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by james targett

This essay? ... column? ... whatever it is ... is really a response to a blog posted by George RR Martin a few weeks ago. It's not an off-the-cuff, reactionary response; more of a *spirit d'escalier* response. That's because my brain works slow and takes a while to mull things over, down in the basement, where the boys do the heavy lifting, to (mis)quote Stephen King.

In essence, Mr Martin was complaining about the new *Star Trek* movie. Amongst several comments – all justified – he muttered about the retcon – retroactive continuity – of the movie's plot; i.e. the key history of the *Star Trek* universe was being redefined. And he also mentioned *Battlestar Galatica*.

Now, I'm not going to argue whether the new *Trek* is a retcon or not. It probably is; I haven't seen it yet. (Sacrilege you cry! But I don't care: I have a small child, I don't get as often as I did pre-family, and I see most movies six months late when they air on Sky).

No, what I got thinking about was mythmaking. Are we living in an age where we have created a whole myriad of new myth cycles? There's *Star Trek*, *Star Wars*, *Battlestar Galatica*; *Spiderman* and *Superman* and all their caped and costumed brethren. There's Luke and Han, Clarke and Lois, Kirk and Spock.

Because what happens with myth cycles is that they get reinvented and retold. Batman and Superman, eighty year-olds, are already far advanced along that cycle, with films and comics and TV series. You don't hear anyone bitching that Smallville is a retcon of Superman.

Or maybe the Welsh bards who told ballads about King Arthur in the *Mabinogion* were spinning in their graves at the "retcon" by the romantic movement of the 15th century, culminating in *L'Morte D'Arthur*. ("You introduced a whole new character!"). In Batman, you got Harley Quinn; in Arthurian myth, you got Sir Lancelot.

No one seems to complain about retcon differences in the Robin Hood stories: the current BBC version versus *Robin of Sherwood* versus *The Prince of Thieves* versus the swashbuckling heroics of Errol Flynn, to name but a few. Sure, people have favourites, and can criticise each version for different reasons, but not because they break with the rules of a predetermined artificial franchise universe.

I grant you, there is a grey area where some of the variations start to take liberties with real history.

How much the audience will tolerate depends on the story and who is watching/reading. I give you *U-571* and the furore it caused in the UK because it had Americans capturing an Enigma device, when everyone knows it was the Brits!

In the future, undergraduates studying 20th and 21st century narrative can argue about versions of *Battlestar*, whether Starbuck was a man/woman as passionately as we can argue about the role of Merlin, or how Merlin died, and the role of Nimue or Vivian, or whoever it was that was his lover/apprentice/betrayer and/or also the Lady of the Lake.

Of course, I don't know which stories we are telling now will live on and be retold. Some stories thrive, some die. There's a fair chance that Superman and Batman will be living alongside Robin Hood and King Arthur and the Three Musketeers for a long time to come.

For a story to be healthy it has to be able to be retold, themes and elements changing and morphing with the needs of the audience and the storytellers.

What we are seeing with *Star Trek* is it taking the first step beyond the stale nature of its franchise universe. JJ Abrams has dropped the baggage, sticking with what he feels the current audience wants from the Trek myth.

Whether *Star Wars* and *Buffy* and all the rest – even the *Lord of the Rings* – stay relevant by being retold again and again, will be a test of their vitality. Whatever heart a story has is what attracts us in the first place. Have we been following a story that is merely part of the zeitgeist, relevant to the here and now, to be discarded once the age has passed? Or are we looking at a story that is more fundamental?

For the sake of Kirk, Spock and McCoy, I hope so.



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FICTION

Moxyland: Kendra

by lauren beukes

The following story is an extract from "Moxyland" by Lauren Beukes. *Moxyland* is released by Angry Robot in the UK and Australia on 1st July and USA/Canada on 1st October.

There is already spillage out of the doors by the time I get to Propeller, which can only be a good sign when it's just gone six-thirty. I feel fractal with nerves, or maybe it's that I'm on my fourth Ghost in under an hour.

'You're late.' Jonathan latches onto my arm at the door and swishes me inside through the crowd. I can't believe how many people there are, crowded into the gallery. There is a queue up the stairs to see Johannes Michael's atom mobile, but the major throng is in the main room, and not, I regret to say, for my retro print photos.

They're here to see Khanyi Nkosi's sound installation, freshly returned from her São Paulo show and all the resulting controversy. She only installed it this afternoon, snuck in undercover with security, so it's the first time I've seen it in the flesh. It's gruesome, red and meaty, like something dead turned inside out and mangled, half-collapsed in on itself with spines and ridges and fleshy strings and some kind of built-in speakers, which makes the name even more disturbing – 'Woof & Tweet'.

I don't understand how it works, but it's to do with reverb and built-in resonator-speakers. It's culling sounds from around us, remixing ambient audio, conversation, footsteps, glasses clinking, rustling clothing, through the systems of its body, disjointed parts of it inflating, like it's breathing, spines quivering.

It's hard to hear it over the hubbub, but sometimes it's like words, almost recognisable. But mostly it's just noise, a fractured music undercut with jarring sounds that seem to come randomly. Sometimes it sounds like pain. It is an animal. Or alive at any rate. Some lab-manufactured plastech bio-breed with just enough brainstem hard-wired to respond to input in different ways, so it's unpredictable – but not enough to hurt, apparently, if you believe the info blurb on the work.

'It's gratuitous. She could have done it any other way. It could have been beautiful.'

'Like something you'd put in your lounge, Kendra? It's supposed to be revolting. It's that whole Tokyo tech-grotesque thing. Actually, it's so derivative, I can't stand it. Can we move along?'

I run my hand along one of the ridges and the thing quivers, but I can't determine any noticeable difference in the sounds. 'Do you think it gets traumatised?'

'It's just noise, okay? You're as bad as that nutjob who threw blood at Khanyi at the Jozi exhibition. It doesn't have nerve endings. Or no, wait, sorry, it does have nerve endings, but it doesn't have pain receptors.'

'I meant, do you think it gets upset? By all the attention? I mean, isn't it supposed to be able to pick up moods, reflect the vibe?'

'I think that's all bullshit, but you could ask the artist. She's over there schmoozing with the money, like you should be.'

Woof & Tweet suddenly kicks out a looped fragment of a woman's laugh, that startles me and half the room, before it slides down the scale into a fuzzy electronica.

'See, it likes you.'

'Don't be a jerk, Jonathan.'

'There's some streamcast journalist who wants to interview you, by the way. And he's pretty cute.' My stomach spasms. This is another thing Jonathan does to keep me in my place – as in, we're not together.

'Great, thanks. I need a drink.'

'I'll get it. Just go talk to Sanjay. What do you want?'

'Anything.' It's unlikely that the gallery bar would have Ghost on hand.

Jonathan propels me in the direction of Sanjay, who is standing in a cluster of people, in deep conversation. The one is clearly money, some corporati culture patron or art buyer; the other, I realise, is Khanyi Nkosi. I recognise her from an interview I saw, but she is so warmly energetic, waving her hands in the air to make a point and grinning, that I can't match her to her work. And the third, I realise with a shock, is Andile. It shouldn't be a surprise that he should be here, considering he picked me on the basis of my work, but I still haven't come clean with Jonathan about the branding, and this doesn't strike me as the time.

I can't deal with this right now. I push through the queue, detouring back towards the entrance and the open air – only to skewer someone's foot with the '40s-style blue velvet heels I bought for the occasion.

'Hey! Easy!'

'Oh god, I'm sorry.' Shit, I really, really, really need a Ghost. I wonder if I can make it to the spaza down the road and back before Jonathan notices.

'No worries. Art is what the artist does, right? So technically, my bruised toes could be worth something?'

I didn't even realise it was Toby whose foot I had crushed.

'So you must be the famous artist, then?'

'I'm the less famous artist. I mean, I'm not; the thing, it's not mine. But you know that.' I laugh self-consciously, still thinking about how to get a Ghost, my mind chanting a little litany of need, wondering if they serve them at the bar.

'Is now a good time to get an interview?'

'You're the journalist?'

'Ouch!' He mock-staggers back, clutching his heart. 'Yeah. I brought my own phone mic and everything.'

'I'm sorry. That's not what I... Oh God. Can we just start again?'

'Sure. No prob.'

He turns away, clears his throat, and then does a little twirl, one hand raised in fabulous salute, hamming it up like he's on the red carpet.

'Hello. I'm Toby. I'll be your journo for the evening.' And I can't help but laugh. 'Do you have a drink?'

'No, thanks. Someone's getting me one.'

'Rocking.' He suddenly turns serious. 'Okay, now listen, special K, if you want, we can talk later. I know it's your opening and you've got things to do, people to schmooze. I will totally understand if now is not the most opportune moment.'

'Actually, do you want to get out of here?'

'What?'

'Just for a sec. I need some fresh air. And a drink.'

'I thought someone was getting you one.'

'A non-alcoholic.'

'Ooooooh. Right.' He winks.

'You want to come?'

'Sure. Can my mic come too?'

We're not the only people hanging outside. We have to push through a crowd, including an astonishingly gorgeous blonde, with fucked-up hair, who makes me feel conservative. We get halfway down the block before I take off my heels in disgust. 'That doesn't make it into the copy, okay?'

He holds up his hands. 'Do you see me making notes?' We walk in silence for another block, stepping over a *bergie* passed out in the street. And I'm relieved not to feel any sense of an urgent compulsion to touch him. And no Aitos in sight, either.

At the spaza, Toby opens the fridge at the back. 'Ghost, I'm assuming?' he says, putting it on his phone. It's cold and crisp and clean and it hurts my teeth and I realise my hands have been shaking all this while – or maybe my whole body. And this can't be good, but it doesn't feel bad.

'Mind if I join you?' Toby cracks the seal on another can. 'Wow. You really are an addict deluxe,' he says, a little too admiringly.

'Hey, did you check my coat tonight?

'Yeah?'

His BabyStrange is black, which is a relief after the goreporn he was projecting last time I saw him.

'It's my little shout out to *Self-Portrait*.'

'Cute. So, do you want to do this?'

'Am I allowed to take notes now?'

'Yeah, yeah.' I wave my hand impatiently.

He hooks a mic into his phone and points it at me. 'So. What's with the oldschool?'

'Didn't you read the press release?'

'Let's say I didn't.'

I quote it from memory. 'Adams's use of non-digital format is inspired by her fascination with the capacity for error...'

'Okay. Let's skip the press release.'

'Ah, it's just – film is more interesting than digital. There's a possibility of flaw inherent in the material. It's not readily available, so I have to get it over the Net, and some of it has rotted or it's been exposed even before I load it in the camera, but I don't know that until I develop it.'

'Like *Self-Portrait*?'

'And it's not just the film. It's working without the automatic functions. The operator can fuck up too.'

'Did you fuck up?'

'Ha! That's the great thing about working with damaged materials. You'll never know.'

'It's the same in audio, you know. Digital was too clean when it first came out, almost antiseptic.'

The fidelity was too clear, you lost the background noise, the sounds you don't even pick up, but it's dead without the context. The audio techs had to adapt the digital to synth the effects of analogue. How insane is that? It's contentious, though – now they're saying it's been bullshit all along, just nostalgics missing the hiss of the recording equipment.'

'That's exactly it. You can do the same thing in photography. Apply effects, lock-out the autofocus, click up for exposure, all to re-create the manual.'

'And you're looking for the background noise.'

'Yeah. Or something like it.' I set my empty can neatly down beside my shoes. 'Got enough?'

'Yeah. I'm good. You give good soundbite,' he says admiringly, so that another Ghost down, we're still sitting on the pavement, just talking, away from the madding, when a dark-haired boy I recognise as the guy from the band, from Andile's office, comes walking down towards us.

'Hey, photographer girl,' he says, friendlier than last time. 'Damian, remember? From Kill Kitten?'

'Hey, Dame,' says Toby. 'How's the bandscene? Did you catch the cast from your gig?'

'Yeah, man, it was killer. Shot. We really appreciate the exposure.'

'It was all you. I just filmed what I experienced. You guys were tight.'

'Well, it was *great*, man, thanks. We're playing next Saturday, if you want on the guest list.'

'Thanks. So, how do you know our star rising over here?' Toby asks, nodding at me. We are both still sitting, sprawled on the kerb, so Damian is looking down at us. There is a drawn-out silence.

'Ho-kay,' Toby shrugs in mock defeat. 'There's obviously some deep unspoken going on here, and I do not need to know the gruesome details.'

'It's nothing like that. We're...'

I look to Damian for approval, but he doesn't seem concerned.

'We're both branded.'

'How come you're not chugging Ghosts, then?'

'Are you kidding me?' Damian laughs. 'I've had three already tonight.' He drops to sit on the pavement beside us.

'How much do you drink in a day?' I ask, trying to make it sound throwaway.

'Six, seven? Somewhere around there. My girlfriend keeps tabs on me.' I don't say anything. I'm doing nine to twelve. This is my seventh since four thirty.

'It's lucky you're both the same brand,' Toby says, and is that envy in his voice?

'What if you were competitive? There must be a clause about that. "Section 31c. Thou shalt not fraternise with the enemy."'

'Yeah, can you imagine,' Damian says. 'Coke wars for real.'

'No rival soft-drink friends for you!'

'I don't think that's going to be an issue anytime soon,' I interrupt their banter. 'Andile said they're not doing this with other brands just yet. Ghost has the proprietary licence for three months.'

'Yeah, but we're only first gen. They'll be popping out sponsor babies like toast.'

'I hate that word.'

'Toast?' chirps Toby, trying to find a way in.

'And what happened to it being exclusive?'

'You'll be able to buy your way in. Got enough cash, enough cool, you're representing. Just like the cosmetics.'

'So we'll be outmoded already.'

'Bleeding edge no more.'

'So, Dame, where's yours? Can I see?'

'Toby!' I'm scandalised, but Damian shrugs it off.

'S'cool. I don't mind. I signed up for the freakshow.' He turns his back to us and yanks down the collar of his shirt to reveal the faint radiance of the glowlogo between his shoulderblades.

'That doesn't seem exactly high vis,' Toby says.

'Not now, but I have a tendency to take my shirt off on stage. I get hot, okay? It's not like some sex-appeal thing. Hey, are you recording this?'

'Sorry, bad habit. I'm a junkie for collecting vid. I can delete it if you want.'

'No, it's cool. Shouldn't we be heading back, anyway? Aren't there supposed to be speeches and shit? And I know Andile wanted to say what's up.'

'You go ahead, we'll catch up,' Toby says, laconic, and this suddenly strikes me as a very Jonathan thing to do.

'I think I'll go with Dame. We've been gone a while.'

The gallery seems even more oppressive, but I'm less freaked now, even when I see Andile talking to Jonathan. Luckily I get side-tracked by Mr. Muller.

'Congratulations. It's wonderful. Wonderful. Although I'm not sure about this messy animal thing. It's very Damien Hirst. Cheap shock-treatment stuff. Yours is infinitely superior. And people will see that, take my word for it.'

I'm still basking in the afterglow, when I overhear some over-groomed loft dwellers giggling into their wine. 'And this. I'm so tired of Statement! Like she's the only angst child ever to embrace the distorted body image.'

'Oh Emily. I quite like the undeveloped. Because she is. You know, still young, coming into herself. The artist in flux, emergent.'

'Well, precisely. It's so *young*. You can't even tell if it's technically good or not, it's all so... damaged.'

'Don't let the heathen savages get to you.' Toby has popped up again, speaking loud enough for the woman to hear, but I'm more amused than insulted. I'm about to point out that under the black of *Self-Portrait* is a photograph of a photograph, clutched in my fingers, captured in the mirror with a reflected flash of light. That it's all meant to be damaged. But then I realise I don't have to. I don't have to make my motives transparent.

Damian appears at my shoulder with the astonishing blonde, who he introduces as his girlfriend, Vix, a fashion designer for her own small label. Vix distracts Toby, the two of them heading off to the bar to lay in supplies for all of us, leaving me with a convenient gap to ask Damian if he's experienced any weird side-effects. He seems puzzled.

'Like what? I had really *mif* flu for about four days. Sinuses and sweats, but it worked its way out.'

I try and tell him about the thing with the Aito, but it comes out all garbled.

'It doesn't sound that freaky,' says Damian. 'You felt sorry for her. You stopped to help. That's pretty awesome.'

I'm miserable that he doesn't get it. 'It wasn't empathy or altruism or anything. It was like I had to, like a real compulsion.'

The same way we're compelled to drink Ghost, I think but don't say. Damian isn't paying attention. He's watching his girlfriend across the room, trying to get through to the bar while Toby clowns around, making her laugh.

It makes me feel desperately alone. There are all these people circling, like Johannes Michael's swirl of paper atoms upstairs, but the connections to me are only tenuous.

'You know the dogs also function on nano?' Damian says, ripping his eyes from Vix. 'Maybe you got crossed lines,' he jokes.

'Maybe.'

We're cut short by a flurry of activity at the door. I've been aware of a low peripheral clamour, but now it erupts. There are people shoving, wine spilling from glasses and yelps of dismay.

'This is a private function!' Jonathan of all people yells, spouting clichés at the rush of people in black pushing in through the crowd, their faces blurred like they're anonymous informants in documentary footage. It is so disturbing, that it takes me a second to catch on that they're wearing smear masks. Another to realise that they're carrying pangas and a prog-saw.

A few people scream, sending out a reverb chorus from *Woof & Tweet*. The crowd presses backwards. But then the big guy in front yells, 'Death to corporate art!' and Emily, the woman who dissed my work, laughs scornfully and really loudly. 'Oh god! Performance art. How gauche.' There are murmurs of relief and snickers, and the living organism that is the crowd reverses direction, now pressing in again to see.

Damian grabs my arm and pulls me back out of the front line, because I haven't moved, just as one

of the men (women?), towering over the others, grabs Emily by her hair and drags her forward, forcing her to her knees, spitting with contempt, 'Don't you dare make me complicit in your garbage!'

The terrorist raises the panga, pulling back Emily's head by the roots of her hair, exposing her throat. She raises a hand to her mouth, pretends to stifle a yawn.

'Are you going to chop me into little itty-bitty pieces now?'

This is so melodramatic.' And it is. The crowd is riveted. But I didn't think this kind of promotional stunt would be Sanjay's thing.

From the bar, Toby catches my eye and mimes mock applause to the spectacle. Vix has her hands clamped tight round his arm, looking shocked and excited at the same time. And that seems to be the prevailing mood. Not outrage or fear, but excitement. People are grinning, nodding, eyes overbright, which makes it seem all the more horrific.

But what frightens me most is the reaction of one of the men in smear. When the protagonist yanks Emily's head further back, the other guy moves forward, as if frightened himself. 'What are you-?' he starts, but the one with Emily's hair twisted round his wrist gives an impatient jerk of his head, and his hesitant friend backs off. Bowing his legs, he raises the arm with the panga as if to slice across her throat, only at the last instant – so late that she winces back involuntarily – he deflects the blow to a side-swipe, aimed not at her, but at *Woof & Tweet*, which is directly in front of them.

The thing emits a lean crackle of white noise. The audience is rapt, camera phones clicking. There is a scattershot of applause, and laughter, as the others move in, four of them, with one guarding the door, to start laying into it. It's only when the artist starts wailing that it becomes apparent that this was not part of the program. And only then do the smiles drop from mouths, like glasses breaking.

Mr. Hesitant hangs back as the others step in, pangas tearing through the thin flesh and ribs of Khanyi Nkosi's thing with a noise like someone attacking a bicycle with an axe. The machine responds with a high-hat backbeat for the melody assembled from the screams and skitters of nervous laughter. It doesn't die quietly, transmuting the ruckus, the frantic calls to the SAPS, and Khanyi wailing, clawing, held back by a throng of people. It's like it's screaming through our voices, the background noise, the context.

The bright sprays of blood make it real, spattering the walls, people's faces, my prints, as the blades thwack down again and again. The police sirens in the distance are echoed and distorted as *Woof & Tweet* finally collapses in on itself, rattling with wet smacking sounds.

They disappear into the streets as quickly as they came, shaking the machetes at us, threatening don't follow, whooping like kids. With the sirens closing in, the big guy spits on the mangled corpse. Then, before he ducks out the door and into the night, he glances up once, quickly, at the ceiling. No one else seems to notice, but I follow his gaze up to the security cams, getting every angle.

I'm sick with adrenalin. The woman who was taken hostage is screaming in brittle, hyperventilating gasps. Her friend is trying to wipe the blood off her face, using the hem of her dress, unaware that she has lifted it so high that she is flashing her lacy briefs. Khanyi is kneeling next to the gobs of her animal construct, trying to reassemble it, smearing herself with the bloody lumps of flesh.

There is a man trying to comfort one of the drinksgirls, but he is the one weeping, laid waste by the shock. Toby is clambering down from the bar, why I don't know, Mr. Muller is sitting slumped on the staircase, hugging the banister like a friend. Vix fumbles with lighting a cigarette, her hands shaking, until Damian materialises by her side, takes her hands in his, and holds the lighter steady. She folds into him like a collapsible paper lantern. And even from here, I can see him mouth her name. I hadn't even realised he was gone.

There is still a prevailing undercurrent of thrill, a rush from the violence – no one was hurt, apart from Khanyi Nkosi's thing. Everyone is on their phones, taking pictures, talking. Toby is shouting above the ruckus, into his mic, like he's reporting live. There are even more people trying to wedge into the space, so that the cops, who have finally arrived, have to shove their way inside.

Self-Portrait is covered in a mist of blood. I move to wipe it clean, although I'm scared the blood will smear, will stain the paper, but just then Jonathan wraps his arms around me and kisses my neck. And now it's my turn to collapse against him. 'It's okay, sweetheart, everything's going to be okay.'



Charles Stross said of "Moxylant":

"It's what you get when you take your classic 80s deracinated corporate alienation sensibility, detonate about six kilos of semtex under it, and scatter the smoking wreckage across 21st century South Africa; full of unselfconscious spiky originality, the larval form of a new kind of SF munching its way out of the intestines of the wasp-paralysed caterpillar of cyberpunk."

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Drag Me To Hell

reviewed by richard whittaker



Directed by Sam Raimi, Written by Sam and Ivan Raimi
Starring: Alison Lohman, Justin Long, Lorna Raver, Dileep Rao
Certificate: 15, 99 minutes

There are three Sam Raimis in this world.

There's the bright, inventive, take-no-prisoners Raimi that rocked the horror world with *The Evil Dead*. Then there's the ingenious and playful Raimi that took the ideas from his feature debut and revamped them as *Evil Dead II*. And then there's the guy that made *The Evil Dead 3: Army of Darkness*, who spends so much of his time proving to the audience how clever and funny he is that it's really hard to engage with the material.

So, which Raimi turned up for his long-awaited return to horror? Disappointingly, the *Evil Dead 3* guy. There's nothing wrong with *Drag Me to Hell*. There's just not a whole huge amount right with it, and it's ultimately about as disposable many other teen-friendly horrors.

Raimi's script plays on a classic horror trope best summed up as "never mess with a gypsy." Lohman plays Christine Brown, a loan officer at a small bank. She's an adorable small-town girl with a heart of gold and a boyfriend (Long, as the world's youngest-looking university professor) that would do anything for her. But she's a little bit too squeaky-clean for her own good, especially in the realm of work, where she's about to be pushed out of the running for a promotion. So to prove she can be as cut-throat as any other banker, she rejects a little old gypsy called Mrs. Ganush (Raver) for a third extension on her mortgage. Oddly, that makes the film seem a little dated: Ever since the start of the global economic collapse, viewers are a little smarter about the perils of easy credit, so Brown probably made the right decision for the liquidity of the bank and its other customers.

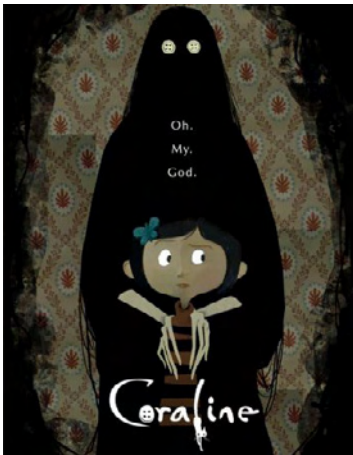
Ganush doesn't see it that way. That's enough to cause the enraged and supernaturally-powered old lady to curse Brown with the most vicious curse of all: In three days, the demon known as the lamia will drag her to hell, to burn for all eternity for the crime of upsetting an old lady.

Sounds grim, but it's really less *Drag Me to Hell* and more *Drag Me to Hee-Hee-Hee*, as Raimi channels more Mel Brooks than Dario Argento. Appearing in almost every frame, it's really Lohman's movie, but Raimi reduces her to little more than a kewpie doll, to be bounced around, accosted, yelled at, and have bugs, goo, embalming fluid and anything else Raimi can mop up vomited down her throat – yes, even an eyeball, in an obvious *Evil Dead II* self-homage/self-parody moment by Raimi. She is undoubtedly a trooper, and for all Raimi's visual virtuosity, when Christine fights off a sinister possessed scarf, it's Lohman that makes it engaging.

Unfortunately, there's not much else for anyone else to do. Raver gets to turn in a great and surprisingly moving ten minutes as the gruesome Mrs. Ganush, but she's quickly replaced by a progression of CGI and animatronic versions of herself. After a career in C-grade comedies, Long deserves better than the dull part he is given (possibly something directed by the Sam Raimi that made the brilliant and over-looked noir thriller *A Simple Plan*.) But ultimately, the real star is Raimi, and boy, does he want you to know it.

There's a little too much of a knowing nod behind each well-telegraphed scare, and Raimi's fingerprints are over every frame. That's not just a style issue: It's like having him sit next to you in the cinema saying, "Hey, there's a great bit coming up." He even throws in a fly walking on a camera lens to playfully shatter the fourth wall. If the thrill-ride is sufficient for you as a viewer, then good luck to you. But it's hard to care about Brown's fate if Raimi doesn't. She's just an elaborate prop for him to pummel, and Long is given little to do except look supportive.

What's ultimately disappointing is that, for all the talk about this being Raimi's return to horror, audiences are still left waiting for that moment. Instead, it's a fine enough return to slapstick.



Directed by Henry Selick
Written by Henry Selick and Neil Gaiman
Starring: Dakota Fanning, Teri Hatcher, John Hodgman, Jennifer Saunders, Dawn French, Ian McShane, Keith David, Robert Bailey Jr.
Certificate: PG, 100 minutes

Once upon a time, there was a movie called *Coraline*. It doesn't begin with 'once upon a time,' but it is undoubtedly a fairy tale. It started off as a book by Neil Gaiman, and has been adapted using traditional stop-motion techniques by Henry Selick, the man most famous for being the man everyone forgets actually directed *The Nightmare Before Christmas*.

It did seem like Selick's career as a feature director had been permanently derailed by 2001's Brendon Frasier-starring clunker *Monkeybone*. But the end result may be that it gave him time to make a real masterpiece. While it's based on Gaiman's smash hit book, Selick's real inspiration seems to be the Polish school of experimental stop motion. Not that this is some slab of *avant garde* adventurism, but instead it's a film that does not seem to believe in limitations, and it is truly beautiful and terrifying and enchanting in equal measures.

For the half-dozen or so readers that haven't breezed through Gaiman's text, it's in many ways a very traditional tale of an ordinary girl in a magical, metaphorical world. Coraline (Fanning) and her family move to a remote and unusual house, filled with quirky failed performers. Her parents, as is the way in fairytales, are present but emotionally absent, working hard on a gardening catalogue. This leaves, as is only suitable, the little blue-haired girl with the unusual name to explore the house. What she finds is a door to another house – or rather, the Other House. There's an Other Mother, and an Other Father, and Other house mates, who are all like the real world versions, but better, nicer, happier, kinder. Oh, and with buttons for eyes. There are scary monsters and magical gardens to contend with, as well as the traditional mythological deal for Coraline to out-wit. She can stay with Other Mother forever, on one condition: She must swap out her own eyes for buttons.

If parents are worried that this may be too much for their kids, then they need to trade up on their offspring. Selick takes Gaiman's whimsically Gothic story, as well as some slight influences from original illustrator Dave McKean, and makes it even more elaborate, more magical, and more intriguing, refining it for the big screen rather than jamming unnecessary extra plot in to pad the running time.

The biggest film star here is Fanning as Coraline (OK, Keith *Candyman* David as the cat is the big name here for horror genre fans,) and for the rest of the cast Selick went to the idiot tube, scooping Terri Hatcher as Mother and, as Father, John Hodgman (best known to UK readers with digital TV as an occasional guest on *The Daily Show*.) Selick shows an appreciation for 80s British comedy by renting the rest of the house to French, Saunders, and, of course, Lovejoy, as the oddball performers that populate both worlds. But, surprisingly, it's Hatcher whose vocal talents are most on display. Anyone used to contending with her overly-knowing delivery on over-priced soap opera (yes, I said it) *Desperate Housewives* probably isn't expecting much: Instead, as the dismissive Mother and the creepily clingy Other Mother, she delivers two remarkably separate performances and, frankly, is unrecognizable as in both.

Gaiman purists (and there are enough people out there who have a complete set of *Sandman* for reading, another for loaning, and another just for Sunday best, to make this a real concern) will probably grouse about Wybie (Bailey.) Who be Wybie? Wybie be the grandson of the little old lady that owns the apartments that befriends Coraline. Selick has explained in interviews that he is, in part, a fix: In Gaiman's terse novella, Coraline's internal monologue serves as its own narration. Wybie is a sounding board for her, as well as occasionally as an occasional deus ex machina. Again, the purists (and feminist literary theorists) may complain that this means that the plucky Coraline is watered down, and needs a boy to bail her out, but actually he adds depth to her. He may be, apart from Selick's remarkable sense of design, the writer/director's biggest addition to the story.

But it is that sense of design that will ultimately be what *Coraline* is remembered for. If *The Nightmare Before Christmas* saw Selick's artistic vision taking a backseat to Burton, and *James and the Giant Peach*

was charming but overly-literal, this is truly Selick's movie. In part that's because he pushes the limits of what can be done with traditional stop motion. It's almost a 'philosophy of art' question. When CGI animation became commonplace, it was like adding weight to cel animation: Over the years, it's become less computer animation, more computer puppetry. With that came the opportunity to make impossibly huge sets and increasingly elaborate characters: The only limit was processor power. With Selick, the only limit is imagination and sheer hard work, and it seems he lacked neither. When there's a theater in the Other World filled with 500 Scotty dogs, or the cat slinks between trees, or Other Mother scuttles like a spider across an unraveling universe, it feels alive and organic and wondrous. It's strangely rewarding to see a film of this complexity and, once in a while, see an animator's thumb-print in some fur.

There will, of course, be an argument amongst many about whether to see this in 3D or not. The quick answer is yes, if it's available. There are moments that are gorgeous in 2D, but remarkable with the glasses on. Yet it is the biggest tribute to Selick's hand-sewn world that it doesn't need any technological tricks to make it more immersive.

FEATURES

Bleeding Words

Bleeding Words #4: I Wanna Be Scared

by gary mcMahon

I remember with great fondness an interview with the film director David Fincher, where he was talking about the first time he'd ever seen the film *Jaws*. This was around the time that his own great film *Seven* was released, and the interviewer was trying to establish why the director had created such an uncompromisingly bleak and terrifying vision. Fincher recalled being so effected by Spielberg's monster shark movie that he was scared of open water for years afterwards (me too, mate!). This, said Fincher, was what he wanted to do: make films that *scarred*.

Another recollection, this one from my teenage years: the first time I ever read Stephen King's *Pet Sematary*. My grandfather had recently passed away and my grandmother was in hospital, which meant that their sheltered bungalow was empty, and vulnerable to the burglars who had tried to break into the place two or three times just before my grandad died. As Man of the House, it was my duty to sleep there and guard the place. Foolishly, I took along Mr King's bleakest and most unforgiving book for company.

I read the book in bed, with the light on. I couldn't put it down; the story was so compelling, so dreadful, so powerful and personal. But when I finally did manage to place the book, still open, on the nightstand for even a few minutes, I found that despite being exhausted I couldn't sleep. If I turned out the light, I suffered a mental image of my grandad's ghost shambling across the carpeted floor towards the bed, clawed hands reaching out for me, slack mouth open in a silent wail. So I left the light on. And still I was unable to sleep. This lasted two or three nights. I didn't sleep at all, but I finished the book.

To this day, *Pet Sematary* remains my favourite horror novel, indeed one of my favourite novels of any genre. The book *scarred* me, and I will always cherish it for that.

This is what I aim to do with my own fiction. When I write a story, it's always about something that either angers or moves me, and I want the reader to feel the emotions that I do. I want to scar them. To fuck them up. Whether I actually succeed or not is another question entirely, and not one for me to answer, but at least I'm trying. Oh God, am I trying...

I know a lot of other writers, both new and established, who strive to do the same. These are the writers I love to read, the ones that produce the good stuff, the *real* stuff, and are dragging the horror genre kicking and screaming into the 21st Century with its unique ability to terrify intact.

However, I've also read an increasing number of genre stories over the last few years that have a great idea at their nucleus – a grand and *terrifying* idea – but fail to fulfil its potential. These stories are certainly nicely written, and some of them have even appeared on awards short lists. But, for me, they are missing one vital element: they do not scar. They do not scare. It seems that scaring a reader has become slightly unfashionable in these sterile post-modern times. Is this a disturbing trend, or simply me being paranoid?

These stories I mention show so much promise, and never fail to raise my hopes...but inevitably I am disappointed. It's as if the author becomes self-conscious at some point during the opening third, and from then on tries to write the terror out of the tale, attempting instead to win us over with clever post-modern deconstruction or wry humour. Instead of terrific, terrifying, affecting tales of fear, these stories end up being

ever so slightly insipid. Nice. Good stories, but not great stories. And certainly not scary stories.

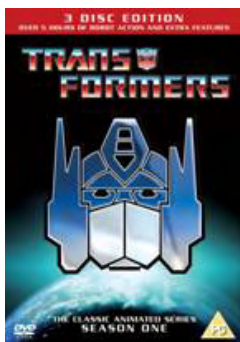
This trait seems to me to be more prevalent in the UK small press than it is in the US. Perhaps somewhere along the line the idea of the struggle towards literary sophistication has turned into a sort of snubbing of the roots of the genre tale; and some writers seem to me at least to be merely dipping their toes into the water instead of wading uncaring into the deeps, making waves to scare the rest of us away. To some the tale of *horror* seems to represent a dirty word. Maybe so many good writers of dark fiction are falling over themselves to deny that they write horror that something fundamental (and essential) to the genre is being lost along the way.

So, a semi-serious question to these trepidatious writers: what's wrong with trying to scare us? Why don't you attempt to crawl under our skin with your prose, burrow into our brains with your words, disembowel us with a well-placed phrase?

Scare us. Scar us. Go on, I dare you.

20th April 2009

Transformers Competition



To coincide with the release of this summer's blockbuster sequel - *TRANSFORMERS: REVENGE OF THE FALLEN*, we are offering the original animated TRANSFORMERS in 4 stunning box sets which are packed with over 5 hours of robot action and extra features as a competition prize.

The original TRANSFORMERS are a definite (re-)introduction to the wonderful animated series for both the die-hard Transformers fan and those wanting to discover where it all began.

To be in with a chance of winning, simply answer this question:

Who provided the voice for Optimus Prime in the original animated series and the animated "Transformers: The Movie"?

Send your answer by 28th June to: transformers@hubfiction.com

3 winners will be chosen at random



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