporarily displaced within the human.[72] During this process, actions and utterances of the

[68] Lorca, *Deep Song and Other Prose,* p.46.
[69] Ibid, p.140.
[70] Mackey, 'Cante Moro'. *Paracritical Hinge*, p.182.
[71] Norman Finkelstein, 'Nathaniel Mackey and the Unity of All Rites'. *Contemporary Literature*, Vol 49, No 1 (Spring, 2008), p.27.
[72] Deren is careful when translating *gros-bon-ange* into English: 'The exclusive use of the word 'soul' (which has moral and mystic connotations),' she writes, 'would… misrepresent the sense of *gros-bon-ange* or spirit, which is understood, in Voudoun, as the invisible, non-material *self* or character of an individual, as

possessed person 'are not the expression of the individual, but are the readily identifiable manifestations of the particular *loa* or archetypal principle.[73]

During possession, one's individual being is briefly occupied by a god, spirit or demon. As Mackey writes in 'Cante Moro', it is a process where 'something beyond your grasp of it grabs you, that something that gets away from you'.[74] Lorca, in 'Play and Theory of *Duende*', compares the effect of listening to a flamenco singer (such as Pavón) gripped by *duende*, to possession, to 'the blacks of the Antilles' who, in the "lucumí" rite, 'huddle in heaps before the statue of Santa Bárbara'.[75] Mackey claims to think of possession similarly, as somehow 'related to *duende*'.[76] Trane, within these richest intensities of trance, is overwhelmed by the divine. And it is here that he locates his voice, that which lies at the far side of technique—plays, in fact, with *duende*. Ta'wil, meanwhile, is the term used by Ismā'īli Islamists for 'hidden meanings' that can be found in the Qur'ān. As Asghar Ali Engineer explains, 'ordinary' people are not supposed to know the original meaning or the ta'wil; only 'the chosen few or the initiated who are entitled to know', namely Allah, the holy Prophet, his legatee (wasi) and imams from his progeny.[77] Coltrane, his generation's 'heaviest spirit', as Baraka described him in an oft-quoted encomium, becomes, as *Ohnedaruth*, one of these 'chosen few'.[78]

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distinguished from his physical body: i.e., the person John, as a *concept*, distinct from the physical body of John. As a matter of fact, the word 'psyche' , as it is used in modern psychology, conveys some aspects of the Voudoun *gros-bon-ange* much more accurately than the word 'soul' , which has been used in most of the literature on Haiti because of its relevant religious associations; and the word 'spirit' would approximate the Voudoun esprit only if understood as a person's 'life principle' , his 'nature' or 'character' (as we understand it in such phrases as 'the spirit of the times') rather than in its exclusively mystic or spiritual sense' (*Divine Horsemen*, pp.17-18).

[73] Deren, *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti* (New York: Dell, 1970), pp.15-16.

[74] Mackey, 'Cante Moro'. *Paracritical Hinge*, p.191.

[75] Lorca, *Deep Song and Other Prose*, p.46.

[76] Ibid.

[77] Asghar Ali Engineer, 'Qur'ānand Ismai'li Ta'wil'. *Panjabilok* website. http://www.panjabilok.net/faith/islam/islamismaili.htm

[78] Baraka, *Black Music*. The author dedicates his work: 'For John Coltrane / the heaviest spirit' (10).

But ta'wil *to* where? Mackey responds in the following lines by writing, 'to what love / turned into loss by my getting here / as Night's reign whips on to where / someday / weaned of time's ghosted light we / begin again, our Boat as was in / the beginning, the sea itself?' (*EW* 73). The *sea itself*: a new beginning of essences, where the Boat (Ark) merges into the sea and time itself is 'weaned', is an imagining of Unity, a world without divisions. Yet such imaginings inherently draw attention to the very capacity of symbol, as a mode of signification, to describe it. As Paul Ricœur, in *The Symbolism of Evil*, warns,

> There does not exist, in fact, any act of signifying that is equal to its aim… it is always with something that plays the role of analagon as starting point that the symbol symbolizes; the multiplicity of the symbols is the immediate consequence of their subservience to a stock of analoga, which altogether are necessarily limited in extension and individually are equally limited in comprehension.[79]

Robert Duncan, in *Bending the Bow*, similarly alerts to the inexhaustibility of the cosmos as a field of reference and the inability of linguistic analoga to fully grasp that field:

> The poet works with a sense of parts fitting in relation to a design that is larger than the poem. The commune of poetry becomes so real that he sounds each particle in relation to parts of a great story that he knows will never be completed.[80]

World, then, overwhelms word. Or, as Duncan puts it, 'the theme is much too big / to cover all o'er'.[81] For David Halliburton, this demands a more ambitious hermeneutic. Concluding a phenomenological study on Edgar Allen Poe, he claims: 'The interpreter's job… is not merely to read the actual poem but to explore the one that was never written.'[82] Mackey, reflecting on this quote in his Stanford doctoral dissertation, *Call Me Tantra: Open Field Poetics as Muse* (1974), associates this job with *ta'wil*,

[79] Paul Ricœur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, trans. Emerson Buchanan (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), p.168.
[80] Robert Duncan, *Bending the Bow* (New York: New Directions, 1968), p.vi.
[81] Ibid, p.26.
[82] David Halliburton, *Edgar Allen Poe: A Phenomological View* (Princeton: UP of Princeton, 1973), p.420. Halliburton was one of the examiners for Mackey's Stanford Ph.D. dissertation.

an 'exegesis which carries the soul back to truth'.[83] From Henry Corbin's *Avicenna and the Visionary Recital* he learned:

> The truth of the *ta'wil* rests upon the simultaneous reality of the mental operation in which it consists and of the psychic Event that gives rise to it. The *ta'wil* of texts supposes the *ta'wil* of the soul: the soul cannot restore, return the text to its truth, unless it too returns to *its* truth, which implies for it passing beyond imposed patencies, emerging from the world of appearances and metaphors, from exile and the "Occident".'[84]

Corbin goes on to explain that, for the Isma'ilis, it is only through rigorous grounding in a 'text of a book or a cosmic text' that the soul can be raised 'to the rank of a real, but inner and psychic Event'.[85] This Event, which is the soul's encounter with its own intentionality, 'carries us to the utmost limit of the world; at this limit, the cosmos yields before the soul, it can no longer escape without being interiorised into the soul, being *integrated* with it'.[86] During this phase, 'psychic energy' performs the transformation of the text into what Corbin describes as a 'constellation of symbols'.[87]

Coltrane, whose study of the Qur'an, as well as many other religious texts, was rigorous and longstanding, is deemed to have fulfilled these prerequisites. *Ta'wil* of texts has been achieved: his soul is ready to be reunited with the cosmos. And in the final two stanzas of 'Ohnedaruth's Day Begun', it is exactly this 'integration' of soul and cosmos that is depicted, his soul at peace with the world in which it once existed:

> The backs
> of our necks caressed by African pillows,
> the far side of her voice by
> the flutter of birds blown out to sea…
> While 'each is both' we bask in
> an air swept clean of all distance,

[83] Mackey, *Call Me Tantra: Open Field Poetics as Muse*, p.158.
[84] Henry Corbin, *Avicenna and the Visionary Recital* (New York: Pantheon, 1960), p.31.
[85] Ibid, p.32.
[86] Ibid.
[87] Ibid.

attended by bells…
Attended by
birds, in their beaks the hem of dawn's
lifted
skirts
(*EW* 74)

Amid the tolling of the bells and the fluttering of the birds, Coltrane's spiritual journey through the afterlife reaches its final resting place. His soul, in Corbin's words, 'suddenly visualises its *own* archetypal Image, that Image whose imprint it simultaneously bears within it, projects, and recognises outside of itself'.[88] The 'her' is his muse, recognisable from the poem's preceding stanza: 'her thread of words a white froth at our / feet as I forget myself' (*EW* 73). The 'we' might be Sanders, Shepp, Jones, Ali, Brown, Garrison, Tyner—Coltrane's band-members that night at the Village Gate—who are caressed by 'African pillows', their heads cushioned by a far-flung but soothing Africanicity. But the 'we' could be mankind-at-large as well, integrated, without divisions, within this Event. Separations are transgressed, distances between humans bridged: 'While "each is both" we bask in / an air swept clean of all distance,' Mackey writes (*EW* 74).

'Dawn's / lifted / skirts,' the poem's final image, links the day's first appearance of light with sexual desire. Mackey's specific allusion, however, is to the wisdom of the blind Dogon elder Ogotemmêli, whose first-hand account of the myth, religion and philosophy of the Dogon of Mali proved another key influence on his thinking in the sixties and seventies. 'Coiled fringes of the skirt,' Ogotemmêli told Marcel Griaule during a conversation in 1946 (in a text later published in 1965), were 'the chosen vehicle for the words which the Spirit desired to reveal to the earth'.[89] The birds, divine attendants to Unity, carry in their beaks the hems of this 'lifted / skirts', the ill-defined speech at the beginning of all things.[90] Ron Silliman, in an essay on Jack Spicer's poetry, made the observation that language, 'like sex ... is about power. Power over production and

[88] Ibid.
[89] Marcel Griaule, *Conversations with Ogotemmêli: An Introduction to Dogon Religious Ideas* (London: UP of Oxford, 1965), p.20.
[90] Ibid.

consumption of meaning.'[91] Mackey's poem raises the possibility, in these final lines, of a language being cast anew, a poetry 'swept clean of all distance', cleansed of the racially prejudiced ideologies that have all too frequently saddled poetic representations of Coltrane in the past.

'Ohnedaruth's Day Begun,' to be sure, has none of the simplistic language that Ogotemmêli describes having existed at the world's origins. Allusive and, on occasions, obliquely self-referential, its symbolism and rich intertextuality confound easy comprehension. Like Coltrane's music, it is *bird-language*, thick with open-ended meaning. But the poet was simply refusing to reduce his subject to something more prosaic than the vast range of meanings his music could, if given the chance, be heard to express. 'Trane is a mature swan whose wing span was a whole new world,' Baraka wrote in 'New Black Music'.[92] And in trying to capture this 'mature swan' in language, the almost limitless hermeneutic possibility of his 'unruly' saxophone wail, Mackey found a literary voice of his own.

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[91] Ron Silliman, 'Spicer's Language'. In Bob Perelman (ed.), *Writing/Talks* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: UP of Southern Illinois, 1985), p.181.
[92] Baraka, 'New Black Music: A Concert in Benefit of The Black Arts Repertory Theatre/School Live' (liner notes for *New Wave in Jazz*, Impulse A-90). *Black Music*, p.173.

Uncanny Carnage in Peter Weir's *The Cars That Ate Paris*

REBECCA JOHINKE

Arthur Waldo wakes up in hospital, learns that his car and caravan are wrecks, his brother is dead, and that he is trapped in a sinister community that is caught in a time warp. He is grief-stricken, disorientated and confused. It seems that cars are the key but he is not sure whether he is 'man enough' to unlock the dark secrets of the town and drive away. It is this setting that our protagonist Arthur must navigate in Australia's first car crash film: Peter Weir's *The Cars That Ate Paris* (1974). The film and Weir's next work, *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1975), served as watershed films in the Australian film revival of the 1970s and both are typically described as seminal examples of Australian Gothic. As Gerry Turcotte notes, one of the comforting traits of genre fiction, in this case Gothic, is that the audience is in familiar territory (orientated).[1] If the familiar, however, seems slightly strange and unfamiliar (as is the case with Australian Gothic), then the uncanny is evoked in what can be a

[1] Gerry Turcotte, 'Australian Gothic', in *The Handbook to Gothic Literature*, Marie Mulvey-Roberts, ed. (Houndsmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire, London: Macmillan, 1998), p. 19.

disorientated and disorientating narrative. *The Cars That Ate Paris*[2] may be a Gothic horror film but its dark humour underscores the uncomfortable position of the viewer who is likely to be simultaneously horrified and amused by the onscreen carnage. This destabilising rhetorical strategy works to evoke uncanniness in the audience as it contemplates the strange but recognizable events on screen. Thus, automobiles operate as a remarkably flexible organising metaphor in a film where they act as both technological storks and agents of death. In this essay, I will interrogate the way that Weir aligns immobile crashed cars with Parisian/Australian culture and with liminal male bodies. I will argue that the characters and cars are manifested as uncanny hybrids with both zoomorphic and anthropomorphic qualities. Finally, I will argue that Weir dismantles many of the myths about Australia and Australians in *Cars* just before he goes on to define them in his next films.

Weir's early films paint Australia as a strange environment, populated by people who are insecure about identity and their place in both the national and international landscape. Weir's first success, *Michael* (1970), was conceived as the second part of a trilogy called *Three to Go* filmed for the Commonwealth Film Unit. *Michael* rehearses many of *Cars'* anxieties about subjectivity, claustrophobic family environments, intergenerational conflict and culture clashes. Weir confesses that in making *Michael* (and *Cars*) he hoped to generate discussion about Australia's xenophobia and involvement in the Vietnam War.[3] His next project, the darkly comic *Homesdale (1971)* is less self-consciously earnest than *Michael*, and Susan Dermody and Elizabeth Jacka describe it as Australia's first Gothic film.[4] *Homesdale*'s black take on trauma and repression rehearses the pathological psychotherapeutic terrain explored in *Cars* and it shares its sense of mischief and fun. Both films simultaneously parody and interrogate issues such as trauma, repression, compulsion and sublimated violence. The title *Homesdale*, of course, alerts viewers that the notion of 'home' should be interrogated just as setting *Cars* in an Australian town called Paris suggests that 'foreign' and 'foreigners' are cultural constructions. Crucially, *Homesdale* introduces a plot device that is central to *Cars*, that car 'accidents' provide an excellent cover for murder. After

[2] Hereafter referred to as *Cars.*

[3] See Michael Dempsey, and Peter Weir, 'Inexplicable feelings: An interview with Peter Weir,' *Film Quarterly* 33.4 (Summer, 1980): 2-11.

[4] Susan Dermody and Elizabeth Jacka, eds., *The Imaginary Industry* (North Ryde, Sydney: AFTRS Publications, 1988), p. 50.

making *Cars*, Weir shot *Picnic at Hanging Rock* [5] the next year and it famously questions white notions of home, belonging and the strangeness of Australian landscape and the female body. Weir's next film, *The Last Wave* (1977), was less commercially and critically successful than *Picnic* but it continues Weir's experimentation with the Gothic genre. Weir encourages viewers to question white colonialism and respect Indigenous Australian culture while simultaneously stereotyping that culture as eerie and uncanny. The made-for-television and less well known *The Plumber* (1978) is less interesting than Weir's other early work but it is well regarded by some critics.[6] It centres on a psychological contest, this time between a white educated woman (an academic) and a working-class male (obviously, a plumber). Set in a claustrophobic domestic setting the two characters do battle over unnecessary repairs to an increasingly abject (leaking and unruly) bathroom. I will return to these films and their relationship to *Cars* throughout this essay.

In Sigmund Freud's 1919 essay 'The Uncanny', he explains the relationship between the *heimlich* (homely or familiar) and the *unheimlich* (unfamiliar or uncanny) and just why the uncanny evokes dread, fear or anxiety.[7] One experiences the uncanny when what should be comforting and familiar appears alien and what should be foreign seems strangely familiar. Moreover, if what should be private and known only to a small community is made known or partially revealed to outsiders then the uncanny is evoked in the form of the interloper (a liminal figure). Apparent antonyms, *heimlich* and *unheimlich* in fact coincide (or conflate) to provoke a terrible sense of eerie familiarity or *déjà vu*. Traumatic repressed memories, often Oedipal in nature, resurface and destructive behaviour may reoccur as subjects battle to repress the memories again. Thus repetition, doubling, and a sense that one is trapped or going around in circles is a typical uncanny sensation. In their summary of the uncanny, Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle helpfully list ten ways in which the uncanny is evoked, and in addition to the aforementioned tropes they add animism, anthropomorphism, automatism, coincidence, uncertainty about

[5] Hereafter referred to as *Picnic.*

[6] See, for example, Marek Haltof, *Peter Weir: When Cultures Collide* (New York: Twayne, 1996).

[7] Sigmund Freud, 'The Uncanny,' *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud, t*rans. James Strachey, Anna Freud, Alix Strachey and Alan Tyson (London: Hogarth Press, 1955. Vol 17.), pp. 218-252.

sexual identity, fear of being buried alive, telepathy, silence and death.[8] Royle expands on these unconventional conventions in his book-length study entitled *The Uncanny* and, as I will demonstrate, all of these identifying tropes surface in Weir's work and in *Cars* especially.[9] As both Royle and Hélène Cixous observe, however, attempts to 'list' aspects of the uncanny are doomed to failure as, by nature, the uncanny can never be defined or trapped in this fashion.[10] Inevitably, one is chasing ghosts and shadows and attempting to make them behave. To make matters worse, as Royle also notes, any meta-analysis of the uncanny is fated to be uncanny (circular and disorientating).[11] Nevertheless, as Royle's scholarship and Weir's films demonstrate, it is peculiar how much enjoyment can be experienced when one is waylaid grappling with uncanny shape-shifters.

Ken Gelder and Gerry Turcotte are Australia's best-known scholars of Australian Gothic and as Gelder notes, 'Gothic tropes seemed to lend themselves all too readily to the colonially perceived Australian interior'.[12] As Gelder and Jane M. Jacobs expound in *Uncanny Australia*, inevitably, any colonised space generates uneasiness and ambiguity about ownership and the right to call that territory 'home'.[13] Even after several centuries of colonisation and agricultural cultivation (making it more *heimlich*), the land will always be, to some extent at least, *unheimlich*: familiar but at the same time inevitably alien. Any postcolonial reading of Australian texts starts with the acknowledgement that white 'settlers' are by definition dislocated and disorientated (unsettled) in a hostile foreign environment and this renders Australia both terrible and sublime: an uncanny space. *Picnic* is perhaps still the most potent example of this and Douglas Keesey makes a convincing argument that *Picnic* and *The Last Wave* are texts haunted by the spectre of the uncanny while simultaneously trying to

[8] Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle, *An introduction to literature, criticism and theory*, 2nd ed. (Hemel Hempstead: Prentice Hall Europe, 1999), p. 37.
[9] Nicholas Royle, *The Uncanny* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003).
[10] Ibid, p.13 and Hélène Cixous, 'Fiction and its Phantoms: A Reading of Freud's Das Unheimliche (The 'Uncanny'),' *New Literary History*, 7.3 (Spring, 1976), p. 525.
[11] Royle, op.cit., p. 19.
[12] Ken Gelder, 'Australian Gothic,' in *The Routledge Companion to Gothic*, eds. Catherine Spooner and Emma McEvoy (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), p.116.
[13] Ken Gelder and Jane M. Jacobs, *Uncanny Australia* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1998).

characterize Australia and its (white) defining myths.[14] Uncanny representations of the Australian landscape depict Australia as simultaneously familiar but also foreign; a space haunted by the absent presence of Aboriginal Australians who operate as liminal beings in these texts and this is implicit in *Picnic* and explicit in *The Last Wave*. The only indigenous presence in *Cars* is 'the mayor's Aborigine' (a garden ornament that is smashed part way through the film) and a white Parisian in blackface and fancy dress at the Pioneer Ball at the end of the film. Thus black Australians are reduced to tokens or totems—noble savages who are part of a distant past (history) but nonetheless haunt the present.[15]

Although Australian Gothic narratives also take place in the city (for example, the aforementioned *The Last Wave*) and the suburbs (for example, P.J. Hogan's 1994 *Muriel's Wedding*) they are typically set in the bush or outback where small isolated communities are coded as brutal: simultaneously agoraphobic and claustrophobic environments. This is the setting for behaviour that may initially appear to be larrikin-like but which quickly degenerates into violent gynophobia, homophobia and xenophobia (for example, Ted Kotcheff's 1971 *Wake in Fright*). Aggressive white hetero-normative masculinity is enforced to guard secrets like rape, incest, or lethal racism (for example, Steve Jodrell's 1988 *Shame*).[16] These insular communities do not welcome strangers who could learn their secrets or interfere with their way of life and so typically these interlopers are made to disappear. This is certainly the case in *Cars*. After a short prologue, viewers are introduced to two homeless 'battlers' (Arthur and George Waldo) who, like the archetypal 'wandering Jews' of so many Gothic texts, are on the road in search of work and sanctuary. They are unstable stateless bodies in search of a home while all the while radio reports and newspaper headlines emphasise high levels of unemployment, civil unrest, petrol

[14] Douglas Keesey, 'Weir(d) Australia: *Picnic at Hanging Rock* and *The Last Wave*,' *LIT: Literature Interpretation Theory* 8, no.3 (1998): 331-346.

[15] There is a clear case that this could be read as an example of Freud's 'Totem and Taboo.' 1913, *Standard Edition*, Vol. 17, pp. 217-56.

[16] Meaghan Morris's 1989 and 1998 essays remain essential reading about what she calls 'phobic narratives' such as *Cars* and the ones listed in this section of my paper. See Meaghan Morris, 'Fate and the Family Sedan,' *East-West Film Journal* 4.1. (1989): 113-134, and 'White Panic or Mad Max and the Sublime,' in *Trajectories: Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, ed. Kuan-Hsing Chen (London and New York: Routledge,1998), pp. 239-262. John Scott and Dean Biron, '*Wolf Creek*, rurality and the Australian gothic,' *Continuum* 24.2 (2010): 307-322, provide a valuable addition to more recent representations of xenophobic tropes in Australian Gothic cinema.

rationing, and car carnage out of control.[17] After a series of disappointments on the road, the brothers follow a series of road signs and detours that direct them to a town called Paris. Parisians, who mimic Cornish smugglers or pirates by using lights to lure travellers off course, ambush the brothers and pillage their car and caravan. George (Rick Scully) is killed and the town's mayor (John Meillon) 'adopts' Arthur (Terry Camilleri). Arthur is initially employed as a hospital orderly (where he meets another worker, Darryl, played by Chris Haywood) and then as a parking inspector. Both roles evoke horror and dread because, as I will go on to discuss, in the first role he must interact with the dead (and the undead), while in the second role he is forced to confront his driving phobia. The narrative ends with a battle (where cars become hybrid characters), Paris is destroyed, Arthur gets back behind the wheel, kills Darryl, and escapes.

For Australian audiences, Paris at first appears to be an idyllic little country town in a familiar countryside with rolling hills and narrow winding roads. Its quaintness evokes nostalgia and perhaps homesickness. It is a place we expect to feel safe, secure, cosy and at home; and that is why, according to horror conventions, it is particularly unsettling when that expectation is overturned. As Brian McFarlane notes in his essay about filmic representations of Australian small towns, Weir undercuts our expectations at every turn and exposes the 'hypocrisies and assorted malevolences at work in the apparently peaceful setting'.[18] Although a film about country towns, *Cars* is not a narrative about the Australian countryside (landscape) even though, like so many Australian narratives, it interrogates notions of home, homelessness and belonging. Just as in *Homesdale*, the characters do battle with each other, not with the land, and there is never any suggestion that the Parisians could farm or mine the surrounding countryside. One assumes this has been tried before in the days of the 'pioneers' (now history) but that 'the future' is technology, not agriculture. Accordingly, Parisians are preoccupied with the roads and the travellers that traverse the landscape, not the landscape itself. For whatever reason—we never find out—Arthur is spared by the Parisians and not killed or made into a lobotomised 'veggie' (a type of monstrous body manifested as a zombie). Hence, Arthur is stuck in a liminal insider/outsider position between the known and the unknown. He is now

[17] These preoccupations went on to dominate car crash films for at least the next decade. For example, the *Mad Max* trilogy and *Dead End Drive In*.
[18] Brian McFarlane, 'Country Towns in Australian Films: Trap or Comfort Zone?' *Metro Magazine* 146/7 (2005): 50.

the bearer of the town's secrets and he survives to escape with that knowledge and this is not always the case in Weir's early films. In *The Last Wave* the protagonist's mystical insights into Indigenous Australian culture disrupt his stable notion of what it means to be Australian and in a position of white hetero-normative hegemonic power. He learns hidden truths about himself but in doing so, according to Gothic conventions, his subjectivity is shattered and the narrative ends with his impending death. Thus in *Homesdale*, *Cars*, *Picnic* and *The Last Wave,* Weir suggests that self-awareness, agency, and 'wholeness' comes at the expense of possible self-destruction. Of course, it is not just the characters that are placed in this uncomfortable position as the audience is implicated in this colonising process. Subsequently, as viewers we are forced to contemplate our own innocence, guilt or complicity where previously we may have been, as Julia Kristeva argues in relation to the uncanny, 'strangers to ourselves'.[19]After all, Freud's essay centres on a tale about eyes and what is and is not seen—it forces us to reconsider our ability to see (and know) ourselves. As Nicholas Royle and Barbara Creed argue, film is the ideal medium for this type of uncanny visual investigation.[20]

Once viewers are orientated and more 'at home' in Paris, Weir then hints that automobiles may also operate in an uncanny fashion in the narrative. The power of the car as an uncanny object stems firstly from its ubiquity in the Australian landscape. It is a potent signifier of freedom, independence, wealth, power (often associated with virility or masculinity), and, in Australia especially, it is coded as a means to conquer the landscape.[21] It is familiar and part of nearly every household and thus *heimlich*. *Cars* presents the automobile as uncanny because it highlights the *unheimlich*; the elements that we know but try to forget or ignore—driving is a dangerous activity and many people die or incur horrific injuries on Australian roads every year. Crashes and vehicular violence is normalised as an apparently 'everyday' occurrence—tragic but not exceptional. It is a bloody cycle that is repeated year-after-year and, to extend the Freudian

[19] Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, trans. Leon S Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991).
[20] Royle, op. cit and Barbara Creed, *Phallic Panic: Film, horror and the Primal Uncanny* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2005).
[21] For an excellent overview of Australian road movies see Rama Venkatasawmy, Catherine Simpson and Tanja Visosevic, 'From Sand to Bitumen, from Bushrangers to 'Bogans' : Mapping the Australian Road Movie,' *Journal of Australian Studies* 70 (2001): 75-84.

analysis, this compulsion could be described as part of the death drive.[22] Weir rehearses many of these themes in *Homesdale* where violence and humiliation is employed for 'therapeutic' purposes. So in these very broad terms it is clear how Weir establishes the uncanny underpinning of the narrative before extending his interrogation of Australia's relationship with car culture.

The film asks us to consider the place of the car in Australia's future and suggests that our fascination with car culture is indicative of a broader cultural malaise. This anxiety about science, technology and modernity is typical of the Gothic genre and as Gelder and Jacobs suggest:

> Freud's primary concern is certainly with the psyche, but the essay is also about one's sense of place in a modern, changing environment, and it attends to anxieties which are symptomatic of an ongoing process of realignment in the post-war modern world.[23]

Like many small Australian towns at the time Weir shot *Cars*, Paris is in decline, and in a creative attempt to profit from passing motorists it has created a cottage industry from stripping and recycling motorcars and motorists. Given that it is the only 'industry' in town, it is hardly surprising that cars have become fetishised commodities and that their value as transportation has become secondary. Even those Parisians with cars, never leave town, but merely drive around in circles. Indeed, as Michael Bliss notes, the vehicles in *Cars* represent inertia and stasis rather than freedom and movement.[24] Catherine Simpson has written insightfully about what she calls 'auto-immobility' in Australian car crash films more generally.[25] That is, despite the fact that automobiles and roads are usually coded to signify escape, on Australian screens they are more likely to leave characters dead, maimed, or spinning their wheels in frustration. According to that schema, a cargo cult economy has burgeoned around ill-fated

[22] It is beyond the scope of this essay to provide an extended analysis of Freud's *The Pleasure Principle* here but clearly the death drive is relevant in terms of my argument about cars and the uncanny.
[23] Gelder and Jacobs, op.cit. p 23.
[24] Bliss, op cit. p. 43.
[25] Catherine Simpson, 'Antipodean Automobility and Crash: Treachery, Trespass and Transformation of the Open Road,' *Australian Humanities Review*. 39-40, (September 2006). http://www.australianhumanitiesreview.org/archive/Issue-September-2006/home.html.

automobiles and motorists, and cars and automotive parts are used as currency and part of a barter economy in Paris. One of the film's taglines warns 'They run on blood' and indeed cars and petrol are the lifeblood of Paris as they are in so many car crash films. Thus the film is an allegory about consumption and the narrative is punctuated with references to food, hunger, and cannibalism. Once again, this aligns the text with the uncanny given the centrality of cannibalism in the literature of the uncanny.[26] At the top of the food chain is the mayor, who commands the first cut of the merchandise (radios, fur-coats, children). Assimilation is a dominant leitmotif in *Cars*, and all of the other films in the car crash genre, and there is an endless cycle of salvaging and recycling in these texts.[27] The young Parisians cannot afford to buy cars in one piece and so, as schooled by their elders, they scavenge to construct their own monstrous bodies (hybrid killer cars).[28] What I want to suggest is that this recycling (as a conflation of self and other) contributes to the uncanny sensation that the cars induce. In a sense, the crashed cars are regurgitated or reincarnated and as I will discuss later, so are the drivers. Every car has a history and if each car is dismantled and reassembled many times over until many different histories are conflated, this triggers a sensation of *déjà vu*. Every generation learns from the one before but even more so the new generation feeds off the bodies of their ancestors as a form of degeneration.[29] Each car has a traumatic history and is both *heimlich* and *unheimlich*: new but second-hand.

The young men of Paris are so closely identified with cars that they *become* cars. I want to extend this argument by examining how this recycling or shape shifting operates as a form of Gothic metamorphosis or uncanny animism. A blurring of boundaries and confusion about identities is apparent in the three-way hybridity between the town's young men,

[26] Royle, op. cit. pp; 205-212.
[27] This has also been recognised by critics such as Delia Falconer, 'Vanishing Points: Mapping the Road in Postwar American Culture' (Ph.D. diss. Melbourne University, 1995) and Jonathan Rayner, *Contemporary Australian Cinema: An Introduction*. (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2000).
[28] Although with less sinister intentions, young men in other car crash films are portrayed as ingenious scavengers and canny adapters in an endless cycle of pulling cars apart and putting them back together again in films such as *Dead End Drive-In*, *Return Home*, *FJ Holden*, *Midnite Spares*, *Running on Empty*, and *Metal Skin*.
[29] Freud, op.cit. p.234.

animals, and cars.[30] We hear the roar of a wild animal and what appears to be a monstrous gaping mouth as George and Arthur panic and career off the road at the beginning of the film. (Of course, later in the film Arthur discovers that the wild beast is merely a car wreck artfully arranged to resemble a metallic animal.) As Dermody and Jacka note, the mayor's car with its fins and sinister presence resembles a predatory shark—a mythic 'monster' for Australian audiences.[31] The Jaguar is the other animal most often associated with the cars: Charlie (Bruce Spence) collects Jaguar crests as trophies. The Reverend Mulray (Max Phipps) becomes his next trophy as he is picked off *en route* to Paris in another popular British export (a Mini). When Charlie returns with his prey, he poses next to it in the manner of a big game hunter and states, 'I got this one. This one's mine'.

The mayor is quick to mount a cover-up operation and explains 'An accident has occurred … A shooting accident has occurred.' The sense that one is witnessing a type of antipodean safari is underlined by Weir's use of the sounds of roaring animals and screaming engines when the cars' presence is implied. These non-diegetic sound effects are used to reinforce the zoomorphism of the machines, and the wildness and ferociousness of the young men. By aligning themselves with sharks, jaguars and dinosaurs, men align themselves with wild beasts (*unheimlich*) in contrast to characters like the mayor's wife who resembles a domestic cat (*heimlich*) in her sad fur coat. Freud contemplates the division of tame and wild animals as part of a discussion about domestic space and it is significant

[30] See Cyndy Hendershot's *The Animal Within: Masculinity and the Gothic* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1998) for an extended analysis of this link between animism, Darwinism, and the uncanny. She argues that animality and sexuality are often linked in Gothic texts. Also, see Creed, op.cit.
[31] Dermody and Jacka, op.cit. p. 95.

that this animism is gendered in *Cars*.[32] Creed's work is an extended examination of this type of gendered uncanny animism which she argues is at the centre of what she labels the 'primal uncanny'.[33] Many of the arguments that Creed makes about women, animals and death as profoundly other (thus prompting phallic panic) are borne out in *Cars*.[34]

The suggestion that cars and humans are interchangeable is reinforced throughout the film. This is implicit when the torching of one of the vehicles provokes rebellion, and as the mayor's henchman observes, 'It's the cars—they're upset over the burning.' This form of animism incorporates both anthropomorphism and automatism and a fascination with the dead. When Arthur shuffles out of hospital to attend George's funeral, he is met at the entrance to the hospital by a group of Parisians who appear to be catatonic androids or zombies. This strange procession walks behind the hearse, which seems to glide along silently almost of its own accord.

The sense of the car being alive is augmented by the point of view of the camera coming from the back of the hearse itself. Viewers share the gaze of the dead man witnessing his own funeral and this highlights the strangeness of the uncanny viewing position. We are compelled to look and see images that should remain hidden (Creed makes an extended analysis of this type of uncanny subjectivity).[35] Of course, it also suggests that George is being buried alive and amplifies the anxiety about the status of

[32] Freud, op.cit. p. 222.
[33] Creed, op.cit. p.24.
[34] Creed, op.cit. p.15.
[35] Creed, op.cit. pp.27-40.

dead bodies in Paris. Arthur is haunted by the spectre of brother, his double, who may or may not be dead and the presence of so many Parisian zombies augments his anxiety (possibly a premonition) that he too may be buried alive.

Soon after the funeral, another car, a white Jaguar, has an 'accident' during the night. The audience hears the scream of an animal in pain, and then sees the body of the vehicle being stripped. Weir accentuates the parity between cars and humans during this segment when the automobile is being dismantled and the women hand the most prized vehicular pieces to the town's patriarchs. As Bliss notes, the camera cuts back and forth from the street scene to a parallel scenario in the hospital, and this editing underlines the ruthlessness of the townspeople, the status of the human body, and the nature of their economy.[36] Weir uses a similar technique in an episode set the next day where the camera cuts rapidly between the hospital, which is full of human wrecks, a hillside covered in car wrecks, and the town graveyard. The overlap between consumerism and cannibalism, and the subsequent Parisian hybrids, is underlined by the construction of the shots and the editing process. In the first of these 'inter-cut' scenes, the unfortunate driver of the Jaguar is being 'stripped' (of his shoes, watch and wallet) and, like the car, is about to be used as spare parts. The luckless fellow is last seen strapped to the operating table with Doctor Midland (Kevin Miles) unnecessarily but enthusiastically drilling into his head. The use of a mechanical power-tool reinforces the impression that the patient is just another piece of salvage. The patients are used as both transplant fodder and as guinea pigs for the Doctor Midland's 'experimental' work.[37] Hapless motorists who have been salvaged from car wrecks constitute a whole community of patients (described by Darryl as 'veggies') who inhabit the Bellevue Ward of Paris hospital. They all appear to be male but it is difficult to know whether they are dead or alive let alone their gender. As Cyndy Hendershot argues, 'The Gothic exposes the others within and without that give lie to the notion of such a category as stable masculinity.'[38] As is so often the case in the Gothic genre, the

[36] Bliss, op. cit. p. 43.
[37] Weir is clearly poking fun at Gothic favourites like *Frankenstein* or *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, but it is likely that this is also a reference to John Frankenheimer's *Seconds* (1966), an American thriller in which bodies are re-cycled: the final image is a POV of a drill coming towards the camera, positioned as a patient strapped to an operating table.
[38] Hendershot, op.cit.

constructedness of gender, sexuality and subjectivity is thus exposed and disrupted.

Before Arthur is permitted to leave hospital, he undergoes a psychological test where he is obliged to identify a number of flash cards. The exercise starts benignly enough, with Arthur tentatively identifying items such as a tree, chair, dog, house, and television. The mood changes dramatically when a gruesome photograph of a car crash is offered. After recoiling in horror, Arthur says 'crash', only to be corrected firmly by the doctor who says 'accident'. The test then continues with further photographs of car crashes and their bloodied victims intercut with commonplace images of a pen, horse, ball, scissors and so on. Meanwhile, Doctor Midland muses admiringly about his talents as a photographer as he contemplates an extremely abject image of a bleeding body emerging from the metal carapace of a crashed vehicle. In shots such as this one, Weir highlights the anxiety generated by the unstableness of the subject/object binary and the horror that corpses evoke. After all, Freud suggests that dismembered limbs and mutilated corpses are horrifying and 'peculiarly uncanny'.[39] Given that the car is usually coded as a phallic symbol, this mutilated car/human assemblage triggers the castration complex and an overwhelming anxiety about corporality and wholeness. Creed describes this type of cinematic horror as 'phallic panic' in her study of the male monster and this example is particularly apt. [40] Certainly, Dr Midland is a monstrous 'magician' who can carve up and photograph these bodies and put them together again—we see evidence of his work in the wards of the hospital and he even arrives dressed as a magician to the Pioneer's Ball.[41] He insists that we look at his work. His vegetable-like zombies embody both life and death and their bandages seep blood and secretions highlighting the inside/outside horror of the abject and uncanny. Macabre or perverse pleasure is generated when characters are faced with images of abjection: so familiar but yet so alien and confronting. Suitably traumatised, Arthur absorbs the message that when car crashes occur they should be identified as 'accidents'—regardless of the circumstances or the regularity of such incidents. Road accident victims and veggies are abject and thus taboo (and coded as 'other') whereas unified metallic carapaces are clean and whole (but there is an implicit threat that if punctured they will leak). Hence, Arthur as male hysteric is encouraged to reject or repress

[39] Freud, op. cit. p. 244.
[40] Creed, op. cit.
[41] Once again, the magician features in Freud's discussion of the uncanny. Freud, op. cit. p. 244.

his memories (and guilt) and the possibility (or indeed reality) of abjection and death. It is hardly surprising that he finds working in the hospital intolerable.

It transpires that even the timid Arthur has killed before (but he tries to bury that memory) and by the end of the film he kills again. After dinner one night, Arthur confesses to the mayor that he feels guilty about the crash because he feels that he should have relieved George and taken his turn at the wheel. He admits that he has a phobia about cars and driving, stemming from an earlier accident in which he knocked over and killed an old man. Hence, Arthur is immobilised and too traumatised to drive. He returns again and again to the memories of the road fatalities in a self-destructive loop. The assiduous reminders about Arthur's inability to drive are, of course, a means to make him appear impotent, passive, and 'feminine' but they are also remarkably uncanny. The mayor makes light of Arthur's problems but is quick to exploit them (he makes him a parking inspector). Instead of the consolatory platitude expected of him, the mayor responds to Arthur's confession, with: 'Yes. These old pedestrians are a *real* problem, aren't they?'[42] Meanwhile, Arthur's road to 'recovery' starts when he is made Paris' parking superintendent, charged with 'Cleaning up this town and making it a decent place for people to park'. In the climatic battle scene, the cars engage in 'hand-to-hand' combat with the townspeople and the town's elders guard their territory on foot, chiefly armed with makeshift weapons such as pitchforks. In one scene the faceless driver of one of the cars is prodded and poked to death with a pitchfork and dies at the wheel.

[42] This shocking response prompts guilty laughter and thus as viewers we are reminded of our own dual natures (we are horrified at our response and do not recognise ourselves).

A metal carapace shields body parts and contains bodily fluids that could suggest the abject or grotesque. Thus, the car's metal armour (as a denial or refusal of abjection) is ultimately insufficient protection and what should remain inside is penetrated and seeps out. Arthur's status as outsider places him in a quandary when the battle commences and he has to choose sides and align himself with the young people or the elders. He sides with the mayor who manipulates him to crush Darryl in a deadly version of a demolition derby. Arthur complies, at first reluctantly, but then with ghoulish satisfaction when he joyously rediscovers his mechanical potency. When he emerges, alive and victorious, from his cathartic duel with Darryl he ecstatically exclaims 'I can drive'. Significantly, Arthur is deemed 'cured' after he has smashed Darryl into a bloody pulp and is able to drive away. A car and a fatality take away Arthur's agency and conquering a car and another driver are the means for him to regain it. Thus, in this instance, repetition proves restorative.

If cars and humans are so uncannily interchangeable perhaps it should not be a surprise that the cars become responsible not only for deaths but also for rejuvenation and even reproduction in Paris. Dr Midland 'gives birth' to abject zombies (the result of car crashes) and in producing these monsters he also becomes a monster.[43] Cars also convey additional and equally unnatural offspring and unnatural families are artificially constructed. Such progeny can only ever be monstrous as they are divorced from the maternal body and this is one of Creed's key points.[44] In 'The Uncanny' Freud suggests that the female genitals and womb are the uncanniest places of all given that, more than any other place, the womb conflates self with other.[45] The maternal body as first home, but one that we are inevitably excluded from, is a source of anxiety in this film which circles around issues of childbirth, reproduction and immigration (borders). Australia cinema abounds with what Meaghan Morris has termed 'phobic narratives' about immigration and border protection and this topic remains an hysterical one in Australian debates about population and immigration.[46] Hence, when Arthur motors into town he is playing a role in engineering a

[43] Creed, op.cit. p.xvi.
[44] Creed, op. cit.p.17.
[45] Freud, op. cit. p. 245.
[46] See Morris op.cit. I have also written about xenophobia and immigration a little-known phobic narrative entitled *Dead End Drive-In* in an essay that will soon appear in *Studies of Australasian Cinema*.

change in the genetic makeup of the region.[47] Given that Paris is constructed as such an isolated xenophobic place, the sequence where Beth (the mayor's wife) and Arthur sit at the kitchen table and have tea is especially memorable given that Arthur has manipulated the mayor so that he can remain part of the family. In a sense, he is 'reborn' as their son. Thus, Beth and Arthur are 'at home' in a domestic space but that space is *unheimlich* because it is the site where all that is terribly wrong about the Parisian way of life is revealed and manifested. As Arthur is coded as Beth's adopted son, the scene has decidedly Oedipal overtones, and as Morris argues, the transgression of such taboos as incest and cannibalism underscore the town's parochial insularity that is, gradually and inevitably, causing it to implode. As Morris also notes:

> Parisian women do not bear enough children for the town to survive: so, like the mutant cars that terrorize the streets, Parisian patriarchy reproduces by making over the remnants of the car-crashes caused by the men.[48]

This becomes evident when Beth (Melissa Jaffer) informs Arthur that she is barren, and that Hilary and Jeanette are 'orphans' whom she and the mayor have 'adopted'. The fact that she has been complicit in murder in order to obtain a 'family' is repressed (as is her attraction to Arthur). Although it is never made explicit, the 'accidents' are perhaps similarly beneficial for other childless families in the town. As already noted above, it is not even necessary for 'adoptees' to be whole (complete bodies) as Dr Midland utilises body parts to construct the veggies. This automotive benevolence marginalises women from the reproductive process and renders them superfluous in the town's economy. [49] Paris is a town almost devoid of women: apart from the 'orphans' Hilary and Jeanette, and two

[47] The automobile revolutionised courtship rituals and sexual practices, and resulted in a widening of the gene pool. See Graeme Davison, *Car Wars* (Crows Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 2004), B.L. Bailey, *From Front Porch to Back Seat* (Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press, 1988), and Julian Smith, 'A Runaway Match: The Automobile in the American Film, 1900-1920,' in DL Lewis and L. Goldstein, eds. *The Automobile and American Culture* (Ann Arbor: Michigan University Press, 1983), pp. 179-192.

[48] Morris, 'White Panic,' p. 246.

[49] The 'mad' scientist who gives birth to monstrous 'children' is the subject of many studies. See, for example, Hendershot op.cit., Creed op.cit., and Gayatri Spivak, 'Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism,' in Henry Gates Jr. (ed.), *Race: Writing and Difference* (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1985).

nurses, there do not appear to be any women under the age of forty. Just as the feminine is cast as out of place and uncanny in *Picnic*, once again the female body is unknowable and unpredictable in Paris. Paradoxically, the maternal body is divorced from sex and childbirth and thus is not abject whereas the male body *is* monstrously abject. Paris is certainly not the centre of romance, sex, and glamour that viewers may have expected, and the absence of sexual desire on the screen is striking.[50] (In fact, the only desire on screen is directed at the rewards and thrills associated with *cars*, and not *car*nal pleasures.) Arthur is coded as impotent (because he does not drive), George is a bachelor, and the other men on the road appear to be without female companionship. The mayor and Beth are unable to have children, Doctor Midland brings his patients rather than a partner to the Pioneer Ball[51], and Darryl and his mates roam in bachelor packs. Sexuality is repressed and sexual identity is somewhat ambiguous but as Royle states, this is to be expected in uncanny narratives.[52] Despite the town's rhetorical emphasis on 'the future', there can be no future for Paris without the contribution of motorcars and motorists.

This anxiety about sexuality speaks of a typically Gothic 'crisis' of masculinity given that the men appear to mimic male heroes from the past or from the screen, from Hollywood Westerns, American politics, Australian bush ballads, and adventurous tales from radio serials or black and white movies. Thus *Cars* parodies mythic Australian tropes (or dominant national myths) like mateship and white hegemonic masculinity, and figures like the battler, bushman, larrikin, Anzac, heroic driver, noble savage, and 'pioneers'. It sets them up, one-after-the-other, and then pulls them down. The costume party scene at the end of the film highlights that the Parisians are awkward players who do not seem to know how to read the script, or how to act out male and female roles.

[50] Many other commentators have noted an absence of heterosexual desire and romance in Australian films. See, for example, Meaghan Morris, 'Personal Relationships and Sexuality,' *The New Australian Cinema*, ed. Scott Murray (West Melbourne, VIC: Nelson, 1980), pp. 133-151.
[51] Such asexual behaviour is the norm for the Gothic 'mad' scientist. See Hendershot, op. cit p.72.
[52] Royle, op.cit. p. 1.

This underscores the performative nature of their constructions—their salvaged and hybrid bricolage of what it is to be 'Australian'. The heroes that they have chosen to emulate from the screen are conservative, dated, and decidedly unromantic; they are figures that personify power and authority rather than passion. *Cars* parodies Australia's post-war rhetoric about 'progress' and the 'future' when even role models and speeches are recycled from the past (as we witness at the Pioneer Ball when the mayor 'borrows' a speech heard earlier in the film and is dressed as Abraham Lincoln). Ironically, Weir, more than any other Australian director would go on to define national myths in two of his next films: *Picnic at Hanging Rock* and *Gallipoli*—although very different films, they both look back at Australia's past to define us as a nation.

The uncanny is strange and savage; it shifts, slides, and changes shape. Uncanny films force audiences to look and question whether we recognise what we see on the screen (strangeness) and in the mirror (strangers). *Cars*, as one of a suite of Gothic uncanny films made by Weir in the 1970s, employs the automobile as a means to interrogate post-war Australian society and its trajectory. Is what we see monstrous? *Cars* suggests that it is and that the everyday horrors of the 'pioneers' haunt those trying to embrace 'the future'. As viewers, we are forced to reflect on Australian culture and the uncanny status of women, Aboriginal Australians, and immigrants. Strangely, these supposedly liminal presences refuse to go away and our gaze returns to them again and again in Weir's films. *The Cars that Ate Paris* allows us to laugh (nervously) at what we see and even after all of these years, it is strangely *heimlich* and *unheimlich*. It is difficult to turn away.

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Life and Love and 'Lasca'

PETER KIRKPATRICK

Very few people these days have heard of, let alone read, the heroic ballad 'Lasca' by Frank Desprez, yet less than a century ago it was one of the most popular poems in the English-speaking world. In 1919 an American newspaper could claim that 'there is scarcely an American who has not read the poem, recited it, or committed it to memory'.[1] In 1953 Australian writer Alan Marshall, recalling the popular elocutionists of his childhood, declared:

> there was one poem [reciters] had to include in their repertoire if they did not wish to be considered elocutionally immature.
>
> This masterpiece, called 'Lasca', invariably brought an encore (most important for the sake of prestige), and, when well delivered, sometimes made audiences thump their boots upon the floor—a sign of great enthusiasm.[2]

The poem was frequently included in elocution manuals and books of standard recitations. It was also recorded twice on Edison cylinders—in 1905 and 1909—by the American stage and screen actor Edgar L. Davenport; recordings which are now freely available on the University of California, Santa Barbara's *Cylinder Preservation and Digitization Project* website.[3] The time limitations of cylinder recordings—initially two (1905)

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[1] *Newark Advocate* (Ohio), 5 December 1919, n.p., reproduced in 'Classic Cowboy Poetry: 'Lasca,' by Frank Desprez', *Western and Cowboy Poetry Music & More at the Bar-D Ranch*, http://www.cowboypoetry.com/lasca.htm#Lasca, accessed 14 September 2010.

[2] Alan Marshall, 'Boo! to the Villain', *Argus Week-End Magazine*, 6 March 1953, p. 15.

[3] Three recordings are available, but that from 1913 is a reissue of the 1909 version. Donald C. Davidson Library, University of California, Santa Barbara, *Cylinder Preservation and Digitization Project*:

and later four minutes (1909)—mean that the Davenport recordings are more truncated than printed versions of the poem, themselves usually shorter than the original text by many lines. But, because it soon became such a party piece for reciters and early entered an oral tradition, 'Lasca' exists in many versions.

This article gives an account of the poem's history and its textual transformations—but also its appropriations, notably within the genre of 'cowboy poetry', which has some parallels with the Australian bush ballad. For, as Alan Marshall's recollection shows, 'Lasca' was a stand-out favourite in this country, even surviving quite late as a de facto 'bush recitation'. Furthermore, Desprez's nostalgic evocation of 'Texas, down by the Rio Grande' may have influenced one of the most famous Australian ballads of them all.

Complete texts of 'Lasca' are hard to come by. The only more or less scholarly version I have been able to locate appears at the end of a sixty-year-old article in the Texan literary journal *Southwest Review*. Its author was Mabel Major, whose research into the life of 'Lasca's' creator established most of what is now known about Frank Desprez. Her text of the poem is, however, based on its second authorised appearance, in Desprez's little collection *Curtain Raisers for Amateurs and Others* from 1886. So, before discussing its variations and influence, here is the original text of 'Lasca', including Desprez's footnotes, transcribed from its first publication in November 1882. [4]

It's all very well to write reviews,
And carry umbrellas, and keep dry shoes,
And say what every one's saying here,
And wear what every one else must wear;
But to-night I'm sick of the whole affair,
I want free life and I want fresh air;
And I sigh for the canter after the cattle,
The crack of the whips like shots in a battle,
The melley of horns and hoofs and heads
That wars and wrangles and scatters and spreads;

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http://cylinders.library.ucsb.edu/search.php?queryType=%40attr+1%3D1016+&query=lasca

[4] Frank Desprez, 'Lasca', *London Society* 42.251 (1882), pp. 484-86.

The green beneath, and the blue above;
And dash and danger, and life and love.

And Lasca!
Lasca used to ride
On a mouse-gray mustang close to my side,
With blue *serapé*[5] and bright-belled spur;
I laughed with joy as I looked at her!
Little knew she of books or of creeds;
An *Ave Maria* sufficed her needs;
Little she cared, save to be by my side,
To ride with me, and ever to ride,
From San Saba's shore to Lavaca's tide.
She was as bold as the billows that beat,
She was as wild as the breezes that blow;
From her little head to her little feet
She was swayed in her suppleness to and fro
By each gust of passion; a sapling pine,
That grows on the edge of a Kansas bluff,
And wars with the wind when the weather is rough,
Is like this Lasca, this love of mine.
She would hunger that I might eat,
Would take the bitter and leave me the sweet;
But once, when I made her jealous for fun,
At something I'd whispered, or looked, or done,
One Sunday, in San Antonio,
To a glorious girl on the Alamo,[6]
She drew from her garter a dear little dagger,
And—sting of a wasp!—it made me stagger!
An inch to the left, or an inch to the right,
And I shouldn't be maundering here to-night;
But she sobbed, and, sobbing, so swiftly bound
Her torn *reboso*[7] about the wound,
That I quite forgave her. Scratches don't count
In Texas, down by the Rio Grande.

Her eye was brown—a deep, deep brown;
Her hair was darker than her eye;

[5] Cloak. (Desprez's note.)
[6] The principal square in the city of San Antonio. (Desprez's note)
[7] Headdress. (Desprez's note.)

And something in her smile and frown,
Curled crimson lip and instep high,
Showed that there ran in each blue vein,
Mixed with the milder Aztec strain,
The vigorous vintage of Old Spain.
She was alive in every limb
With feeling, to the finger-tips;
And when the sun is like a fire,
And sky one shining soft sapphire,
One does not drink in little sips.

Why did I leave the fresh and the free,
That suited her and suited me?
Listen awhile, and you will see;
But this be sure—in earth or air,
God and God's laws are everywhere,
And Nemesis comes with a foot as fleet
On the Texas trail as in Regent Street.

* * * *

The air was heavy, the night was hot,
I sat by her side, and forgot—forgot:
Forgot the herd that were taking their rest,
Forgot that the air was close opprest,
That the Texas Norther comes sudden and soon,
In the dead of night or the blaze of noon;
That once let the herd at its breath take fright,
That nothing on earth can stop their flight;
And woe to the rider, and woe to the steed,
Who falls in front of their mad stampede!

* * * *

Was that thunder? No, by the Lord!
I spring to my saddle without a word.
One foot on mine, and she clung behind.
Away! on a hot chase down the wind!
But never was fox-hunt half so hard,
And never was steed so little spared,
For we rode for our lives. You shall hear how we fared

In Texas, down by the Rio Grande.

The mustang flew, and we urged him on:
There was one chance left, and you have but one:
Halt, jump to the ground, and shoot your horse;
Crouch under his carcase, and take your chance;
And if the steers in their frantic course
Don't batter you both to pieces at once,
You may thank your star; if not, good bye
To the quickening kiss and the long-drawn sigh,
And the open air and the open sky,
In Texas, down by the Rio Grande!

The cattle gained on us, and, just as I felt
For my old six-shooter behind in my belt,
Down came the mustang, and down came we,
Clinging together, and—what was the rest?
A body that spread itself on my breast,
Two arms that shielded my dizzy head,
Two lips that hard on my lips were prest;
Then came thunder in my ears,
As over us surged the sea of steers,
Blows that beat blood into my eyes,
And when I could rise,
Lasca was dead!

* * * *

I gouged out a grave a few feet deep,
And there in Earth's arms I laid her to sleep;
And there she is lying, and no one knows,
And the summer shines and the winter snows;
For many a day the flowers have spread
A pall of petals over her head;
And the little gray hawk hangs aloft in the air,
And the sly *coyoté*[8] trots here and there,
And the black snake glides and glitters and slides
Into a rift in a cotton-wood tree;
And the buzzard sails on,

[8] Wolf. (Desprez's note.)

And comes and is gone,
Stately and still, like a ship at sea;
And I wonder why I do not care
For things that are like the things that were.
Does half my heart lie buried there
In Texas, down by the Rio Grande?

'Lasca' made its thrilling debut in *London Society*, subtitled *An Illustrated Magazine of Light and Amusing Literature for the Hours of Relaxation*. As literary ballads were part of a stock in trade of popular verse which most newspapers carried,[9] there's no reason why a relaxed middle-class Londoner shouldn't have been lightly amused by this harrowing tale of miscegenation and stampeding cattle set in remote Texas.

Its author, Frank Desprez (1853-1916), was a twenty-nine year-old Bristol-born former apprentice engraver who, from his late teens, spent three years working on a Texan ranch. Following his return to England in 1875, Desprez gradually established himself in the theatre scene, notably as the librettist of the musical comedy *Tita in Thibet* (1879), becoming close friends with, and secretary to, the impresario Richard D'Oyly Carte. In these capacities Desprez went on to script humorous one-act curtain-raisers for the operas of Gilbert and Sullivan, later co-writing the lyrics to *The Nautch Girl, or, The Rajah of Chutneypore* (1891), with music by Edward Solomon, which played at the Savoy Theatre during the interregnum following Gilbert's famous 'carpet quarrel' with Carte and Sullivan. From 1884 he was a contributor to the major theatrical journal, *The Era*, going on to become its editor in 1893, where he stayed until ill health forced him to retire in 1913. He died in 1916.[10]

Four years before 'Lasca', Desprez had drawn upon his Texas experiences in one of his curtain-raisers. *After All!*, with four songs by Alfred Cellier, was first staged in 1878 as a companion piece to early performances of *HMS Pinafore*. Its simple plot involves a character called Selworthy who has lately returned to London to search for his long-lost

[9] See J.S. Bratton, *The Victorian Popular Ballad* (London: Macmillan, 1975).
[10] Mabel Major, 'The Man Who Wrote 'Lasca' ', *Southwest Review* 36 (1951), pp. 298-304. Also Kurt Gänzl, 'Desprez, Frank', *The Encylopedia of Musical Theatre: A-K* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), p. 353. Desprez may have briefly returned to the US, as the *Bar-D Ranch* page on 'Lasca' notes: 'A search of immigration records finds a 24-year old Frank Desprez, artist, leaving Cornwall in 1877, headed to New York.'

sweetheart after ten years acquiring a fortune in the New World. As he tells his friend Pennyfather:

> **Sel**. You know I left England intending to invest that legacy of mine in cattle-farming in America.
> **Pen**. And did you do so? (*Sitting* R. *of table*.)
> **Sel**. (*with assumed indifference*). Yes. Went into partnership with a Western man; I found the capital, he the experience.
> **Pen**. And how did you get on?
> **Sel**. Oh, the old story. In six months *he* had the capital and *I* had the experience.
> **Pen**. Dear me! What did you do next?
> **Sel**. Bought a toothbrush and a revolver, and went down to Texas.
> **Pen**. What did you do there?
> **Sel**. The first thing I did was to shoot a sheriff. People were so delighted with my spirit of enterprise, that they offered me his berth.
> **Pen**. Do [*sic*] you take it?
> **Sel**. No. Played euchre same night with a silver-miner, my toothbrush against his boots; won his boots. Played him toothbrush and boots against his shirt; won that. Played him toothbrush, boots, and shirt against his braces; won again. Played toothbrush, boots, shirt and braces against his –
> **Pen**. (*looking round*). S-s-s-h!
> **Sel**. Well, I won the entire outfit.
> **Pen**. What did you do then?
> **Sel**. Crossed over the Rio Grande into Mexico. They were getting up a Revolution there, and, as I had two shirts, they made me Governor.
> **Pen**. Did you govern long?
> **Sel**. No. I collected the revenues as quickly as possible, and abdicated one night down the river in a canoe; invested in sheep-farming, made money, took ship for England, and—here I am!

The action hinges on Selworthy's slowly dawning awareness that, not only has Pennyfather succeeded in marrying the sweetheart, but she's blossomed into a fat shrew. Just as the above dialogue parodies some already familiar

images of the Wild West, Selworthy's memories of his sweetheart's Lasca-like eyes and oddly foreign tones are made fun of:

> **Sel**. Her whole manner was so gentle, so timid, and retiring; shrinking, you know, from observation, like –
> **Pen**. Like a snail.
> **Sel**. And then her eyes, so sweet and liquid in expression... (*Sighs*.)
> **Pen**. It was her eyes that hooked you, evidently.
> **Sel**. So dark and soft—like a gazelle's, you know.
> **Pen**. No, I don't. Never knew a gazelle.
> **Sel**. And then her voice, so sweet and melodious, and with that delicate *timbre* that you so seldom find in our Saxon races... (*Overcome*.) O, Pennyfather—that girl![11]

Though 'Lasca' reveals a more passionate streak, Desprez's temperament seems to have leaned towards comedy such as this rather than more serious modes. Nevertheless, while his stage works are now largely forgotten, in his romantic Texas ballad he left a remarkable legacy—especially in the land that inspired it.

In 1963 Mabel Major could describe 'Lasca' as 'the best known Texas poem'.[12] Hal Cannon, founding director of the Cowboy Poetry Gathering in Elko, Nevada, claims that the poem appeared in the Montana *Stock Growers' Journal* in 1888 and that it subsequently 'enjoyed wide distribution in American society, not only around the campfire but in Victorian parlors and chautauqua programs'.[13] Its appearance in the *Stock Growers' Journal* probably marks its rapid entry, through recitation, into American popular culture. According to Major's sources, 'Lasca' was already in oral circulation by the mid 1880s:

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[11] Desprez, libretto of *After All!*, n.p., available as a PDF from *The Gilbert and Sullivan Archive: After All!*:
http://math.boisestate.edu/gas/companions/after_all/index.html

[12] Major stated this in the abstract of a conference paper to the South Central Modern Languages Association in 1963 titled 'From Ghent to Texas', of which only the abstract survives. See 'Abstracts of Papers: American Literature', *The South-Central Bulletin* 23.1 (1963), p. 10.

[13] Hal Cannon, 'Cowboy Poetry', *American Folklore: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Jan Harold Brunvand (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1996), p. 168.

> Mrs. Margie B. Boswell, Fort Worth poet, first heard 'Lasca' in 1885 at Parker Institute. Beulah Spruill gave it as a recitation, and Mrs. Boswell's mother thought it was a good poem. Newton Gaines, Texas Christian University physics professor and cowboy singer, learned it from his father, S.M. Gaines, who knew it before his marriage in 1889. He thought the poem a little naughty and felt somewhat guilty teaching it to his son, out of earshot of the women folks. In the nineties and early 1900's elocution teachers taught the poem with appropriate gestures.[14]

Clearly 'Lasca' was able to cross boundaries of class and gender, from rough cowboy recitals around the campfire to more genteel parlour performances. Even so, the poem retained a risqué flavour that elocutionists with their 'appropriate' stylised gestures needed to tone down for middle-class consumption. Ten years after its first publication, it had so risen in public esteem as to appear in the social column of the *New York Times*:

> The Misses Van Winkle of 11 East Forty-fifth Street gave the last of their series of afternoon readings yesterday, when a hundred guests listened to some entertaining recitations by Miss Annie Baker. Among Miss Baker's selections were James Whitcomb Riley's 'That Old Sweetheart of Mine,' several of Robert Browning's poems, 'The Song of the Camp,' by Bayard Taylor, 'Lasca,' and some Southern dialect stories.[15]

As a mark of its oral circulation, note how 'Lasca' has already lost its authorship. Indeed, the present-day Texas Folklore Society website, which reproduces a version of the poem, observes that 'It quickly moved into the oral tradition where it remains'.[16]

Although it incorporates local references and some Hispanic words, 'Lasca' isn't written in Western or cowboy dialect. At least not the sort of dialect that characterises many classic cowboy poems, such as 'Alone' by Bruce Kiskaddon (1878-1950):

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[14] Major, 'The Man Who Wrote 'Lasca' ', p. 298.
[15] 'In the Social World', *New York Times*, 8 March 1892, p. 8.
[16] 'Other Things', *The Texas Folklore Society*, accessed 14 September 2010, http://www.texasfolkloresociety.org/OtherThings.htm

> The hills git awful quiet, when you have to camp alone.
> It's mighty apt to set a feller thinkin'.
> You always half way waken when a hoss shoe hits a stone,
> Or you hear the sound of hobble chains a clinkin'.[17]

We are now so familiar with this kind of Western patois from Hollywood films and old TV shows like *Gunsmoke* that it can seem comic ('camping' indeed). Specific to the evolving culture of Western ranching, it's been suggested that 'it took until the mid-1870s for a distinctive idiom to spread widely enough to distinguish cowboy language, poetry, and song from those of ordinary citizens'.[18] About this time, too, 'signed' poems with cowboy themes started to be published in local newspapers[19]—which corresponds to the period that Desprez spent on a Texan ranch. Still, when cowboy poetry was at last established as a literary genre in the early twentieth century, 'Lasca' was co-opted into its canon. In 1919 the co-founder of the Texas Folklore Society, John Avery Lomax, included the poem in his second influential anthology, *Songs of the Cattle Trail and Cow Camp*—about the time when William S. Hart, the first major star of screen Westerns, recorded it on a 78 rpm disk. No doubt the rise of the Hollywood horse opera had a role to play in the consecration of cowboy poetry, which 'reached its height between 1905 and 1935'.[20]

So a literary ballad of the Wild West written by a cultured late imperial Englishman with links, via D'Oyly Carte, to Gilbert and Sullivan, has become a part of modern Texan folklore. Yet 'Lasca' wasn't only a hit in Texas and the USA, and it's evident that performers in other countries were often more likely to learn it through oral transmission rather than print. When accounting for the selections in his *Popular Reciter* of 1914, English humorist Joseph Blascheck specifically commented on 'Lasca' as a 'well-known favourite' that was 'constantly being inquired for' but

[17] Cited in Buck Ramsey, 'Cowboy Libraries and Lingo', in *Cowboy Poets & Cowboy Poetry*, ed. David Stanley and Elaine Thatcher (Urbana and Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), p. 100.
[18] Guy Logsdon, 'The Tradition of Cowboy Poetry', in *Cowboy Poets & Cowboy Poetry*, p. 53.
[19] David Stanley, 'Cowboy Poetry Then and Now: An Overview', in *Cowboy Poets & Cowboy Poetry*, p. 7.
[20] Hal Cannon, 'Cowboy Poetry: A Poetry of Exile', in *Cowboy Poets & Cowboy Poetry*, p. 63.

'difficult to find' in books.[21] Blascheck himself could locate only a manuscript copy in his collection. The editor of one 1890s British elocution manual formatted the text in prose, '*Adapted for Recital*', possibly because he had only ever heard it and was uncertain about how to set it correctly.[22]

This is hardly surprising for, in structural terms, 'Lasca' is not a typical Victorian literary ballad. Most obviously, it lacks a stanzaic structure, so that its divisions are strophic and irregular. More curiously, though, while Desprez's prosody is broadly based on four-beat anapestic couplets, there is much variation throughout: in rhyming pattern, but especially in off-beats and therefore line length; some lines being as long as thirteen syllables and others—effectively hemistichs—five. Desprez thus employs a largely accentual metre common enough in folk poetry but unusual in parlour verse.

Mabel Major felt that Desprez must have taken his form from Joaquin Miller's 'Kit Carson's Ride',[23] which was first published in *Harper's Magazine* in August 1871. While there are obvious similarities, notably in content (a point I'll take up shortly), the use of a 'galloping' anapestic metre was common enough by this time in ballads involving horses: Adam Lindsay Gordon employed it in 'From the Wreck', as would A.B. Paterson in 'The Man from Snowy River'. Miller publicly acknowledged Robert Browning's 'How They Brought the Good News from Ghent to Aix' as his model, and Browning (or so Miller claimed), Virgil;[24] though Browning also copies the stanza of Sir Walter Scott's 'Lochinvar', which may well have been the progenitor of them all. Then again, the metrical irregularity of 'Lasca' may also owe something to Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's immensely popular 'Paul Revere's Ride' (1861), which skillfully varies anapests with iambs.[25]

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[21] Joseph Blascheck, introduction, *The Popular Reciter: Book One* (Melbourne and Sydney: Lothian, [1914]): n.p.

[22] John Forsyth, *The Practical Elocutionist* (London: Blackie and Son, [1895?]) p. 277.

[23] This is part of Major's argument in her 1963 'From Ghent to Texas' paper. See footnote 12.

[24] In a note to 'Kit Carson's Ride' Miller wrote of meeting Browning in London, and asking 'to borrow the measure and spirit of 'Good News' for a prairie fire on the plains, driving buffalo and all other life before it into a river.' The Englishman replied: 'Why not borrow from Virgil, as I did? He is as rich as one of your gold mines, while I am but a poor scribe.' In *Joaquin Miller's Poems: Volume Two: Songs of the Sierras* (San Francisco: Harr Wagner, 1920), p. 182.

[25] This was suggested to me by my colleague David Kelly.

Whatever the case, 'Lasca's' rhythmical and phonetic variations are well adapted to the exciting narrative and assist in pacing its performance: qualities that undoubtedly aided its widespread circulation. To that extent, and regardless of its clearly literary origins, the success of 'Lasca' was based on its adaptability as an oral text. It's not hard to see why it was taken up by cowboy poetry, a genre, as David Stanley writes, that 'remains intensely oral in performance'.[26] Among the oral-formulaic devices that the poem employs one could note such things as: simple, dramatic action without complex reflection; in the heroine, the use of a memorable, because stereotypical character;[27] a degree of redundancy, as in the refrain 'In Texas, down by the Rio Grande' (though this also works as mnemonic aid, to mark transitions in the story); and, ultimately, a conventional, not to say conservative, moral framework. As with a play script, each individual performance may rightly be deemed the 'proper', because fully-realised, version of the text. In this regard, the first cylinder recording of Desprez's poem in 1905 is prefaced by an announcement that credits the text to its performer—'"Lasca", by Edward L. Davenport'—even though Desprez was still alive and busy editing *The Era*.

Along with other variations at the level of the line, American versions of the text are generally missing two sections; namely, the opening five lines:

> It's all very well to write reviews,
> And carry umbrellas, and keep dry shoes,
> And say what every one's saying here,
> And wear what every one else must wear;
> But to-night I'm sick of the whole affair

—and the proleptic fourth verse paragraph:

> Why did I leave the fresh and the free,
> That suited her and suited me?
> Listen awhile, and you will see;
> But this is sure—in earth or air,

[26] Stanley, 'Cowboy Poetry Then and Now: An Overview', p. 6.
[27] As Walter J. Ong has observed, 'Colourless personalities cannot survive oral mnemonics. To assure weight and memorability, heroic figures tend to be type figures': *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London and New York: Routledge, 1982), p. 70.

> God and God's laws are everywhere,
> And Nemesis comes with a foot as fleet
> On the Texas trail as in Regent Street.[28]

Oral transmission no doubt partly accounts for the elision of these sections. The opening cry of the edited version, 'I want free life and I want fresh air', sets the scene with greater urgency, immediately putting the hearer in a Western setting by removing the introductory urban frame. The reference to London's Regent Street in the other deleted passage is an even greater distraction for an American audience; besides, without this the action moves seamlessly from the sultry, unpredictable Lasca to the sultry, unpredictable prairie night.

The popularity of 'Kit Carson's Ride' by Joaquin Miler has already been cited as an influence. Written from the perspective of the title character, this ballad tells of how the legendary frontiersman and his Indian lover, together with a friend called 'old Revels', flee a revenge party of Comanches determined to recapture Carson's 'stolen brown bride'. As the party rests and Carson dallies with his love, Revels suddenly senses a greater threat bearing down upon them in the form of a prairie fire driving before it a herd of buffalo. The trio then briskly saddle up and ride for their lives—but Revels falls in the blazing stampede, and so too does the Indian girlfriend, with a final 'look of delight/That I should escape'.[29] Publicly denounced by friends of Carson for this unchivalrous and wholly fabricated treatment of their old comrade, eventually, in the 1897 edition of his *Complete Poetical Works*, Miller shortened the text and gave it a happy ending, with Carson rescuing the woman at the last minute.[30]

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[28] These variations from Desprez's original are also noted by Major in 'The Man Who Wrote 'Lasca' ', p. 302.

[29] The original version of the poem, cited here, is reproduced in Gerald Thomson, ''Kit Carson's Ride' : E.F. Beale Assails Joaquin Miller's Indecent Poem', *Arizona and the West* 26.2 (1984), pp. 140-44.

[30] Miller also added an introduction which suggests that 'Lasca' may have influenced his revision. The 1897 version boldly begins (*Joaquin Miller's Poems: Volume Two*, p. 177):

> *Room! room to turn round in, to breathe and be free,*
> *To grow to be giant, to sail as at sea*
> *With the speed of the wind on a steed with his mane*
> *To the wind, without pathway or route or a rein.*

Even so, the parallels with 'Lasca' are all too apparent, even down to its racy eroticism:

> We lounged in the grasses—her eyes were on mine,
> And her hands on my knee, and her hair was as wine
> In its wealth and its flood, pouring on and all over
> Her bosom wine-red, and pressed never by one,
> And her touch was as warm as the tinge of the clover
> Burned brown as it reached to the kiss of the sun.

Through her indigeneity, Carson's lover is inextricably linked to the natural world; but, as a *vaquera* (cowgirl), Lasca is also connected to nature through her work with horses and cattle. In both poems, desire is figured as wine, with Desprez's narrator literally drunk with Lasca's beauty:

> Her eye was brown—a deep, deep brown;
> Her hair was darker than her eye;
> And something in her smile and frown,
> Curled crimson lip and instep high,
> Showed that there ran in each blue vein,
> Mixed with the milder Aztec strain,
> The vigorous vintage of Old Spain.
> She was alive in every limb
> With feeling, to the finger-tips;
> And when the sun is like a fire,
> And sky one shining soft sapphire,
> One does not drink in little sips.

Both Lasca and the unnamed Indian woman are depicted as wild opposites of white domestic femininity, whose cultivated presence is absent from these works as it is from the men's business of most cowboy poems—and bush ballads, for that matter. Characterised by their exotic ethnicity, these wild women 'naturally' inhabit the frontier as a border zone between civilization and its others. As well, Lasca, it is implied, is highly sexed, the repetition of 'to ride' in the couplet 'Little she cared, save to be by my side,/To ride with me, and ever to ride', carrying an ancient and obvious innuendo.[31] What's more, it's she who's on top during the stampede, chivalrously protecting her man rather than vice versa, and so usurps the

[31] In the *OED* the first usage of 'ride', meaning 'To mount a partner or mate for the purpose of sexual intercourse; (also) to have sexual intercourse, esp. when positioned on top', is from circa 1275.

hero's role. Small wonder, then, that she must be laid to rest, along with the prospect of racial intermixing. Miller clearly thought the same of Carson's 'bride', as in an early defence of the poem's original ending he wrote that 'She represents a race that is passing away'.[32]

It's worth reflecting on Lasca's heritage because, although it's possible that Desprez actually met some vaqueras in his Texan travels, they were relatively rare.[33] In any case Lasca, with her flamenco dancer's 'Curled crimson lip and instep high', is something more: a literary, and racial, hybrid, with 'the milder [read *inferior*] Aztec strain' in her blood strengthened by 'The vigorous vintage of Old Spain'. For the Spanish link is, of course, the key to her character, the amorous *señorita* being a familiar exotic to English culture from at least as early as the shanty that begins 'Farewell and adieu to you, Spanish ladies'. As a man of the theatre, too, Desprez was likely influenced by the first London production of Georges Bizet's *Carmen* in 1878, with its *habanera* beginning '*L'amour est un oiseau rebelle*/*Que nul ne peut apprivoiser*' (Love is a rebellious [wild] bird that none can tame). Unlike Bizet's faithless cigarette girl, however, Lasca is self-sacrificing and fiercely jealous; though both images feed in to the stereotype of the beautiful, 'fiery' Hispanic woman that continues to fascinate American popular culture.[34]

The erotic elements of 'Lasca' were well suited to adaptation to the new medium of film, and four Hollywood movies were based on Desprez's poem, in 1913, 1917, 1919 and 1931.[35] The last of these, *Lasca of the Rio Grande*, is a sixty-five minute B-grade outing that gave Latino actor Leo Carillo top-billing, even though he didn't play the romantic lead. Lasca herself was played by Dorothy Burgess, a minor actress who specialised in

[32] Cited in Thomson, 'Kit Carson's Ride', p. 150.
[33] Cynthia L. Vidaurri, '*Levantando Versos* and Other Vaquero Voices: Oral Traditions of South Texas Mexican American Cowboys', in *Cowboy Poets & Cowboy Poetry*, p. 261.
[34] Decades before Jennifer Lopez and Salma Hayek arrived in Hollywood, for example, there was Dolores Del Río and Lupé Velez. More recently still, the character of Gloria Delgado Pritchett in the Emmy Award-winning TV sitcom *Modern Family*, played by Colombian actress and former model Sofía Vergara, offers an updated, domesticated version of this sexy Latina type.
[35] '*Lasca*', *The American Film Institute Catalog of Motion Pictures Produced in the United States: Feature Films, 1911-1920: Film Entries*, ed. Patricia King Hanson and Alan Gevison (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), p. 500. This entry describes the five-reel 1919 film of this title. The 1913 version was two-reels long, and that released in 1917 as *The Mad Stampede*, one.

Spanish roles without actually being a Latina herself. The film is unavailable in Australia, but a plot summary on the *Internet Movie Database* sketches a conventional Hollywood love triangle that pays oblique tribute to Desprez's poem only at its climax. The non-Anglo characters are suitably romantic and outré.

> Texas Ranger Miles Kincaid is in love with dance hall singer Lasca, and bandit Jose Santa Cruz also has staked a claim on her. Lasca kills a man in self defense and Kincaid, taking her to jail, lets her escape. All hands survive a cattle stampede but Lasca loses her life when she steps in to save the life of the man she loves, Kincaid, from being killed by Cruz.[36]

Nowhere in accounts of 'Lasca' has it been noted that Desprez had previously created a complementary Spanish-American character in a poem called 'The Vaquero', which appeared in the London journal *Temple Bar* in January 1879.[37] He glossed the title as follows:

> A Californian cattle-driver. Furnished with revolver, lasso, and long-lashed whip, these adventurous gentry conduct the half-wild cattle of the plains over miles of their surface; and, with their gay sashes, high boots, gilded and belled spurs, and dark, broad hats (*sombreros*), present a very picturesque appearance.

Desprez's lost poem serves to remind the modern-day reader of the vital role of the vaqueros in the early US cattle industry, as well as the Hispanic origin of much of the cowboy's dress and style.[38] But, for English readers in 1879, the vaquero is another amorous exotic: a faintly Byronic outsider

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[36] 'Plot Summary for *Lasca of the Rio Grande*', *The Internet Movie Database*, accessed 14 September 2010, http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0022053/plotsummary The character of Santa Cruz is actually 'a wealthy, half-Portugese, half-Indian ranch owner': for a more detailed plot summary see '*Lasca of the Rio Grande*', *The American Film Institute Catalog of Motion Pictures Produced in the United States: Feature Films, 1931-1940: Film Entries, A-L*, ed. Patricia King Hanson and Alan Gevison (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), pp. 1143-44.

[37] Frank Desprez, 'The Vaquero', *Temple Bar* 55 (1879) pp. 91-92.

[38] In his entry on 'Cowboys' in *American Folklore: An Encyclopedia*, Guy Logsdon observes that, while 'The greatest cultural influence came from Mexican *vaqueros*', 'A different strain of *vaquero* moved northward through California into Nevada and Oregon, and slowly the Americanization of the word *vaquero* became *buckaroo*', p. 170.

who is only truly at home on the wild plains. By this time Desprez was a librettist, so the poem with its quaint refrain may have been written with a musical setting in mind. To the best of my knowledge, this is only its second appearance in print:

> Oh, who is so free as a gallant *vaquero*?
> With his beauty of bronze 'neath his shady *sombrero*:
> He smiles at his love, and he laughs at his fate,
> For he knows he is lord of a noble estate:
> The prairie's his own, and he mocks at the great.
> 'Ho-ho! Hai! Ho-ho!
> Head 'em off! Turn 'em back!
> Keep 'em up to the track!
> Ho-hillo! Ho-hillo!
> Cric-crac!'
>
> Oh, Donna Luisa is proud as she's fair;
> But she parted last night with a lock of her hair.
> And under the stars she roams, seeking for rest,
> While she thinks of the stranger that came from the West;
> And Juan bears something wrapped upon his breast –
> 'Ho-ho! Hai! Ho-ho!
> Head 'em off! Turn 'em back!
> Keep 'em up to the track!
> Ho-hillo! Ho-hillo!
> Cric-crac!'
>
> His proudest possessions are prettily placed,
> His love at his heart, and his life at his waist.
> And if in a quarrel he happen to fall,
> Why, the prairie's his grave, and his *poncho's*[39] his pall,
> And Donna Luisa—gets over it all!
> 'Ho-ho! Hai! Ho-ho!
> Head 'em off! Turn 'em back!
> Keep 'em up to the track!
> Ho-hillo! Ho-hillo!
> Cric-crac!'
>
> The Padrè may preach, and the Notary frown,

[39] Cloak. (Desprez's note.)

But the *poblânas*[40] smile as he rides through the town:
And the Padrè, he knows, likes a kiss on the sly,
And the Notary oft has a 'drop in his eye,'
But all that he does is to love and to die –
'Ho-ho! Hai! Ho-ho!
Head 'em off! Turn 'em back!
Keep 'em up to the track!
Ho-hillo! Ho-hillo!
Cric-crac!'

Like Lasca, Desprez's vaquero is highly sexed, but with a courtly insouciance which is utterly foreign to the evolving image of the Anglo-American cowboy. Indeed, the 'cowboy', as such, was little-known outside the West at the time this was written. The *OED*'s examples of this particular usage ('A man employed to take care of grazing cattle on a ranch') are all from the 1880s, with the exception of one from 1849 that associates the term explicitly with Texans. 'Vaquero', on the other hand, is cited as early as 1826; so, for an English audience, he was potentially a more recognisable figure.

The first mention of 'Lasca' in Australia that I have located is from 1887, in a brief review of Desprez's *Curtain Raisers for Amateurs and Others* in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, where the poem is praised along with a companion piece as 'new and above the average in merit'.[41] The poem appears again in performances by the African-American Jubilee Singers in 1892, whose concerts of minstrel songs and spirituals included a recitation of 'Lasca' by 'Miss Julie Wormlie' (*sic*), who was 'twice recalled' to the stage of Sydney Town Hall.[42] After this it is regularly listed in advertisements for and accounts of recitals. For instance, the 'Alexander-

[40] Peasant-girls. (Desprez's note.)
[41] 'Current Literature', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 30 July 1887, p. 9. The companion poem was 'The C'rrect Card', in which a crippled jockey tells the story of his fall. It bears some comparison with A.B. Paterson's 'Only a Jockey', which appeared in the *Bulletin* on February 26 that year. 'The C'rrect Card' was first published, however, in June 1873 in *Temple Bar* 38, pp. 366-69, by which time Desprez was no doubt already in America.
[42] *Sydney Morning Herald*, 21 June 1892, p. 4. The reciter's correct name was Julia C. Wormley: see Lyn Abbott and Doug Seroff, *Out of Sight: The Rise of African American Popular Music* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2002), p. 125.

Young-Page Entertainments', to be offered on Saturday evening, 15 September 1900, again in the Town Hall, where 'Miss Edith Tasca-Page will render the Mexican Idyll "Lasca," and the Humorous Sketches "After Marriage," and "How He Proposed"'.[43] By the 1920s it was so often performed as to have become tedious, as evinced by a satirical poem in the popular *Smith's Weekly*:

> Way out in the suburbs howls the wild Reciter,
> Storming like a general, bragging like a blighter;
> He would shame hyenas slinking in their dens
> As he roars at peaceful folk whose joy is keeping hens.
> 'How We Beat the Favourite,' 'Lasca,' 'Gunga Din,'
> There they sit and tremble as he rubs it in.[44]

As a reviewer in the Hobart *Mercury* noted, 'At one time and another most of us have been victims of the would-be elocutionist.'[45]

Cinema and radio were already cutting a swathe through such parlour pleasures, but recitations of 'Lasca' appear to have remained popular here longer than anywhere outside America. If the days of the 'wild Reciter' were numbered in the cities, it was a different story in rural Australia. As late as 1940, North Queensland folklorist Alex Vennard, aka 'Bill Bowyang', was reprinting 'Lasca' in his collections of *Bush Recitations*, describing the contents as 'rare poems, recited in the bush places in the early days'.[46] Vennard collected these through his 'On the Track' column in the *North Queensland Register* (Townsville), but also from anthologies and other newspapers, including the *Bulletin* and *Smith's Weekly*.[47] 'Lasca' appeared three times in *Australian Bush Recitations*, in numbers 2, 3 and 6—its forthcoming appearance in number 6 encouragingly advertised by

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[43] 'Amusements: Centenary Hall', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 12 September 1900, p. 2.

[44] Kodak (pseud. Ernest O'Ferrall), 'The Reciter', *Odd Jobs* (Sydney: Art in Australia), n.p. All the poems in this chapbook first appeared in *Smith's Weekly* under the heading 'Games for Big Kids'.

[45] 'The World of Books: Reviews', *Mercury*, 17 November 1928, p. 15. The review was of *Odd Jobs*.

[46] Bill Bowyang (pseud. Alex Vennard), introduction, *Australian Bush Recitations No. 2* (Red Hill: [the author], [1937]), [p. 3].

[47] Hugh Anderson, 'On the Track with 'Bill Bowyang' ', *On the Track with Bill Bowyang: With Australian Bush Recitations* (Ascot Vale: Red Rooster, 1991), pp. xix-xxi.

the statement that: 'Those who cannot sing will make a "hit" at any gathering when they recite this famous poem.'[48] Line-by-line, Vennard's versions are very close to Desprez's original, and include the framing London context. Most likely Vennard had access to a printed text—or perhaps the local reciter who provided his source was less troubled by English references in a poem about Texas.

Desprez's use of this framing device, whereby a middle-class narrator compares his routine present in England with his romantic past in a foreign land, allowing the story to unfold in a series of vivid flashbacks, was a significant innovation. Most ballads cut straight to the story—which helps explain why the first five lines of 'Lasca' were so often dropped in performance. But here the shift between home and abroad is thematic, because it emphasises not only distance in time, but also distance in place. Furthermore, the London sections of 'Lasca' expose a flawed narrator who has retreated to a comfortable bourgeois existence and now tastes life *only* 'in little sips'. Memories of his Mexican spitfire are also now tempered with pious moral judgement on their sinful relationship, for 'God and God's laws are everywhere,/And Nemesis comes with a foot as fleet/On the Texas trails as in Regent Street'. As noted earlier, Lasca is the true 'hero' of the tale, for she has greater agency and courage and, at the moment of crisis, takes the initiative. She also carries a phallically 'dear little dagger', which she wields with near-deadly effect. His nostalgia for her as both sexual object *and* subject represents a nostalgia for his own lost, ideal masculinity—a masculinity also embodied in the glamorous vaquero in the poem of that title—but which is only imperfectly realised within the conformities of the modern metropolis.

This nostalgic masculinity would be copied by Rudyard Kipling in his famous *Barrack-Room Ballad* 'Mandalay', written in 1890, which also uses a London frame to express desire for the lost, exotic other. The class register has changed, and for this reason the poem is comic, but the underlying sentiment is the same:

> By the old Moulmein Pagoda, lookin' eastward to the sea,
> There's a Burma girl a-settin', and I know she thinks o' me;
> For the wind is in the palm-trees, and the temple-bells they say:

[48] Bowyang, ''Bill Bowyang's' Bush Recitations No. 6', *Australian Bush Recitations No. 5* (Red Hill: [the author], [1940]), p. 18.

> 'Come you back, you British soldier; come you back to Mandalay!'...
>
> I am sick o' wastin' leather on these gritty pavin'-stones,
> An' the blasted Henglish drizzle wakes the fever in my bones;
> Tho' I walks with fifty 'ousemaids outer Chelsea to the Strand,
> An' they talks a lot o' lovin', but wot do they understand? [49]

The poet who perhaps took Desprez's message most to heart didn't write about a woman of another race in an exotic locale but, rather, about a male compatriot who happens to be working up-country. In 'Clancy of the Overflow' from 1889 A.B. Paterson drew upon Desprez's device of a city-bound middle-class narrator recalling his adventures in remote places. Like 'Lasca' and like 'Mandalay' it also hankers after a lost masculinity, but because its object of desire is male rather than female Paterson only lightly sketches Clancy, who is a brief, abstract presence in the text. This Australian vaquero is disembodied, a singing cowboy dissolving into the natural world through which he rides:

> In my wild erratic fancy visions come to me of Clancy
> Gone a-droving 'down the Cooper' where the Western drovers go;
> As the stock are slowly stringing, Clancy rides behind them singing,
> For the drover's life has pleasures that the townsfolk never know.
>
> And the bush hath friends to meet him, and their kindly voices greet him
> In the murmur of the breezes and the river on its bars,
> And he sees the vision splendid of the sunlit plain extended,
> And at night the wond'rous glory of the everlasting stars.[50]

[49] Rudyard Kipling, 'Mandalay', *The Complete Barrack-Room Ballads of Rudyard Kipling*, ed. Charles Carrington (London: Methuen, 1973), pp. 64, 66. In the parlour song version of this poem, made famous by baritone Peter Dawson, only the first and last verses are used, thus avoiding the more grotesque aspects of the Cockney speaker's orientalism.

[50] A.B. Paterson, 'Clancy of the Overflow', *The Man from Snowy River and Other Verses*, 1895 (Sydney University: Sydney University Press, 2009), p. 16.

Instead, Paterson focuses on all those facets of urban life that diminish the prospect of a life more richly lived: along with the ugly details of the urban landscape, the 'nervous haste' of the city crowds with their eugenically 'stunted forms and weedy'. Significantly, the speaker would 'like to change with Clancy' rather than actually be *with* him, while recognising the impossibility of the exchange. That's because the distance that separates Paterson's narrator from Clancy is more profound than even geography: it's the gulf that divides modernity from the heroic, pre-modern world of myth.

'Clancy of the Overflow' directly dramatises a tension that operates through many bush ballads, which were written by authors with city addresses for metropolitan journals—most famously, the *Bulletin*—keen to construct an idealised rural-based Australian identity.[51] There were close links between cowboy poetry and middle-class journalism, as well, and for the same reasons. Just as Paterson, though he had experience of station life, could never be called a 'bushman' of the kind celebrated in his verse, most of the writers who were instrumental in establishing cowboy poetry as a distinct genre had little or no direct experience as cowboys.[52] In this regard, and although he was only in Texas for three years, Frank Desprez was somewhat exceptional.

A reviewer in the *Journal of American Folklore* in 1957 casually remarked that '"The Man from Snowy River"… apparently occupies the same position in Australian popular literature as "Lasca" in the American'.[53] But 'Lasca' was a favourite here too, and the long currency of Desprez's poem in Australia implies that ideological connections between the bush and the Wild West extend some way back along the dusty trail of frontier history. Certainly more work needs to be done on the obvious affinities between bush ballads and cowboy poetry. Although the title of

[51] See Richard White, 'Bohemians and the Bush', *Inventing Australia: Images and Identity 1688-1980* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1981); also Graeme Davison, 'Sydney and the Bush: An Urban Context for the Australian Legend, in John Carroll, ed. *Intruders in the Bush: The Australian Quest for Identity* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1982).

[52] See Stanley, 'Cowboy Poetry Then and Now: An Overview', pp 7-10; also Logsdon, 'The Tradition of Cowboy Poetry'.

[53] Kenneth Porter, 'Folklore in Australia', *Journal of American Folklore* 70.275 (1957), p. 91. Porter also unfairly described Paterson's poem as 'cliché-ridden doggerel'.

Adam Lindsay Gordon's *Bush Ballads and Galloping Rhymes* (1870) ensured earlier recognition of the bush ballad compared to the cowboy poem, both emerged as literary forms at about the same time, took shape in nationalistic journals from the 1880s, and were popularly canonised by the early twentieth century. Not only are they thus coeval but, considering the respective influence of Gordon and Desprez, in each case an immigrant Englishman had a major hand in establishing the genre.

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Digital Scholarly Editions of Modernist Texts: Navigating the Text in Samuel Beckett's *Watt* Manuscripts

MARK BYRON

Modernist literary texts produced in the early years of the twentieth century stake out a direct challenge to conventional notions of literary language, genre, and even the concept of the literary text itself: such novels as James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) and *Finnegans Wake* (1939), the concrete poetry of Guillaume Apollinaire and the Italian Futurists, and the strange poetic decompositions of the Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven (to cite a few striking examples), provide an array of challenges to reading and interpretation, and even to the basic task of identifying the text object. Experiments in form, particularly by writers who self-identified with the avant-garde, continue to fundamentally challenge scholarly practices of reading, critical evaluation, and editing. Scholars have honed these practices, in turn, to seek new ways to understand Modernist textuality more fully.

Theories of the text in Anglophone scholarship have undergone profound changes in the last three decades, especially in the field of textual criticism and editing. An array of editing techniques and theories have emerged in recent years that aim to deal more adequately with unruly and inadequately defined elements of Modernist textuality. The promise of more powerful and nuanced methods of text presentation in the digital domain has emerged alongside these new (or renewed) textual theories and methods. The subtle relationship between the digital domain and scholarly editing offers scholars an opportunity to rethink Modernist textuality at a fundamental theoretical stratum, and to generate new modes of understanding textuality *per se*. The work that emerges from this crisis (κρίσις in the Greek sense of an event demanding judgment and decision, in other words, *critical* discernment) will bear directly upon the future of

textual scholarship, literary theory and scholarly reading practices, and their mutual imbrications.

Defining Modernist Textuality

Modernist texts have precipitated a crisis in the very concept of textuality—including scholarly editors' ability to represent them and to provide coherent, comprehensive descriptions of their structures and processes. This crisis is still to be fully understood partly because, until recently, theories and methods of editing and interpretation remained contingent upon outmoded text models: the authoritative text or draft that represents the author's intention most completely; the linear, progressive course charted from notes and manuscripts to published texts; and the stable authoritative imprimatur that comes with the fact of publication. These models and assumptions were sufficient for most pre-Modernist texts, and indeed for most modern and contemporary texts that tend not to veer too far from classic text structures. But they are neither able to accommodate a number of experimental avant-garde texts, nor more recent innovations in digital textuality (whether analogue texts transferred into the digital domain in the form of digital archives or editions, or born-digital texts).

A basic problem asserts itself when any attempt is made to sort such texts into zones of stability and experimentation: Modernist textuality is itself a problematic term, at once too broad and too narrow. It captures a variegated range of textual practices. If formal experimentation is considered to be a dominant thread in Modernist writing (and this is obvious in the case of the avant-garde) then a specific concept of 'text' can be applied to kinds of writing by certain authors, and in some cases, even to individual texts by those authors. In other words, we find numerous instances where the generic question 'what is a text?' devolves into the question 'what is this text in front of me?' (e.g. What is the Steinian text? What is this beast named *Finnegans Wake*? Is this published series of notecards a text proper, even if authored by Vladimir Nabokov?)

Approaching this problem from the other direction, Modernist text practices, however we define them, constitute only a discrete portion of literary production at any moment in time. A range of more popular, stable, and enduring textual practices were at work in 1909, or 1922, or 1939. For example, the year Gertrude Stein published *Three Lives* (1909) was also the

year that L. Frank Baum published *The Road to Oz*, the best-selling fifth instalment in his fantasy series; and Rafael Sabatini's novel *Captain Blood* was perhaps *the* popular publishing event of 1922, at least in the United States, and it later achieved a further level of fame as the source text for the 1935 film starring Errol Flynn and Olivia de Havilland. Such works of literature were not interested in radical reconsiderations of the concept of text, or with formal experimentation. Other widely read works of literature demonstrated compelling literary quality. Pearl S. Buck, the 1938 recipient of the Nobel Prize for Literature, and the first American woman to have achieved this distinction, is one prominent example: her novels of peasant life in China (where she lived most of her life) could not be described as Modernist in any coherent sense of the word. The novels of Dashiel Hammett (*The Maltese Falcon*, 1930) and Raymond Chandler (*The Big Sleep*, 1939), which were made even more famous by their film adaptations, stand in for an entire genre of popular writing that was long considered to be mere entertainment, and that saw its literary stocks rise only decades later.

In attempting to delineate what is meant by Modernist textuality, it is worth keeping in mind that the demarcation of a specifically literary heritage is itself a radical kind of exercise, albeit a useful one for the purposes of research and teaching in university literature departments. But it is a kind of artificiality, often utterly at odds with the lived practices and animating circuits of filiation amongst those working creatively in other media during the early twentieth century (and in other centuries). The time of Modernism leaches into the nineteenth century, on one hand, and the postmodern, on the other, and does so at different moments and in varied ways in Britain, Ireland, France, and the United States. In addition, the literary text, for all of its formal delineations, is not easily demarcated from Modernist artistic production in music, the visual and plastic arts, architecture, opera, and so on. Of course it has always been thus, but this is perhaps more sharply focussed in the wake of the Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk* (the 'total artwork') and French Symboliste speculations on the correspondences between colour, musical pitch, syllabic enunciations, and geometrical shapes.

Reflection on the range of artistic and cultural production in the Modernist era, and on the subdivisions within those practices, may be of help in working through a number of issues critical to a clearer understanding of Modernist textuality and its intersections with the digital domain: how do we consider the Modernist text in the light of subsequent

changes to textual production, not least the impact of digital media? Do we need to update our theories and methods of literary analysis (perhaps as cultural studies and other fields have been doing for some time already)? Do we need to reconsider the status of the text as a cultural object and as hermeneutic field for the purposes of editing, conservation, and textual criticism? Are there specific areas in which scholars still need to catch up with Modernist texts, conceptually and even formally, in order to better edit, analyse, and comprehend them? Material and conceptual changes in aesthetic mediation—foremost being the quick rise to ubiquity of digital media—demand renewed scholarly practices that do not simply react to such change but span traditional practices and those emergent in new media.

Scholarly Editing: Analogue and Digital

The principles and methods of scholarly editing have changed enormously in the last three decades. One significant reason for this change is found in the way scholars and editors have reflected on their discipline, subjecting basic concepts to intense scrutiny. The force of critical theory can be observed in essays and monographs pertaining to scholarly editing practices. David Greetham's *Theories of the Text* and G. Thomas Tanselle's series of essays[1] published in the discipline's flagship journal, *Studies in Bibliography*, are two examples, written from the disciplinary heart of textual scholarship, that explore the way psychoanalysis, Marxism, deconstruction, and other denominations of literary theory inflect the way textual scholars think about and edit texts.

At the same time a number of textual scholars became keenly interested in editorial methods that developed outside of the dominant Anglophone custom of copy-text editing. Such methods as genetic and synoptic editing—core practices in modern German textual scholarship that descended from the great philological movement of the eighteenth century—opened up novel ways of understanding the bibliographical and even physical structure of texts, and thus provided the means by which to edit texts thought to be described inadequately by prevailing conventions. The genetic editorial approach, broadly conceived, avers that all stages of a

[1] See D. C. Greetham, *Theories of the Text* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1999); G. Thomas Tanselle, 'Textual Criticism and Deconstruction,' *Studies in Bibliography* 43 (1990): 1-33; and 'Textual Criticism and Literary Sociology,' *Studies in Bibliography* 44 (1991): 83-143.

text's evolution, from manuscript working drafts, to setting copy and published editions, are essential aspects of that text's identity, and that the relationship between them are to be made fully explicit. The expression of this accretive view of a text's history is best illustrated in the synoptic edition, in which no single document or published text is considered to hold an essential authorial imprimatur against which other documents are to be measured. Hans Walter Gabler's edition of Joyce's *Ulysses* is the most prominent (and controversial) example of the synoptic edition in Anglophone literature. Other scholars have followed Gabler's synoptic-genetic editorial lead, most notably Charles Krance in his synoptic bilingual edition of Beckett's later short prose text *Mal Vu Mal Dit / Ill See Ill Said*.[2]

The German philological model of the *Handschriftenedition*—the 'sui generis edition of working drafts and manuscripts'[3]—comprises an editorial platform in which an imperative authorial intention (usually linked to publication) is displaced by the authority of the documents themselves. Textual analysis proceeds by taking any one document as an anchoring point from which the history of the text's production radiates: the edition provides a cross-sectional view of the temporal and compositional relations between documents, and is not bound to observe a privileged status of publication. This model might prove to be groundbreaking in providing Anglophone scholarly editors with a flexible, contingent model: one in which documents can stand in relation to each other without the need for base texts—usually the first published edition, against which all other documents are measured—or stemmatic hierarchies—the 'family tree' diagrams in which families of documents are ordered according to strict, causal lines of descent.

In other contexts, editors came to consider contextual material to be increasingly relevant to the identity of specific literary texts, and developed methods that dissolved conventional boundaries between the text and the context in which it came into being (and the contexts, across time and

[2] Hans Walter Gabler, Wolfhard Steppe and Claus Melchior, eds., *Ulysses: A Critical and Synoptic Edition*, 3 vols. (New York and London: Garland, 1984; rev. ed. 1986); Charles Krance, ed., *Samuel Beckett's* Mal vu mal dit / Ill Seen Ill Said*: A Bilingual, Evolutionary, and Synoptic Variorum Edition* (New York and London: Garland, 1996).

[3] Hans Walter Gabler, 'Introduction,' in *Contemporary German Editorial Theory*, ed. Hans Walter Gabler, George Bornstein and Gillian Borland Pierce (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1995), p. 4.

space, in which the text is and has been read). The social text model is one such concept of textual production and reception as a socialised series of events, best articulated by Jerome J. McGann and D. F. MacKenzie.[4] This model is sensitive to the role of all documents in contributing to a text's identity, and thus its representation, but asserts a wider range of potential sources than manuscripts and published editions: the role of non-authorial actors, such as editors, family members, literary executors, and 'environmental' influences such as theatre architecture, postal systems, social interactions between authors and audiences, all directly shape the text's identity in potentially profound and foundational ways. Editions of literary texts that accord to a social text model require the means to represent these dimensions of text identity, and are clear candidates for digital editorial treatment: Jerome J. McGann's Rossetti Archive[5] is perhaps the most elegant expression and embodiment of this textual worldview, in which Dante Gabriel Rossetti's complex process of textual revision and republication is integrated with his visual art, and the socialised nature of his aesthetic production is given full expression.

These reconsiderations of the materials and methods of scholarly editing go to the heart of what scholars consider to be the substance of their enterprise. Yet the practical effects of intense theoretical reflection are not widely manifest in the production of scholarly editions. The basic premise of scholarly editing has remained constant regardless of an editor's method or theoretical disposition: to produce a reliable, readable text that seeks to remove or minimise error according to a rationale or set of governing principles. Editors will often choose to conform to the orthodoxies of Anglophone editorial practice if not faced with pressing reasons to employ other means to represent a particular text. To take a very recent example, indeed a landmark literary event of recent decades: *The Letters of Samuel Beckett, Volume I: 1929-1940*.[6] This text is edited much as it might have been fifty or a hundred years ago (had its primary materials existed then).

[4] See Jerome J.McGann, *A Critique of Modern Textual Criticism* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1983; repr. Charlottesville and London: U of Virginia P, 1992); D. F. MacKenzie, *Bibliography and the Sociology of Texts* (1985; London: The British Library, 1986).

[5] The Rossetti Archive <www.rossettiarchive.org> is housed under the auspices of the Institute for Advanced Technology in the Humanities and NINES (a digital research environment for nineteenth century studies), Alderman Library, University of Virginia.

[6] Samuel Beckett, *The Letters of Samuel Beckett, Volume I: 1929-1940*, ed. Martha Dow Fehsenfeld and Lois More Overbeck (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2009).

The arrangement and presentation of transcribed documents, annotations, translations, and other appended primary and critical materials are all clearly explicated by means of rigorous traditional scholarly principles. Although the edition's publication was heavily expedited by the availability of digital technology (digital photographs, email correspondence, digital submission to the press, and so forth), its form and conceptual structure are not fundamentally dependent upon the paraphernalia of the digital age. Of course a conservative editorial approach is not in itself necessarily a bad thing: new methods and techniques, as well as the technologies supporting them, demand justification in a process of critical appraisal. Traditional methods of textual scholarship often suffice: indeed, a renewed focus on the traditions of scholarly editing may provide the means for conceptual breakthroughs in the field.

Testing the Limits of Modernist Textuality: Samuel Beckett's *Watt*

A suitably challenging text will best illustrate the ways in which innovative Modernist texts place pressure on concepts of text, and consequently of editing, interpreting, and theorising about them: Samuel Beckett's 1953 novel *Watt* marks itself out as a distinct outlier in definitions of text and editorial processes. The manuscript of this text was first composed in 1941-45, during the Second World War, first in Paris, and following the fall of Beckett's Resistance unit, in Roussillon in the Vaucluse in Free France. The obvious distinction of the archival material lies in its florid visual appearance: the six notebooks (housed at the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center at the University of Texas at Austin) amount to nearly a thousand pages and are heavily illustrated. The text material, in Beckett's notoriously challenging hand, displays the signs of intensive processes of composition. The doodles and multi-layered erasures and emendations suggest a recursive mode of composition, where material is submerged, quarantined, refined, and recycled. The relationship between the archival material and the published text breaks down into two basic categories: the first three and a half notebooks do not correspond directly with the published text, although some sections are reworked and sedimented into phrases or short passages; the last two and a half notebooks reappear almost verbatim in the published narrative, although out of any perceivable order. In addition, a partial typescript divides into material that appears in the published text but not in the manuscript, or otherwise to material in the manuscripts but not in the published text.

The basic relation between archival document and text is put under radical scrutiny by virtue of the physical arrangement of the materials. This is compounded by the recurrent preoccupations in the narrative—in both manuscript and published text—with the relative fragility of texts and concepts in times of physical duress (war) and indeed of metaphysical duress. In fact there are physical resemblances to the manuscript in specific features of the published text. The narrative concludes in a moment of suspended action (not unusual for a Beckett text) but is unique in being followed by a sequence of Addenda items that gesture towards metanarrative and even archival significance: '*Watt learned to accept* etc. Use to explain poverty of Part III,' 'Note that Arsene's declarations gradually come back to Watt,' 'change all the names.'[7] The value of aesthetic production *per se* recurs as a dominant theme of profound reflection in Beckett's writing: a theme not uncommon to other texts composed at this time and in similarly straitened circumstances (Ezra Pound's *Pisan Cantos* is an obvious case in point).

The task of establishing this text is a vexed one. The published text betrays a notoriously uneven linguistic surface, and the corrugations of the Addenda items follow a narrative that itself begins to leach metanarrative clues as to its mediation by layers of narrators, transcribers and 'editors.' These complexities attest to the relative paucity of critical commentary on *Watt*, despite its being one of Beckett's most substantial texts. The novel is significant in marking a defining shift in his aesthetic outlook, from plenitude to indigence, and from English to French as his preferred language of narrative composition. Scholars often attribute the multitude of textual conundra and riddles to the author's characteristic perverse humour or the gnomic tone of his emergent aesthetics, but they fail to account for the many obvious references to extended manuscript episodes that either do not appear in the published narrative or do so in submerged form. And it is entirely understandable that this failure occurs: the contents of the manuscript archive, so critical in determining the various gradations of text material, are simply not available to most scholars. The first critical step in establishing the text of *Watt*—if indeed this can be done by conventional means at all—is to produce a representation and transcription of the manuscript notebooks. For reasons deeply implicated in the archival materials and their relationship to the published text, this task is not readily

[7] Samuel Beckett, *Watt* (1953; New York: Grove, 1959), pp. 248, 253. Subsequent citations from the novel are taken from this edition and are incorporated in the essay text.

conceivable in a conventional codex facsimile edition; indeed the complex imbricated relationships between narrative episodes and fragments cannot be represented at all adequately in the linear structure of the codex.

As a consequence, any edition of Beckett's *Watt* that seeks to integrate archival materials (compelling reasons for which are evident) must begin with a digital transcription and representation of the manuscript notebooks. This task forms a part of a larger international project—the Samuel Beckett Digital Manuscript Project—that aims to have all of Beckett's literary manuscripts transcribed and represented in digital form. This initiative responds to a profound deepening of scholarly interest in Modernist manuscripts as potential sources of literary hermeneutic attention, and in concert with this focal shift, a renewed interest in theories of textuality and textual criticism. The specific (and heightened) relevance to this particular text in Beckett's oeuvre is immediately apparent in light of the complex series of heavily revised and illustrated manuscript notebooks. The *Watt* archival documents provide a huge amount of material that illuminates Beckett's composition processes and the emergence of his aesthetic programme in this text. It only requires a mode of delivery adequate to the task of representing these features.

The digital manuscript of *Watt* presents the transcription marked up in XML in a simplified version of TEI5: the fifth edition of the Text Encoding Initiative Guidelines. It is presented in an interface powered by Apache Tomcat (a servlet container that basically provides a means to run Java code in an HTTP server), allowing specific textual features and annotations to be hidden or made prominent, depending on the scholarly use to which the digital manuscript is put. The content, placement, and kinds of erasure and emendations can be tracked, as well as the writing implement in any one example or set of examples. All matters of editorial interpretation can be read against a high resolution digital photograph of the manuscript page, which also illustrates the types of relationship between doodles, diagrams, lists and notes, and nearby narrative matter.

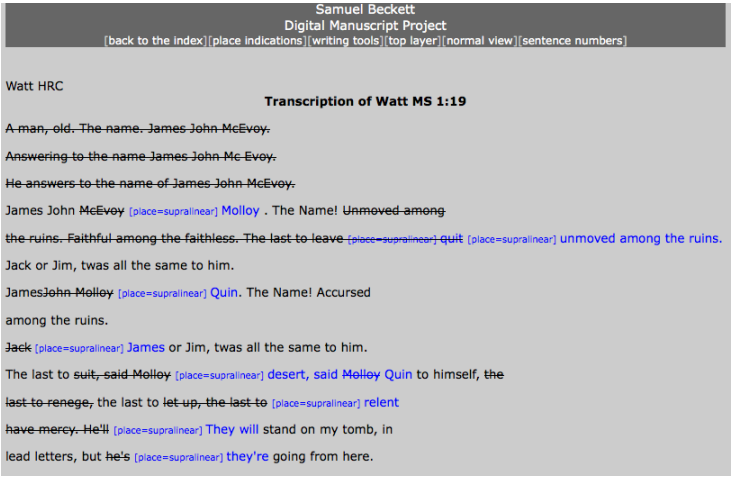
The primary purpose of numbering sentences and paragraphs in the TEI markup is to allow for comparisons to be made between corresponding segments in a series of documents, whether manuscripts, typescript, pre-publication documents, or published editions. Beckett often composed long series of manuscripts and typescripts, in both English and French. *Watt* functions as a complex exception to this trend, having just one manuscript (albeit one of nearly a thousand pages), a partial typescript and a series of

published texts, in French, British and American editions. The SBDMP is not permitted to reproduce published material, but the existence of page proofs or setting copy provides most of Beckett's manuscripts with a control text very similar to published editions. This is the case for *Watt*: the setting copy is housed in the Beckett International Foundation at the University of Reading. But this document only correlates with the last two and a half notebooks, whilst the partial typescript correlates (roughly) with the first three and a half. The fully transcribed manuscript will be numbered against two documents: the typescript and the setting copy. This practice is a world away from copy-text editorial practices, and is not meant to serve such a purpose. However, it does highlight the practical and theoretical challenges presented by the *Watt* archive and editions to conventional Anglophone editorial practices.

The conventional scholarly work of manuscript transcription is reflected in the tags employed to identify and collate the documentary information (including the illustrations), which bear morphological affinities with the bibliographical codes scholarly editors have traditionally used. The TEI encoding operates on a segmentation level of the sentence, which allows for comparisons between manuscript versions and the chosen base text where these exist in other of Beckett's manuscripts, and also makes provision for *paralipomena*, omitted passages in subsequent versions, wherever they are deemed to exist. Each paragraph is also numbered. The physical layout of the manuscript page is also largely preserved in the TEI, where div markers of type 'page' and rend values of 'recto' or 'verso' preserve the spatial relation between text segments. Once the material is coded in this way, it is ready for web delivery, and can be manipulated in a variety of ways. A preliminary view of the interface, before digital photographs of the manuscript pages and searchable database facilities have been added, illustrates several features of the digital transcription and the compositional practices at work in the documents. Below is the transcription of the top half of Notebook 1:19, showing Beckett's deletions and additions (in blue):

SBDMP transcription of *Watt* Notebook 1:19

Beneath the project title a command menu provides a sequence of features, drawing from the transcription files marked-up in XML that serve as a kind of database of all encoded manuscript information. The *place indications* command reveals exactly where on the page Beckett's deletions and emendations occur:



SBDMP transcription of *Watt* Notebook 1:19 showing place indications

The *writing tools* command indicates the implement used at each point of emendation or deletion, and the hand responsible for it:

In this case the hand is always Beckett's, but this tool is of critical importance in situations where editors or other agents actively participate in the shaping of a manuscript. Beckett uses several different writing implements on this page of the manuscript: the more substantial emendations are made in black ink and then brown ink, but crucially, the change in the protagonist's name, from James John Molloy to James Quin (the precursor to the character who will become Knott in the published text), is recorded in pink ink. A pattern emerges across manuscript pages, where name changes are made in this ink colour, suggesting a discrete process of revision. Other patterns of revision can be adduced from similar colour traces throughout the manuscripts.

This digitised manuscript is a first step in describing the complex, imbricated relationship between archive and published text. It provides scholars with the raw material with which to begin such explorations, and will undoubtedly alter the critical terrain, such as it is, of this pivotal novel in Beckett's oeuvre. Of all of his major texts, *Watt* has received the least critical attention, despite significant scholarly curiosity regarding the deep ambiguity of the published narrative and the baroque nature of its

manuscript archive.[8] The well-known hermeneutic difficulties presented by the published narrative are thus in no way adequately understood in relation to the primary materials, because they themselves constitute a kind of *terra incognita*. By representing and transcribing the manuscript archive of this pivotal text in digital form, such relations between the archive and publication can begin to proceed in an informed way, and more adequate editorial and hermeneutic strategies can be brought to bear on this most inscrutable of Beckett's texts.

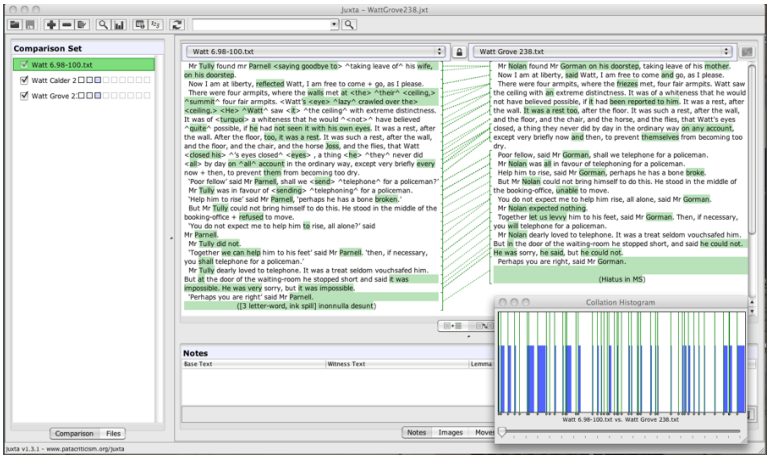
'change all the names': Hackett ⇔ Watt

There are distinct hermeneutic benefits in introducing digital collation tools into an expanded critical edition of *Watt*, especially given the limited document set available for collation. Tools such as Juxta[9] or Versioning Machine[10] allow the reader to locate significant patterns of divergence between documents. A sequence of pages in Notebook 6 (the leaves 98-100) corresponds very closely to passages in the British and American editions of *Watt*:

[8] J. M. Coetzee described the *Watt* manuscript material and hypothesised its stages of composition in his PhD dissertation nearly forty years ago at the University of Texas at Austin. An epitome of this description and analysis was published in his essay, 'The Manuscript Revisions of Beckett's *Watt*,' *JML* 2.4 (1972): 472-480. Other discussions include: Sighle Kennedy, ''Astride of the Grave and a Difficult Birth': Samuel Beckett's *Watt* Struggles to Life,' *Dalhousie French Studies* 42 (1998): 115-147; David Hayman, 'Beckett's *Watt*—the Graphic Accompaniment: Marginalia in the Manuscripts,' *Word & Image* 13.2 (1997): 172-182 and 'Nor Do My Doodles More Sagaciously: Beckett Illustrating *Watt*,' in Lois Oppenheim, ed., *Samuel Beckett and the Arts: Music, Visual Arts, and Non-Print Media* (New York and London: Garland, 1999), pp. 199-215; and John Pilling, 'Beckett's English Fiction,' in Pilling, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Beckett* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994), pp. 17-42.

[9] Juxta was originally developed as a collation tool for Jerome J. McGann's digital Rossetti Archive <www.rossettiarchive.org> and is now housed under the auspices of the Institute for Advanced Technology in the Humanities and NINES (a digital research environment for nineteenth century studies), Alderman Library, University of Virginia.

[10] Susan Schreibman began developing Versioning Machine <v-machine.org> in 2000. It is housed at the University of Maryland Libraries and the Maryland Institute for Technology in the Humanities.



Juxta window of *Watt* MS 6:98-100 and *Watt* (New York: Calder, 1959), p. 238 with Collation Histogram

The dialogue between Tully and Parnell in the manuscript, shown in the left panel, is transformed into a nearly identical conversation between the newly named Nolan and Gorman on the right (variations are shown in green colour blocks and almost uniformly refer to deletions and corrections in the manuscript). The significance of these changes rests in what they tell the reader of Beckett's style of allusion. He decides to 'change all the names' as recorded in the Addenda in the published text, from those of two historically significant figures—Tully is the Roman philosopher and orator Cicero, and Charles Stuart Parnell, the nineteenth-century Irish nationalist leader. The change to two generic Irish family names diminishes any prominent intertextuality in a process of distancing or 'vaguening' that was to become one of Beckett's compositional hallmarks.

Of course it can be most diverting to incorporate digital tools into one's editorial work, but the question of utility should accompany the selection of any particular tool. In the case of this small example, it is immediately clear that the otherwise very strong correlation between Notebook 6 and the published editions of *Watt* diverge on the subject of characters' names. These changes, so late in the manuscript record, recall that Addenda directive to 'change all the names.' But the provenance of that textual element is actually Notebook 3:62, nowhere remotely close to the substance of Notebook 6. This supports the notion that the Addenda item and the fact of Beckett's changing the names of his characters are linked but are not one and the same, that the 'archived' Addenda items

recall specific events in the manuscripts, but also effect a metatextual commentary on them and give them a phantasmic textual afterlife.

Another digital tool can be applied most effectively to the manuscript notebooks in the form of a wordcloud.[11] This tool is eye-catching in its visual immediacy by showing the relative frequency of specific words in a text sample: the bigger the word appears in the cloud, and the more centrally located, the more frequently it occurs. Wordclouds also function as very powerful indicators of substantive tendencies in a sequence of documents. Below is a wordcloud representation of Notebook 3, in which the word 'one' dominates, not surprisingly, but is flanked by the names Watt, Lynch, Quin, Arsene and Erskine. All of these names appear in the published text with the exception of Quin (the character who is transformed into the more passive and enigmatic Knott in the published text).

Wordcloud of *Watt* Notebook 3 transcription

The wordcloud of Notebook 4 is also dominated by names—Watt, Hackett and Nixon—reflecting the fact that this notebook contains the draft of what is to become Part I of the novel, where the decrepit character named Hackett meets a couple, Goff and Tetty Nixon, at a park bench, before the novel's eponymous anti-hero makes his appearance nearby, disembarking from a tram.

[11] The wordclouds in this essay were generated from <wordle.net>.

Wordcloud of *Watt* Notebook 4 transcription

These two wordclouds immediately suggest that the Addenda directive to 'change all the names' bears complex significance. We would expect a wordcloud of a novel to be dominated by characters' names, but the changing emphasis on specific names in different notebooks may indicate that there is more to this textual feature than is at first apparent. As it turns out, the relationship between the two characters Hackett and Watt is a most lucid illustration of the complexities at work in the manuscript, an indication of its reticulated rather than teleological structure. The first-person narrator of the first three notebooks is transformed into the character Watt in the later notebooks and in the published text. But this earlier figure is not discarded from the later evolution of the narrative: he becomes the elderly Hackett. This character only appears in the opening scene of the published text, but occupies a critically important place, allowing us to see exactly how the Addenda functions in relation to manuscript change.

The opening scene of the novel has Mr Nixon unable to reconcile his uncanny associations of Hackett and Watt. When the latter appears at the tram stop, Nixon is at a loss to account for his familiarity: firstly, 'I cannot say I really know him,' and then 'I seem to have known him all my life, but there must have been a period when I did not' (18). The punchline comes with the confession: 'The curious thing is, my dear fellow [ie. Hackett], I tell you quite frankly, that when I see him, or think of him, I think of you,

and that when I see you, or think of you, I think of him. I have no idea why this is so' (19). With the aid of the manuscript transcription, and the visual clues of the wordclouds, the attentive reader knows precisely why Nixon finds himself in this uncanny predicament. It is because Hackett and Watt are different stages of the same fictional character, appearing together in the same place, contrary to all rules of naturalistic representation. Hackett is an archival revenant of the novel's anti-hero, visibly dessicating before Nixon, as physically fragile as the manuscript pages from which he emerges and to which his presence subtly refers.

The relationship between archival material and published text in this case is neither linear nor teleological. An adequate conceptual model for this complex literary manuscript is a necessary first step in any scholarly edition of the text. The singularities of the *Watt* archive present specific challenges to current editorial practices, but the material may also represent more wide-ranging aesthetic change in the Modernist era. The blurred edges between archive and published text pose radical questions of the conceptual possibility of stable published texts that push into zones of contingency outside the range of even the most experimental literary productions of the Victorian age. The profound reconfigurations of text status present basic challenges to Anglo-American editorial practices, but they also provide clear opportunities for digital tools and methods to represent texts in ways impractical or impossible in analogue forms. In other words, the value of any digital edition will rest upon how it answers the question: what specific bibliographical and hermeneutic innovations are made available by virtue of its digital delivery?

Digital Technology and Editorial Practice

The presence of digital technology in scholarship has become increasingly prominent in recent years. Digital aides to scholarship (online library catalogues, concordances, databases, digital repositories of journals, digitised images of literary manuscripts, etc.) provide extensions to existing scholarly tools and practices, facilitating certain kinds of scholarship. Primary sources can be identified by means of web-based archive catalogues, and online digital representations of manuscripts allow scholars to conduct particular kinds of work at geographical distance. Whilst access to the physical document may be desirable or even critical in the final event, several stages of research can be accomplished prior to such access. Digital extensions of traditional analogue research tools are perfectly

commonplace, and are not particularly difficult to integrate into the culture and mentality of scholarly disciplines. How might the obvious virtues of digital technology best support, or even inform, editorial theory and practice in relation to Modernist texts?

Recent innovative approaches to Modernist scholarly editing tend to imply or assert the relevance of a wider array of documentary sources. Genetic editions, such as Hans Walter Gabler's synoptic edition of *Ulysses*, seek to incorporate all available manuscript material and published versions of a text, as well as a rationale of any stemmatic relationship between them, in an attempt to provide a 'total' text. Social text methods seek to integrate erstwhile secondary documents and materials into the very conceptual fabric of a text, as constituent parts of a text's identity. These more aggregative models of text identity, and more specifically the texts to which they pertain, are clearly conducive to presentation as digital scholarly editions. Conversely, digital modes of representing literary texts can bring questions of a text's identity into sharp focus. The representation of multiple textual witnesses in collation software such as Juxta or Versioning Machine alters rather profoundly the reader's apprehension of the textual matter at hand. The text is digitally mediated and may be represented by transposed digital reproductions and transcriptions suitably marked up for digital display. But this mediation can go to the very heart of what is considered to be the text. Any digital collation of the *Watt* manuscript and the published text forces the editorial hand: not so much in terms of the choice of singular base texts and linear, stemmatic lines of descent to which codex editions are structurally well-configured, but in terms of the links made between textual units, the division of material into units of varying kinds, the nature and extent of annotations, and the relative degrees of freedom provided to the reader of a digital edition to explore or even create links of their own. Decisions of legitimacy—of annotation, of textual comparisons, of the reader's theoretical and hermeneutic lines of thought arrived at heuristically—are basic to the structure of a digital edition. Clearly a well-designed digital edition can, and perhaps should, abdicate a traditional, centralised editorial power (which is the exercise of another kind of power) and stimulate editorial decision-making in the ways readers use the edition.

Digital scholarly editions can do two things that seem fundamentally new: firstly, a potentially large corpus of material can be represented in one space, and manipulated in ways simply not possible in the world of physical manuscripts and codex editions (a basic premise of the digitised

manuscript of *Watt*). Secondly, digital collations allow for manipulations of the text material that are visually straightforward and intuitively intelligible, whilst bearing profound implications for the text's identity and the authority of textual evidence. The digital manuscript of *Watt* deploys software designed to demonstrate how the manuscripts accord very closely to the published text in many places but diverge almost absolutely in many others. From this conceptual ground, more sophisticated understandings of text structure evolve, providing us with textual models that do justice to the complex artworks we read, and to our already theoretically informed modes of reading.

Digital Futures of Modernist Scholarship

A sufficient number of Modernist texts present basic challenges to conventional notions of text status and, consequently, to the editorial methods and hermeneutic strategies brought to those texts. Scholars need to reconsider the grounds upon which such texts are understood. The dominant features of this aesthetic and conceptual revolution—deeply ambiguous borders between text and archive, the radical displacement of the stable, complete published text entity by virtue of an equally radical doubt concerning literary value—are not novelties that arose *ex nihilo* at the outset of the last century, but rather in a context of a rapidly changing media ecology, and within novel circuits of filiation and collaboration. The novels, plays, poems and other writing produced during the high Modernist era broadly conform to formal and generic categories, but in a sense they are fundamentally different objects to their nineteenth century forebears. Indeed it is not certain that they are fully-fledged objects at all, as conventionally understood, but rather text processes that require flexible, innovative editorial reflection, and subtle means of representation in order to more fully convey the precise challenge they provide to their own aesthetic landscape. The challenge for textual scholars and editors is to try and catch up to Modernist aesthetic innovation, by using the most powerful traditional tools combined with new media and innovative scholarly methods.

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editing techniques. His ARC Discovery Project, due to begin in 2011, aims to produce a longitudinal study of literary text structures from the mid-nineteenth century, and the range of editorial methods (analog and digital) used to represent those texts.

Narrative and Narration in John Ford's *The Searchers*

DAVID KELLY

'First of all, the western is American History.'
Jim Kitses[1]

On second glance, the first thing you notice about *The Searchers* is the framing. It takes a second glance, because the first time we see it we are simply not aware that the opening image of the opening door framing the figure of Martha looking out at Ethan Edwards is itself a framing device for the film as a whole.

[1] Jim Kitses, *Horizons West* (London: 1969), p. 8. I am very grateful to Simon Petch for first alerting me to Kitses' text, for sharing his knowledge and enthusiasm for the western over the years, and for reading and advising on this paper in draft form.

We become aware of the motif as the film proceeds, the interior-exterior shot the signature of this classic western, but it's not until the closing image of the closing door framing the figure of the departing Ethan Edwards that we realise quite how elaborate this framing device has been, nor how insistent it means to be as such a device.

John Ford was a director with an exquisite sense of the cinematic frame—his eye for composition was unmatched among Hollywood directors.[2] And as his style developed he became known for his capacity to impart symbolic depths to the image, to manipulate it in the service of the tone, mood, and thematic impulses of the narrative. It was a technique he first developed in silent films—framing the perfect symbolic geometry of the mise-en-scene—and this developed into a distinctive compositional style in which the characters became figures in expressionistic landscapes generated by the aesthetic conception of the whole, as here in the hulking figure of Victor McGlaglen's Gypo Nolan lurching drunkenly through the Dublin night in *The Informer:*

[2] In an admired and incisive observation Andrew Sarris was to claim that Ford's visual style 'evolved almost miraculously into a double vision of an event in all its vital immediacy and yet also in its ultimate memory image on the horizon of history.' Quoted in Joseph McBride, *Searching for John Ford* (London: 2003), p. 114.

Such potent expressionistic use of light, figuration and symbolic landscape is certainly at play in what, at first glance, is probably the scene from this film that most vividly stays with one afterwards, as it did with me for many years after I first saw *The Searchers* as a teenager long ago: the massacre at the Edwards homestead—'the best suspense sequence ever filmed,' according to Australian director Richard Franklin,[3] and a haunting image of the fragility of the innocent frontier family victim to the pitiless savagery of the wilderness, the sum of all pioneer fears gathered together and figured forth in the person of the marauding Comanche chief, Scar. No physical violence is depicted: Ford focuses rather on the terrified apprehension of the family, a terror that climaxes in the astonishing zoom-close-up on Lucy.

[3] Richard Franklin, 'John Ford', http://archive.sensesofcinema.com/contents/directors/02/ford.html accessed 1/9/2010.

I'll return to this chilling and deeply affecting scene later, but first I want to return to that first image of the opening door. This is a film that emphasises point of view from this very first shot, but it plays with that point of view significantly, asking the viewer to reassess and re-apprehend what is seen and the viewpoint from which it is comprehended. It is a narrative technique that is literalized in what has often been seen as a highly problematic incident late in the movie. After a series of trades with the local Native American population Marty, who was hoping to obtain a blanket, finds that he has inadvertently acquired a wife. Dutiful and obliging, she is nevertheless unprepossessing and indeed somewhat homely, and Ethan immediately takes the opportunity to needle Marty about his acquisition of 'Mrs Pauley', as he calls her. It is an unkind humour, but one in which the audience is invited to share a certain complicity. In her willingness to please Marty she comes to call herself 'Look,' mistaking his expression of attention for her marital name, but when she seeks to share the marital bed, Marty reacts by violently kicking her out. Again there is a comic accent to the scene, cued in particular by Ethan's laughter, which once more implicates the audience in the cruel humour. [4] Shortly afterwards Look leaves to join Scar's band, leaving signs

[4] The 'kicking out of bed' scene remains a problematic one for many commentators. Douglas Pye notes that 'it is difficult (now, at any rate) not to experience the treatment of Look as brutal and painful. If it is intended as comic (even grotesquely comic), the effect seems ill-calculated, the humour unpleasant and misogynistic.' ('Miscegenation and Point of View in *The Searchers*,' in Arthur M. Eckstein and Peter Lehman (eds.), '*The Searchers': Essays and Reflections on John Ford's Classic Western* (Wayne State University Press: 2004), p.227. Peter Lehman considers the scene at length in 'Looking at Look's Missing Reverse Shot: Psychoanalysis and Style in John Ford's *The Searchers*,' *Wide Angle* 4 (1981): 65-70), while Christopher Sharrett, in a scathing reassessment of the film, has taken this scene as evidence of Ford's 'insensitivity and ... generally coarse sensibility,' and concludes: 'His coarseness and tendency to go for the easy joke make one question the artistic complexity for which he is so often praised.' (Christopher Sharrett, 'Through a door darkly: a reappraisal of John Ford's *The Searchers*,' *Cineaste*, 31.4, Fall 2006).

Not all commentators have written on Ford and this scene in quite so sanctimonious a manner, however. Ed Buscombe takes up the issue in this way:

> It's a good question whether we, the audience, are supposed to guffaw along with Ethan as Marty's foot propels his 'wife' down the side of the hill. Perhaps; no one has yet claimed Ford as prematurely politically correct. One has a sneaking suspicion that we're meant to find her physical attributes funny in themselves. And yet she is the one Indian character who is given any sort of individuality (Scar is barely more than a stereotype). She is good-natured to a fault, making coffee, willing to take on whatever

in her wake for Ethan and Marty to follow—a dutiful wife to the end. When they catch up to her, however, they find that she has been the victim of a cavalry raid.[5]

This sequence opens with an expression of moral puzzlement by Marty ('something happened that I ain't got straight in my own mind yet') which helps to cue our particular attention. He and Ethan have encountered a herd of Buffalo, which Ethan begins to shoot with maniacal zeal. 'That don't make no sense!' Marty complains, to which Ethan replies: 'Hunger! Empty bellies! That's the sense it makes ya blankethead! At least they won't feed any Comanches this winter!' They are then interrupted by the

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> identity Marty requires, even to the extent of changing her name. Mistaking Marty's expostulatory 'Look' as a vocative, she replies in Comanche that if he wishes to call her that it's fine. (Ethan with a sneer translates, giving her Comanche name as 'Wild Goose, Flying in the Night Sky'; how could such a plain girl have such a fancy name, he implies.) So some groundwork is established for a more caring response, and if we do indeed succumb to Ethan's coarse laughter, we are soon sorry for it. So is Ethan himself.' (*The Searchers*, British Film Institute, London: 2000, p. 51.)

David Grimsted puts the case that, although disturbing 'to feelings of political correctness, the scene retains that humorous zest Ford usually brings to his low comedy sequences. Nor is there any sense of hostility and hurtfulness towards Look, who retains substantial dignity. She doesn't seem dumb like Ford's Anglo yokels like Charlie or irresponsible like the comic Irishmen Ford had Victor McLaglen often play.' And he concludes with the generous observation: 'There is no film precedent for Ford's use of a Native American woman for comic relief. It was a Fordian innovation toward integration, slightly increasing his huge repertory of folk who populate his humorous Americana.' (David Grimsted, 'Re-searching,' in Eckstein and Lehman, op.cit. pp. 308-9). Reflecting on negative responses to Ford's comic approach, Joseph McBride offered the view: 'Perhaps the deepest underlying cause of some people's distaste for Ford's comedy lies in its subversive nature. To Jean Mitry, who wrote a critical study of his work in 1954, Ford explained that he liked 'to discover humour in the midst of tragedy, for tragedy is never wholly tragic. Sometimes tragedy is ridiculous.' ' Joseph McBride, op.cit., p. 455. For my own part I would point to Look's name and the textual insistence that she be regarded as a figure of moral consequence as evidence of an artistic complexity that should deliver Ford from the comfortable self-righteousness of much contemporary criticism. In addition, there are significant aspects to the narration of the film at this point which need to be taken into account, and which I discuss more fully below.

[5] This raid appears to have been based on the 1868 Washita River massacre, conducted by General Custer, in which he claimed to have killed up to 140 warriors, but which all other parties number at approximately 14, along with upwards of 80 women and children.

sound of cavalry which draws them to the site of the massacre, where they encounter the dead body of Look. 'Why did them soldiers have to go and kill her for, Ethan?' Marty asks a clearly distressed John Wayne, 'She never did nobody any harm.' Framed in this way by Marty's moral confusion and his bewildered question, and underscored by the literalizing effect of the character's name, the film at this moment is pointedly asking us to look and look again—

to re-appraise previous people, events and attitudes in a new light, such as westward expansion and the role of the military in this, or such as our own

complicity in the callous humour of the earlier comic violence in the marriage bed, which shares in the callous treatment of the native population meted out by the 7th Cavalry.

Look, and look again, as the frames of reference change and different aspects of human experience are brought into the light. As I suggested earlier, Ford learnt his art in the days of silent pictures and quickly developed a painterly style that remained his signature throughout his career. But in time he came to explore a different kind of framing technique to that of the aesthetics of the cinematic frame—a narrative and narratorial framing which invests the text with something more than symbolic composition and expressionistic effect, a point self-consciously elaborated in the reiterative insistence of the frame image of *The Searchers* (and particularly its pleonastic and, again, its literalizing feature of the frame within the frame, the doorframe within the cinematic frame). So I return again to that opening frame.

Apparently an establishing shot, we eventually come to understand this opening interior-exterior image as in part dramatizing the point of view of Martha, Ethan's sister-in-law, who, we discover, has feelings for Ethan. She opens the door as if sensing his arrival, and she, the shot, the film itself, welcome Ethan to the ranch. Metaphorically, this scene also functions as welcoming the generic figure of the frontiersman, the cowboy loner, the pathfinder, that ambiguous figure who stands at the edge of the wilderness and is the first to bring to it the light of 'civilization', just as he is the first to learn its ways—as Reverend Clayton says to Ethan, 'You fit a lot of descriptions'. And this frame opens, too, upon that kind of western in which this generic figure is celebrated. It helps set the tone and mood for what is to follow—a homecoming, but also a rather fraught family tableau, in which there are clearly things left unsaid.

Much that is left unsaid is managed instead by looks, or failures to look. Like the flustered, anxious look which Martha gives when Aaron, her husband, recognises the approaching horseman as his brother Ethan:

Or the look Martha gives when she holds Ethan's coat, or the look which the Reverend Clayton pointedly refuses to take when Ethan farewells Martha before leaving to pursue the raiders of Jorgenson's cattle:

What is seen and what is unseen becomes crucial in this first section of the film. At this point in the narrative things are not looked at and then looked at again—that comes later; here, some things apparently do not require looking in the first place, because they are already known. And in this circumstance one character in particular is seen to possess a commanding vision of things: Ethan Edwards. People see what Ethan

wants them to see—no more, and no less. When he returns to the massacre scene Ethan determines what can and can't be seen by Marty—a noble gesture, in one sense, but a problematic one, too, as he knocks Marty to the ground when he intends to enter the dugout to see the body of his dead aunt Martha:

> **Marty**: Aunt Martha. Aunt Martha. Let me in.
> **Ethan**: Don't go in there boy.
> **Marty**: I want to see her.
> *Ethan hits him.*
> **Ethan**: Don't let him look in there Mose. It won't do him any good.

Later, in pursuit of the Comanche raiding party, Lucy's fiancé, young Brad Jorgensen, believes he sees her in the native camp, but Ethan insists that it is not what it seems:

> **Brad**: I found them! I found Lucy! They're camped about half-mile over. I was just swinging back and I seen their smoke. Bellied up a ridge, and there they was, right below me.
> **Martin**: Did you see Debbie?
> **Brad**: No. No, but I saw Lucy alright. She was wearing that blue dress and...
> **Ethan**: What you saw wasn't Lucy.
> **Brad**: Oh, but it was...
> **Ethan**: What you saw was a buck wearing Lucy's dress. I found Lucy in the canyon, wrapped her in my coat, buried her with my own hands. Thought it best to keep it from you.
> **Brad**: Did they...was she...
> **Ethan**: (*Yelling*) What do you want me to do? Draw you a picture? Spell it out? Don't ever ask me! Long as you live, don't ever ask me more!

'What do you want me to do? Draw you a picture?' asks Ethan, and that is enough to send Brad into a frenzy in apprehension of the lurid and grisly picture that Ethan conjures with these words. Yet it might be that Ethan has been drawing pictures all along, but they look so much like cinema, we can't tell the difference.

There were two earlier Ford films which notably used equally self-conscious framing devices as *The Searchers*, but neither of them are westerns. The first of these was *How Green Was My Valley*, a loving evocation of childhood in a Welsh mining town which uses voiceover framing of the adult Huw Morgan reflecting on his boyhood—we don't see him as an adult, only as a child played by the young Roddy MacDowell. It was in this film in particular, I think, that Ford began to become interested in the ways in which the framing of a story from a particular point of view could shape the reality of events, and it is this foregrounding of the first-person narrator that renders this film ambiguously situated between chronicle and reverie. 'How ***green*** was my valley,' reflects the unseen adult narrator, or rather does he ask 'how green ***was*** my valley?' Simultaneously affirming and questioning the veracity of memory, both the title and Ford's filmic style put in play the subtle tensions that arise between personal and historical truth.

Later, in the second of the films to use this kind of device, *The Quiet Man*, Ford appeared to see the necessity of including a framing voiceover to account for the film's evocation of a clearly idealized western Ireland. This narratorial role—only used in the opening and closing scenes—is given to the secondary character of Father Peter Lonergan, played by Ward Bond, the Reverend Clayton of *The Searchers*. He tells the story of Sean Thornton, a retired boxer whose family had emigrated to America, and who has now come home to the land of his birth. As many commentators have noted, as a member of the Irish diaspora himself, raised on a diet of Irish-American yearning and anti-British bitterness, Ford knew at first hand the ways in which immigrant populations shaped nurturing myths out of the nostalgic elements of a lost cultural past. Here he both celebrates and qualifies this complex of feelings in shaping the impossibly quaint, genial and luminous Irishness that forms itself around the central character, played by John Wayne, and he dramatizes the immigrant consciousness of this fantastic world in tableaux that play at the precipitous edge of the iconic and the clichéd, as when Sean Thornton first sets eyes upon Mary Kate Danaher, the flame-haired, barefooted pastoral maiden who will enrapture him:

Ford is careful to qualify these ideal images: here the town drunk and matchmaker, Michaeleen Oge Flynn, ironically offers Sean sobering advice, putting things in another perspective:

> **Sean**: Hey, is that real? She couldn't be.
> **Michaeleen**: Ah nonsense man! It's only a mirage brought on by your terrible thirst.

The effect of this is to cast what is seen into a light both imaginative and imagined, removing it from the real on the one hand but insisting on the other that this imagined reality has a greater or at least a more compelling force than the merely actual.

Both *The Quiet Man* and *How Green Was My Valley* are self-conscious explorations of almost mythically imagined and subjectively apprehended countries of the mind—the idealized homelands of Wales and Ireland. In a similar way, the framing devices of *The Searchers* announce Ford's intention in this film to inquire into the mythic character and idealizations of the West, here not in a spirit of nostalgic celebration but rather one of literally searching examination. It is an inquiry that begins with Ethan Edwards and our acceptance of the image as it appears on the screen; we don't begin to look again, to search that image, until Marty lets us know that that is precisely what he has begun to do at the beginning of the second act, which opens once again with the classic interior-exterior shot.

At first glance it seems we are back with the opening frame, but this can't be the same door because the Edwards ranch was burned down in the massacre. So this is not the Edwards doorway opening onto a world of dark familial turmoil; rather it is the Jorgenson doorway; and it is not Ethan, the lone rider, who is welcomed, but Ethan and Marty, the companions of the trail; nor is it the Edwards ranch—scene of deep familial tension—but the Jorgenson ranch, scene of sociability and social ritual (dances and weddings are held here, and letters criss-crossing the state arrive here for delivery, connecting people who are far apart). So this second act begins not with a reiteration but a transformation, a new frame opening onto another world in another narrative register. At this point, I would argue, the film detaches itself from the figure of the tragic and solitary outsider, riding the frontier margin of nationhood and wilderness and comprehending all with his determined gaze—the film detaches itself from this figure and the narrative paradigm it motivates, and attaches itself to other values: companionship and marriage, comedy and regeneration. So broad is much of this comedy—reflecting Ford's own great fondness for a Shakespearean or, indeed, Melvillean mix of tragic depths, epic scale, and buffoonish humour—that some have complained of a failure of tone in the film[6], but this very apparent tonal shift is, I take it, meant to underscore the shift in narrative paradigm that the film undertakes here, which has the effect of unhinging both the character and the imposing vision of Ethan Edwards. This allows us to review events in another light, such as the massacre at the Edwards ranch, which I would now like to consider in the context of its framing images.

The first of these is a medium close-up on Ethan—one of a mere handful of close-ups in the film, and one that might recall the medium close-up of John Wayne from *The Quiet Man* as the screen filled with seemingly idealized visions of home and romance:

[6] See note 5 above. 'The first half hour of the film reveals Ford as gifted director,' Christopher Sharrett notes, apparently begrudgingly, but then goes on to claim that the film as a whole is 'complex and intriguing at many moments, but it is also an inconsistent and sometimes silly film, and an often morally outrageous one.' (Sharrett, op.cit.) In view of my own argument here this seems ill-considered.

The second is a brief shot of the riders racing to the Jorgensen ranch:

The shot of the riders, in clear daylight, lasts a couple of seconds only—it could so easily have been left out or put earlier—but its inclusion at this point is enough to establish a time disjunction, for the massacre scene depends for much of its effect on the fact that it takes place in darkening

twilight.[7] The drama of Lucy's lighting of the lamp and the zoom close-up on her awakened horror-struck face rely precisely on this fact.

Twilight at the Edwards ranch

Similarly, we are told that the search party is 40 miles from the ranch when they come to the realisation that a murder raid is to take place: Ethan then decides he must water and rest his horse before trying to return. Marty fails to heed his advice, rushes off, and rides his horse to death before arriving at the ranch—Ethan eventually catches up with him carrying his saddle in early twilight. In other words, either the film has jumped forward and backward in time, or the close-up on Ethan is actually a cue for what Bruce Kawin has called a 'mindscreen', or what we literary types might prefer to call free indirect imagery[8]—precisely the kind of screen imagery inflected

[7] Even allowing for day-for-night shooting, this shot contrasts vividly with the twilit episodes of the massacre that precede it and Marty and Ethan's return to the homestead that follow. By clearly contrasting the lighting in this way these surrounding shots effectively frame the shot of the riders in such a way as to give rise to the sorts of interpretative possibilities I am pursuing here.

[8] Kawin writes:

> My point is not simply that film can 'speak' in the first person as well as the third, and that its narrative structures can achieve reflexivity, but that the presence of these modes and voices indicates that the audio-visual field is at least as flexible and articulate as that of the novelist or poet, and that the interplay of mind (of the artist, of the audience, and of the film) is a decisive element of the visual structure, equivalent in authority—but not in method—to the pronoun system (pronominal code). The 'I' signifier

by a narratorial consciousness that Ford had explored in *How Green Was My Valley* and *The Quiet Man*, but here used to much more pointed rhetorical effect. This scene 'draws a picture' not from the fact but from the 'known', because it is wrought from the paranoid forebodings of Ethan who at this moment is wretchedly imagining what might be taking place. What the screen presents is what Ethan 'knows' is happening: a murderous Indian raid at twilight. It is all managed through the vividness of apprehension: we do not see the massacre itself because we come to apprehend the event through Ethan, who cannot bring himself to picture the physical horror of it because the psychological terror is sufficiently overwhelming.

What I want to suggest, then, is that by using a form of free indirect cinematic discourse, the events that appear onscreen can be understood as coinciding with, but not reproducing, historical actuality. What appears real is so potentially inflected by the consciousness of a particular character that it may not be the case. In other words what the film offers as represented in this most chilling image of frontier terror is in fact the worst imagining of what might take place. No wonder this scene stayed so long with so many of us, since it was an image of unspeakable fear and anguish. And Ethan's refusal to allow others like Marty to see condemns them too to their worst imaginings, or, perhaps, to his—as happens with Brad when Ethan 'draws a picture', by refusing to 'draw a picture,' of what happened to Lucy. It is not that the massacre does not happen; it is that we don't know *how* it happens, nor do we know the motivations behind it, and what is figured in this is a shift in the character of the screen image—and equally a shift in the character of the generic narrative in which this image is fashioned—a shift from the realm of the certain to the realm of the compelling. The story that it tells might now be understood not as a representation of historical

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and the 'mind's eye' signifier differ in that the former is included in its sentence, while the latter is contextual.

Bruce F. Kawin, *Mindscreen: Bergman, Godard and First-Person Film* (Princeton University Press:1978; Dalkey Archive Edition: 2006), p. 92. John Stowell first drew attention to the subjective narratorial style of the film at this point, locating it in Ethan's consciousness, and also discussed the narratorial shifts associated with Laurie's reading of Marty's letter which I discuss below, in his *John Ford* (Boston: 1986), pp. 138-140. He highlights the crucial grammatical point that 'As Ethan begins to wipe the lather off his horse, the camera holds—not in a close-up—on his deeply introverted eyes and his powerfully tragic expression. Then it cuts—it does not dissolve as it has in every other scene change in the film—to Aaron's family discovering and preparing for the raid.' (p. 139)

actuality but rather as the effect of a determined, determining, and potentially psychotic understanding: the delirium of a profoundly racist sensibility, Ethan's sensibility, which—and this is Ford's most profound point—coincides with and indeed may have supervised the dominant paradigm of the western narrative. The opening act of *The Searchers* is for many the most acceptable and dramatically engaging narrative sequence in the film, I suspect largely because it is the most generically familiar, which in this instance also means the most ideologically determined. A paranoiac imagining, the homestead massacre nevertheless looks real because it looks like a western. But as in the literary text, the effect of free indirect screen discourse is to put in play an ironic distance between the narrative content and the narratorial character of the text, allowing Ford to simultaneously evoke and interrogate values and ideas represented by the character whose perspective is understood to be put in play in the narration—a point which I will take up more fully later.

What dominates the first section of the film, then—and we are cued to this not only by the close-up that precedes the massacre but, from the first, by the opening frame welcoming Ethan to the film itself—is the commanding vision of Ethan Edwards. And the degree to which the massacre scene is chilling can now be read as a reflection of the near-psychotic intensity of Ethan's feeling about Native Americans. An unreconstructed Civil War rebel who fought for slavery in the United States and for imperialism in Mexico, who has still not renounced his oath to the Confederacy and who looks with suspicion at Marty, the eighth part Comanche foundling whom Martha and Aaron took into their family, Ethan, the pathfinder and man of the west, is also a dark portrait of a complex and deeply questionable figure. He has returned to the family ranch which is the scene not only of past romantic frustration but also of past familial tragedy. It is never mentioned in the film, and it is only momentarily visible, but the mound to which Debbie runs contains the graves of past Edwards family members, including Ethan's mother, who, the headstone records, was 'killed by Comanche'. It is a detail that would be lodged in Ethan's tortured imagination as he pictures the scene:[9] 'Here lies Mary Jane Edwards,' it reads, 'killed by Comanches / May 12 1852 / a good wife and mother / in her 41st year.' But this family tragedy is only offered as one factor in the pathological racism that informs Ethan's character. It is fashioned equally by his implicit belief in white supremacy

[9] Where it remained for decades, incidentally, only to be unearthed with the advent of DVD technology, which allows the inquisitive viewer the opportunity of pausing on that fraction of a second in which the tombstone is legible.

and by the national claim to its manifest destiny, which inspired the western pioneers both to their heroic endeavours and to their shameful acts of Native American dispossession and near genocide.[10] Ethan's own racial mania erupts on occasion during the film, transgressing sacred laws of human compassion and deeply puzzling the racially hybrid character of Marty. When Marty tells us that he witnesses an event over which he is still puzzling in the cavalry massacre sequence I referred to earlier, the film is sufficiently ambiguous for us to take this as a reference to the Washita massacre and the death of Look, or as a reference to Ethan's crazed killing of the buffalo. Earlier, when Scar's band pursues the rangers across the river where they are able to take a defensive stand, Ethan's manic desire to kill and keep killing causes him to transgress an ancient rite of battle and a religious commandment from Reverend Clayton:

> **Clayton**: Leave them to carry off their hurt and dead. *(Knocks Ethan's arm, disturbing his aim at retreating Indian.)*
> **Ethan**: Well, Reverend, that does it! From now on, you stay out of this, all of you! I don't want you with me. *(Shoots Indian in back.)*

We know that Ethan is a driven character—possibly due to the emotional frustrations to which we are aware he is victim, almost from the beginning of the film. But we are alerted to the manic side of Ethan's personality by Marty, who begins to fear that Ethan is searching for Debbie not in order to rescue her, but rather to kill her. He first voices his suspicions at the Jorgensen ranch:

> **Laurie**: Ethan rode on an hour ago. I don't know what you can do about findin' Debbie that he can't. He'll find her now, Martin. Honest he will!
> **Marty**: That's what I'm afraid of, Laurie, him finding her! I've seen his eyes at the very word 'Comanche.' I've seen him take his knife and… Never mind. He's a man

[10] Ford's decision to make Marty's character one eighth Cherokee (he was fully white in the novel) is relevant here, as it points to a history of brutal and heartless relations between white governments and Native American tribes of a kind that might motivate the otherwise incomprehensible 'savagery' of the 'Indian.' The Cherokee 'Trail of Tears' was perhaps the most dramatic and shameful act of Native American dispossession in U.S. history.

> that can go crazy wild! And I intend to be there to stop him in case he does.

How far are we to go with Marty's suspicion of Ethan? What lies behind the unseen and unspoken elements of his character? How much are we to make of the hints given by the film's fascinating narrational style which, at this stage, now begins to call into question the heroic narrative paradigm with which it began, encouraging us to look again at the behaviour and attitudes of the central heroic figure of Ethan?

Take the matter of Ethan's past with Martha. How far did it go? Both Ethan and Martha's actions throughout suggest a profound affection which they guiltily continue to hide from the unknowing Aaron, but their liaison must have been sufficiently evident for the Reverend Clayton to detect it, and to both discreetly ignore and simultaneously police their relationship as he stares unblinkingly away from them, drinking his coffee while they take their tender farewell. There is enough in this scene to suggest that their previous liaison transgressed the laws of family and society, a suspicion which highlights what we come to recognise as the psychosexual complex of Ethan's blood racism.[11] Could such psychotic fear of the blood-other have moved him to desire union only with the blood-same, moved him, that is, to quasi-incest with his sister-in-law, perhaps fathering the daughter he must now destroy because of her exposure to Indian blood through sex? The urgency of the search, as far as Ethan is concerned, is to find Debbie before she comes of age and is taken sexually by Scar or one of his Comanche braves, suffering a 'fate worse than death' in the 19th century phrase, as Ed Buscombe notes.[12] But this was true only to the religiously-minded, for that fate threatened the salvation of the victim's eternal soul, and once that fate has been enacted nothing is to be gained by killing the victim other than confirmation of her forsakenness. And, in any case, Ethan is not religiously-minded—he has no respect for the Reverend Clayton's orders, and he interrupts the funeral with a snarling 'Put an amen to it! There's no more time for praying—amen!' Rather, he is racially-minded, and so Debbie's threatened fate here is understood as a mortal affront not

[11] Much has been written on this aspect of the text; cf. in particular Brian Henderson, '*The Searchers*: An American Dilemma,' in Eckstein and Lehman, op.cit., pp. 47-74, and Arthur M. Eckstein, 'Incest and Miscegenation in *The Searchers* (1956) and *The Unforgiven* (1959),' ibid., 197-222. See also McBride for a related angle on John Wayne's understanding of Ethan's character, op.cit. pp. 557-8.

[12] Buscombe, op.cit., p. 20.

to the victim of sexual assault but to the race from which she comes—the fate worse than the death of that race involves the racially paranoid fear of miscegenation, leading to the degradation and disappearance of that race through the elimination of the purity of its bloodline, and so Debbie must be eliminated as the source of that affront. It is only later, when Ethan desecrates the dead body of Scar by scalping him (a symbolic castration, undoing the threat of miscegenation) that he finds another way of resolving his paranoid sexual/racial fixation. [13]

It is one of the ironies of the film that the figure who most resembles Ethan is not his brother, Aaron, nor the person to whom he wishes to leave his legacy, Marty, but rather, as has often been noted, the murderous Indian chief Scar.[14] The murder of Ethan's mother by Comanche raiders is matched by Scar's loss of two sons to white gunmen which, we discover, motivates his own racist fury against the whites—one of many ways in which we see Ethan's character reflected and refracted in that of the renegade Comanche chief. This feature is underscored comically by their matched dialogue when they meet, as they sarcastically reflect on the ability of each to learn the ways of the other:

> **Ethan**: You speak pretty good American for a Comanche. Someone teach ya? ...
> **Scar**: You speak good Comanche. Someone teach you?

If this resemblance is ironic, it becomes deeply problematic when we consider that the massacre scene is fashioned out of Ethan's darkest imaginings: it may be read, then, not only as a reflection of his racial psychosis, but equally as a reflection of the intensity of his feelings about his brother's marriage. That is, the massacre perversely fulfils Ethan's own suppressed desire to destroy Martha's relationship with his brother and to possess her.[15] In this sense Scar, a symbolic counter-double, enacts Ethan's

[13] We already know that desecration gives Ethan some satisfaction when we see him shoot the eyes out of a dead Comanche—his vengeance goes beyond death and has other purposes for his racially paranoid personality.

[14] Cf., for example, McBride's view that 'Scar is not so much a character as a crazy mirror of Ethan's desires' (op.cit. p. 561)—a statement that effectively sums up most commentators' opinions on the relation between Ethan and Scar.

[15] James J. Clauss, among others, has discussed this idea in 'Descent into Hell: Mythic Paradigms in *The Searchers*,' *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, Volume 27, Issue 3 1999, 2-17. Perhaps the possibility of metaphorically exploring forbidden desire was appealing to filmmakers at this time, as it is interesting to note

own unacknowledged or repressed desires, and Ethan's quest to retrieve the children might mask his desire to finish the job, which is possibly what he does when he catches up to the party that includes Lucy. For if the narrative allows us to entertain the notion that Debbie is his illicit daughter, it also allows us to suspect that he has saved the elder sister—or spared the race—from 'a fate worse than death' through blood sacrifice of her. It is all a question of how far we are willing to let Marty's suspicions take us, and how darkly we wish to interpret the narrative elements of the text. Consider again the scene in which Marty first voices his suspicions to Laurie: Marty's voice trails off as he makes a motion with his knife—

Marty: I've seen him take his knife and...

—disturbingly recalling the motions of Ethan with his knife after catching

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that the elaborate science fiction adaptation of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, *Forbidden Planet*, came out in the same year as *The Searchers*. This was certainly a film that explored forbidden areas in a metaphorically heightened manner—most notably in Morbius's (Walter Pidgeon, the film's Prospero) protective but dangerously incestuous desire to protect and possess his daughter through monstrous, invisible projections from his own unconscious, 'creatures from the id' that emerged at night to wreak destruction on male rivals for his daughter's affection.

up again with Brad and Marty after discovering Lucy in the canyon.

Perhaps there is a suggestion here that Marty's awakening suspicions[16] reflect an unconscious fear that Ethan has already killed in this way, a fear he rehearses in the motion of the knife. In an ambiguous film that bristles with dangerous implications, particularly through its textual technique of doubling, what are we to make of a particularly distinctive shot of Ethan late in the movie: a zoom close-up as he reacts with horror at the madness of the liberated captives,[17] which replicates the shot of Lucy in the massacre scene as she realises with horror what is about to befall her:

[16] Which, of course, are correct, for Ethan does intend to kill Debbie.

[17] Robert B. Pippin, in a thoughtful essay on *The Searchers* and the meaning of the western as a genre, finds much to ponder in this image: 'The question of understanding Ethan is deeply interwoven with the question of how to interpret this singular, eerie look. It is not so much anger or hatred, even though there are profound flashes of both. Is there sadness at what he thinks he has to do? Self-hatred at not being able to feel the pity he knows he should? Wayne is the master of cold reptilian looks in this film, but this is the extreme, and it is almost completely ambiguous.' 'What is a Western? Politics and Self-Knowledge in John Ford's *The Searchers*, *Critical Inquiry* 35 (Winter, 2009), 236.

In response to the captain's observation, 'It's hard to believe they're white,' Ethan claims: 'They ain't white—anymore. They're Comanche.' Inevitably he sees them as infected by miscegenation. He knows that sex can drive a person mad—the thought of it drives Brad suicidally insane at the Comanche camp, and who knows what his yearning for Martha has done to him—and perhaps he reads in the derangement of the rescued captive the fate of Debbie, and through her the threatened fate of the race. But perhaps it is not Debbie that is on his mind. The zoom close-up is used only twice in the film; [18] given that the massacre scene may be read as a visualization of his own fears, the matched shot here suggests a self-conscious connection in his own mind not with Debbie but with Lucy, since it was Ethan's tortured imagination that rendered her horror in this way. In that case it could be that, looking at the deranged captives, Ethan is remembering the state in which he found Lucy—'not white—anymore'—and what he might have done about it, after which he plays distractedly with his knife in a motion that suggests burial, but also suggests the action of cleaning it. These are the kinds of ambiguities that play so disturbingly about this film, and we can entertain them at this point in the narrative precisely because the narrational mode has shifted from one in which Ethan's view is unquestioned to one in which it is darkly interrogated by competing perspectives, and against which it struggles to manifest itself, so to speak. Here, if Ethan's subjectivity has momentarily inflected the narratorial surface of the film[19] in such a way as to register his traumatic response to the captives, and if this response apparently replicates his own earlier apprehension of Lucy's terror of the Comanche, the effect of this is not to confirm his suspicions of the behaviour of primitive savagery but rather to arouse *our* suspicions of *his* behaviour. [20]

[18] Cf McBride: '[Ford's] sparing use of the close-up, for example, gives that highly emphatic tool far greater impact than if it were diluted by over-use. By withholding close-ups, Ford places greater emphasis on people's social roles than on their isolated, subjective viewpoints.' (McBride, op. cit., p.255) Just so, and, by the same token, Ford's use of the close-up here places greater emphasis on the subjective mode it evokes, especially when—in these two instances—it is combined with a moving camera, which was another stylistic feature he used only sparingly.

[19] That is, the film has momentarily adopted a perspective reflecting Ethan's subjective consciousness. My point is that, at this point in the movie, the narrative is focalized through various points of view, various subjectivities—a fact reflected in the tonal breadth and variety of the film from the second act onwards, and also in its no longer being determined by Ethan's vision of what can and can't be seen and the ways in which it is seen.

[20] Cf Peter Lehman's 'The Limits of Knowledge in and of *The Searchers*,' in Eckstein and Lehman, op. cit., pp. 239-263. Lehman takes up the issue of what can

Ethan has another explanation for what happened in the canyon, of course, but it is sufficiently elliptical for the suspicion to remain. He says he found Lucy there, wrapped her in his coat and buried her. Perhaps that is what happened, or perhaps he left something out, but in any case his view of the event is sufficient to send Brad on his crazed attack of the Comanche camp in a state of suicidal distress, as I mentioned. Ethan's view of things can have this effect, but not on everybody. Later, when the rangers and some cavalry members discover Scar's camp, Ethan wants to charge in with all guns blazing. Marty protests, pointing out that this would cause the Indians to kill their captives—which, at this point, is still the goal Ethan has in mind ('Just a minute reverend,' Marty complains, 'we go charging in they'll kill her and you know it.' To which Ethan replies, 'That's what I'm countin' on.') Against this Marty proposes to steal into the camp first to try to liberate Debbie, and the following exchange takes place:

> **Marty**: Well, it ain't gonna be that way! She's alive and she's gonna stay alive!
> **Ethan**: Living with Comanches ain't bein' alive.
> **Marty**: It's better she's alive and livin' with Comanches than her brains bashed out!
> **Clayton**: Now, son, I know this is a bitter thing to say, but there's more at stake here than your sister.
> **Ethan**: There sure is. I'm gonna tell you somethin'. I didn't mean to speak of it, but I'm gonna tell you now. You remember that scalp strung on Scar's lance? Long and wavy?
> **Marty**: Yeah, I saw it. And don't try to tell me it was Aunt Martha's or Lucy's!
> **Ethan**: It was your mother's.

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and cannot be known and explores possibilities of behaviour for Ethan that might be suggested but not depicted onscreen, arguing that the film 'denies the audience the knowledge of precisely what has happened and why' (p. 239). Regarding Ethan's behaviour he notes: 'The fact that such extreme formulations about Ethan's behaviour occur to so many spectators of the film only makes sense within the epistemological framework I have described. The film pulls the rug out from so many epistemological certainties of both the characters within it and the spectators of it that it almost encourages this kind of speculation.' (p. 249) As to what precisely is signified by Ethan's close-up at this point, that is another matter entirely. Robert B. Pippin discusses this moment at length but does not draw a connection between it and the earlier scene of Lucy's terror (Pippin, op.cit.).

> **Marty**: But that don't change it. That don't change nothing!

It is at this point that Ethan's commanding vision fails in two ways, throwing into doubt all of his other pronouncements, along with the generic narrative and the film form they motivate. First, I think it fails to convince us—for how could he possibly tell? If he found Martin as a baby after a raid, how could he possibly know what an unknown woman's missing scalp would look like some twenty years later? And second, we now know that for Ethan the world takes shape as he chooses (or is compelled) to see it, and we have seen him impose that view on others, but this time it fails to persuade Marty –'That don't change nothing,' he tells him. So for Marty, by this point in the film, Ethan's view of things no longer signifies.

One of the reasons the film acquires an epic scale, like *Moby Dick*, is because of the elusiveness of the object of the quest. Scar and his band are difficult to track because they are what is known as 'Nawyecka Comanche': Alan LeMay in the novel translates this as 'Them As Never Gets Where They're Going', but in the film Ethan translates 'Nawyecka' as 'Sorta like round about; man says he's going one place, means to go t'other'. With its implication of an intention to deceive, and equally an intention to get somewhere—'means to go'—Ethan's translation is much more pertinent to the cinematic style of this film, which artfully metaphorises or literalises so many of its own textual processes. What I would suggest is that *The Searchers* could well be regarded as a kind of 'Nawyecka cinema'—because it too indicates it is going one way, but means to go another. That is, it sets up one generic mode and implicates the viewer in it, sharing in its compelling vision and even empathising with its dark racial imaginings, before disconnecting itself from that mode, arriving somewhere else entirely.[21] It begins with Ethan's view, which is determined and imposing—he knows what he is looking for, he sees what he wants to see, and he supervises the view of others including, effectively, our own: initially we see the narrative unfold according to the heroic paradigm of American westward expansion and the frontier confrontation with an unfathomable savagery. Marty's view, on the other hand, is diffident and sceptical. There are initial indications of this when Ethan fails to read the signs of the cattle raiders' trail correctly, whereas Marty becomes suspicious; we see it too at the buffalo shoot and Indian massacre, where

[21] In this regard it is interesting to note that Ford told Jean Mitry before making *The Searchers*: 'I should like to do a tragedy, the most serious in the world, that turned into the ridiculous.' (McBride, op.cit. p.561)

Marty admits to being morally puzzled by one or other, or both of these events—he reflects on what he sees and he questions it. But most importantly it is there in the feature that confirms that by the second act we are in a new narratorial consciousness—the use of Marty's letter to convey the narrative. Marty's account does not 'draw a picture', it reports, it gives witness to events, and his diffident voice allows for other interpretations, other views, other narrative perspectives. This is elegantly implied by Ford's splicing of Marty's and Laurie's voices across the narratorial line as he tells of Look's assistance in helping them follow the trail of Scar:

Marty: Maybe she left other signs for us to follow but ...
Laurie: ...we'll never know 'cause it snowed that day and all the next week.

This occurs immediately after the scene in which Look is pitched out of the marital bed, and it is difficult to say whether that scene represents Marty's account, the film's account of Marty's account, or, possibly, Laurie's imagining of Marty's account, inflected by the resentment and jealousy she must feel at hearing of this 'marriage'. The latter interpretation, however, is given some weight by Ford's choice of actress, Beulah Archuletta, as Look. Marty insists that she is 'much younger' than Laurie, yet Archuletta was a full 17 years older than Vera Miles, who was 26 at the time of filming. In addition, it is often remarked that Laurie is given one of the most sinister pieces of dialogue in the film, revealing her own bigotry, when she tries to persuade Marty to give up the quest for Debbie and stay with her:

> **Laurie**: Fetch what home? The leavings of Comanche bucks, sold time and again to the highest bidder, with savage brats of her own? Do you know what Ethan will do if he has a chance? He'll put a bullet in her brain! I tell you Martha would want it that way.

Laurie is no doubt motivated here by a desire to keep Marty at home, so she is putting the case in the worst light, but the outburst is extraordinary nevertheless. Yet this only adds to the likelihood that Laurie's prejudiced imagining of Look may be determining the film image in those scenes in which she appears, unflatteringly depicted and comically demeaned, which gives us another reason to look again and reassess that problematic scene of the 'marriage bed' in terms of Ford's use of free indirect cinematic discourse at this point.

That the generic form of the narrative shifts as Marty's narratorial consciousness takes up the story is also indicated by such things as the reframing of the narrative in the Jorgensen doorway, Marty's declaration of his suspicions about Ethan, and the comic sexual byplay of the bathtub scene, in which Laurie has the upper hand, and which sets the tone for much of the rest of the film, which now broadens to include comic romance, the clownish humour and musical diversions of Charlie MacCory, as well as the celebratory dancing of the wedding party. Ethan figures in every scene but the massacre in the first act, and I have argued that he effectively figures in that, too, as it is his tortured imagining that we watch at this point; so from the second act onwards it is significant that he is absent from some scenes. It is not that Marty's point of view dominates but rather that it has the effect of opening the film to alternative perspectives.[22] It is this shift in narrative mode that most strongly indicates the ideological leanings of the film itself, moving from the heroic paradigm and the tonal austerity of the frontier tragedy presided over by Ethan's commanding vision to a more hybrid form that includes a comic celebration of civility, sociability, and anti-authoritarianism, expressed most forcefully in the sword which is unceremoniously shoved up the backside of the figure of political, judicial and ecclesiastical authority, the Reverend Clayton, in an utterly superfluous but gloriously comic coda.[23]

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[22] Like Laurie's, and even Ethan's in the scene of the rescued captives, as mentioned above, but again the effect of Ethan's narratorial command at this late stage of the film is ironically to interrogate his earlier view of the events surrounding Lucy's death.

[23] Ford had already experimented with hybrid forms in relation to the western in his great cavalry trilogy, which included the anti-heroic *Fort Apache* (deconstructing

Ford's greatest early cinematic achievement was the epic of national history, *The Iron Horse*. This silent film relied on a sense of cinema as objective witness to the epic of history. By the end of his career, however, and in his final masterpiece in particular, *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, Ford was to interrogate the issue of narrated history more fully and more darkly. For him the telling of history was no longer understood as an objective affair, a disinterested statement of fact; rather, it was seen as inevitably told in the interests of one over another. In *The Searchers* he employed a mode of narration that allowed him to explore the character of cinematic storytelling with a critical understanding that reflected on the genre of the western itself, showing at once the poetic capacities of the medium and equally its proclivity to be co-opted to one view of history or another. The story of the American West has always had two contradictory aspects: pathfinding and settlement, and the virtues of westward expansion (which include rebellion, outlawry, non-conformity, self-reliance and rugged individualism) are not necessarily the virtues of settlement, union and nationhood (which require the values of tolerance, community, the rule of law, the acceptance of human equality and, by extension, the acceptance of racial hybridity).[24] At a discursive level, Ethan and Marty separately put in play these two generic understandings of the national story. Against the austerity of Ethan's epic vision of heroic white individualism, manifest destiny, and the singular bloodline the film juxtaposes Marty's sceptical chronicle of democratic civility, with its rituals of social cohesion and familial growth, its comic breadth and suspicion of the heroic, and its celebration of inter-racial relations. One is a story of taming the savagery without, the other of taming the savagery within,[25] but one cannot cherry-pick the past, and the film recognises that the latter cannot come to pass without the former. Moreover, no telling of the national story can ignore the fundamental relation between virtues that adorn it from one perspective, and attitudes that darken it from another. In recognising conflicting visions of that story and the values these embody, through a subtle technique of free indirect cinematic discourse Ford was able to simultaneously dramatise these values without endorsing them, and interrogate them without discarding them, arriving instead at an ironic

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the legends of the West), the autumnal *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon* (perhaps the first 'end of the West' film), and another captive adventure, *Rio Grande*, which comes as close to a musical as anything else in the Ford canon.

[24] See Jim Kitses' *Horizons West* for a structural elaboration of these dichotomies within the evolving western narrative.

[25] Cf. Pippin, 227-9.

counterpoise of competing views. Ethan Edwards fits a lot of descriptions—at one moment he looks to have the frontier skills of Natty Bumpo, at another the monomania of Ahab; at times he even seems to have the restlessness of Huck Finn, lighting out for the territory. Importantly, each of these figures is unimaginable without his companion: the noble Chingachgook, the chronicler Ishmael, the pure of heart Jim, in each of whom we might see aspects of Marty. It was Ethan who found Marty abandoned as a baby after an Indian raid on a wagon train, but at the beginning of the film he does not want to acknowledge his role in bringing him into the family; later, when Ethan comes to recognise a kinship with him and aims to make him his sole inheritor, Marty refuses his legacy; yet, the film insists, despite these separate repudiations, each is somehow connected to, somehow implicated with, the other, and it is the task of its complex and shifting narrational mode to reflect this in its management of the western narrative.

The portals of the homesteads that figure so prominently in this film are the frontier limits of American civility: they enclose the warm values of advancing democratic nationhood, but they open onto the terrain of the other that must be dispossessed for this advance to continue, as it inevitably will. At the end of the film the door closes on Ethan as he goes out to continue his roaming, the music building to ask once more 'what makes a man to wander?' It is not the door that opened on him at the beginning, so the frame has altered, and as the film makes clear, a different frame means a different picture. We might wonder whether Ethan has chosen to wander still, restlessly seeking out new territory, unable to find a place for himself

in the settled lives of the growing Texican community; or whether he has been ejected from the interior world of the homestead, advancing civility here closing the door on its wandering, violent, individualistic past. My own reading of the film suggests that it is both, because these are parallel stories, and their common elements signify in fundamentally different ways depending upon how one tells the story of the West.

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