

Fulci's Waste Land: Cinema, Horror and the Abominations of Hell

• Michael Grant

I want to begin by touching on certain aspects of imaginative experience, in order to suggest something at least of what aesthetic appreciation consists in. My purpose in doing this here is to raise a question – by indirection rather than by explicit argument – as to the relevance of psychoanalytic interpretation to that appreciation. It should be noted at once that there have been many and varied approaches to cinema making use of psychoanalytic theories of one kind or another. A recent tendency, associated especially with the writing of Slavoj Žižek, has been to read film in terms of the Lacanian notion of the Real. As Žižek has presented the idea, for example, in *Enjoy Your Symptom!* with respect to the films that Roberto Rossellini made with Ingrid Bergman, he has given to it a persuasiveness and cogency that otherwise it might have lacked. Nonetheless, it will be my suggestion that such an approach, despite its attractions, finally will not do. It subordinates to its own theorising much of what is unique to a given film, and by so doing distorts the work in question. For Žižek, the films that Rossellini made with Bergman always 'contain some picture of "authentic" or substantial life and it seems as if the heroine's salvation depends on her ability to immerge [sic] into this substantial "authenticity".'¹ The strategy of the films is to denounce the 'lure' of this imaginary salvation, and to effect a transition from the seeming reality of it to the Real, to what in reality is more than reality – the traumatic Thing that resists symbolisation. (In *Stromboli*, for example, what on the island is 'more than the island' is the volcano.) This approach does not in fact resist symbolisation: it encourages it. Interpretations proliferate, and the film, held at a distance in order to that it may be

subsumed beneath a pre-existing theoretical template, ends up reduced and reified. My purpose, in contradistinction, will be to propose that, just as there are certain verbal expressions of which it is right to say 'I know what this means but I can't say what it means', so there are certain films of which something similar may also properly be said. There comes a point in the appreciation of such a film at which one finds oneself almost forced to say: 'This is what I see. Reasons, explanations, interpretations, have come to an end'.

I shall be looking – very briefly – at two films: the first is a classic, Carl-Theodor Dreyer's *Vampyr* (France, 1931), while the second is less well known, and far from a classic, Lucio Fulci's *The Beyond* (Italy, 1981). I will try to clarify my approach by setting them against the background of a specific tradition of writing – that of the post-symbolist strand of modernism.

My starting point is the thought on aesthetics of R.G. Collingwood, and in particular his claim in *The Principles of Art* that art is expression. His account of the idea follows from a distinction he draws between what he calls 'betraying' an emotion and 'expressing' one. A person betrays his fear if 'he turns pale and stammers'; he betrays his anger 'if he turns red and bellows; and so forth'.² The betrayal of emotion makes clear the fact that one is in a certain emotional state. With respect to art, however, Collingwood wishes to contrast the notion of betrayal with what he calls expression. As Aaron Ridley has made clear in his recent study of Collingwood's aesthetics, expression, as understood in the context of art, 'consists, not merely in making it clear that one is in a certain state, as the betrayal of emotion does, but in making clear just *what* that state is'.³



- 'Silence'. The Vampire commands.

The person engaged in artistic expression initially knows next to nothing of what he feels. Collingwood writes:

All he is conscious of is a perturbation or excitement, which he feels going on within him, but of whose nature he is ignorant. While in this state, all he can say about his emotion is 'I feel . . . I don't know what I feel.' From this helpless and oppressed condition he extricates himself by doing something which we call expressing himself.⁴

As Ridley points out, expression is the activity of getting clear about one's own experience, an activity which brings about the transformation of the experience even as it makes it clear what that experience is. In Ridley's words, '[o]ne's experience is thus fully and completely distinctive only once expression is itself complete'.⁵ As Collingwood puts it, '[u]ntil a man has expressed his emotion, he does not yet know what emotion

it is'.⁶ In other words, emotion is not revealed for what it is by being expressed: it is through being expressed that it becomes what it is.

This implies that there can be no distinction between the emotion expressed and the expression of it. Not only that, but one must express one's emotion in something – in some medium or other, words, music, paint, film, etc. The act of expression can't be separated from the medium in which the expression takes place. And there is a further consequence of this view. Collingwood is clear that expression is an 'exploration' of one's own experience.⁷ But, if expression is inseparable from a medium, it is clear that that exploration must also be an exploration of one's medium of expression. Ridley takes up this aspect of things by considering Collingwood's appreciation of Cézanne. Cézanne explored his response to Mont Saint-Victoire, in fact his obsession with it, by

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painting it again and again. He explored his obsession through his paint. But equally he explored his paint through his obsession. The response to the mountain is at the same time and in the same gesture a discovery concerning the possibilities of the medium in which that response is embodied.

Expression, then, differs from betrayal inasmuch as expression, unlike betrayal, is a process whereby emotion comes to clarification. In fact, one might go further and say that expression, as Collingwood envisages it, is not only a process of clarification, it is a process that might more properly be called *constitutive* of emotion. However, there is more to Collingwood's argument. He says:

If you want to express the terror that something causes, you must not give it an epithet like 'dreadful'. For that describes the emotion instead of expressing it Some people have thought that a poet who wishes to express a great variety of subtly differentiated emotions might be hampered by the lack of a vocabulary rich in words referring to the distinctions between them This is the opposite of the truth. The poet needs no such words at all To describe a thing is to call it a thing of such and such a kind: to bring it under a conception, to classify it. Expression, on the other hand, individualizes.⁸

Description clarifies by generalising. Expression, on the other hand, clarifies by distinguishing not merely between different kinds of thing but between things that might be described in the same way. The artist, for Collingwood, does not want 'a thing of certain kind, he wants a certain thing'.⁹ Description only yields 'a thing of a certain kind', while expression gives the thing itself. As Ridley puts it, 'what a particular work of art expresses is something unique, to be found there and nowhere else'.¹⁰

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The view of art I have just set out has, of course, its roots in Romanticism. From the beginning of the nineteenth century, with the onset of Romanticism, art began to make the matter of its

own status central to what constituted it, one result of which was to incorporate the problematic and ambiguous into what makes it what it is. This concern with the problematic was itself to develop into a significant feature of modernism, and it is to be found in certain horror films also. That is to say, on occasion, horror films have addressed themselves to the procedures and forms whereby they create what they create, and it is not too extravagant to suggest in this regard that films like *Vampyr* and *The Beyond* (amongst a number of others) exhibit an order of self-interrogation that overlaps with what we find in the literature of modernism.

Self-interrogation is undoubtedly central to the project of Dreyer's *Vampyr*. Aporia and contradiction are fundamental to it, and Dreyer accords them a particularly vivid and focused realisation. For instance, Gray's first walk to the mill is both a narrative event and at the same time a disruption of the logical sequence of that narrative event. We are first presented with a disruption of the intelligibility of the relations between body and reflection, as Gray sees a figure, in reverse motion, reflected in the river, digging a grave. There is then a further fracturing of normal physical relations, when we see a man's shadow separate itself from his body. At the same time, the usual structure of narrative and temporal order is broken by a sudden, unmotivated irruption of music occurring when Gray enters the mill, an irruption which immediately calls forth what look like cut-out figures, dancing or circling around each other. These different elements of cinematic device, combined with the sudden intrusion of the commanding voice of the vampire, compromise the meaning of the narrative at this point, rendering the presentation of events suspect.

The action of the film is thus situated ambiguously, in a world which is that neither of life nor of death. What happens in the film occurs elsewhere, in a place self-consciously created out of cinematic effects, and, as a result, we cannot really be sure of what it is we are seeing. David Bordwell has argued that such a systematic dismantling of secure relations

between the elements within the film extends to *Vampyr* as a whole.¹¹ As he puts it, the film aims to create a displacement of the presuppositions necessary to a stable spatio-temporal continuum.

This is one way of construing the fact that the narrative order of the film in its totality is not to be trusted. The status of what we are seeing has become undecidable, and as a result the temporal progression of the events we see has also become uncertain. The only order of time that we can trust is the time it takes for the film to be seen, the time it takes for the reels of film to pass through the projector and to cast an image on the screen and to bring up sound through the speakers. It is in this sense that *Vampyr* can be said to resemble music. The action that is represented and the process of representing that action have been collapsed into one, so that the time it takes the events we see to elapse and the time it takes to show us those events are one and the same. What *Vampyr* narrates, we might say, is the occurrence of the events that compose it, in the very instant that it is narrating the events themselves.

At the conclusion of *Vampyr*, the mechanism driving the mill wheels that are drowning the doctor (the vampire's human assistant) in flour finally stops, under its own volition and without visible cause. The doctor has been assimilated to the whiteness of the flour, a whiteness which is finally inseparable from a whiteness that has come to dominate the balance of light and shadow across the whole film, a fact made evident in the penultimate sequence, when Gray and Gisèle move across the water into the light of the dawn sun. As they step out of their boat onto the river-bank, they walk into, and are transfigured by, the intensifying rays of light streaming through the forest. Suffusing the mist rising around the branches, the light comes to acquire almost as palpable a material presence as the objects it illuminates. And at this juncture, we cut back to the mill. The whiteness of the flour has by this time so filled the projected image that there appears no discernible difference between it and the whiteness of the screen behind the image, and it is in this same moment of assimilation of the image to its

support that the movement of the mechanism comes to a halt.

The seeming coincidence of the image and the screen behind it is doubled by the fact that the movement of the mill gears and that of the projector showing the film also coincide. The two movements collapse into a single duration, as the teeth of the gears and the sprockets of the projector gears mirror one another, in a concurrence that effectively links an action internal to the film with an action external to it. It is as though the film were being completed in a time that had already been superseded, inasmuch as it has been this same action, the action of the mechanisms of the projector, that began the film and that has sustained it throughout the time of its showing. The result, in this case, is a tension. *Vampyr* exists as a movement by means of which whatever is imaged is abolished; and yet whatever is abolished is sustained, since the being of the thing is taken up into the being of the image. The world of the film is peopled by beings who are at once present and yet somehow shadowy, almost inhuman, monstrous. It is a world in which death may be said to have doubled the impulse to life.

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If we are to accord this way of thinking due weight and seriousness, then we must recognise that art of this kind has come upon states of mind and modes of experience that are accessible only by virtue of a unique employment of image and narrative, similar to that of the post-symbolist poetry of T. S. Eliot or W. B. Yeats. What this kind of experience gives onto is the true horror, the horror of the uncanny and the fantastic. It is the return of being in negation, the impossibility of death, the universality of existence even in its annihilation. It appears to us in the obsessions and insomnias of the night, and it is fear *of* being, not fear *for* being, the fear of death. It is the experience of living death. And we find it explored in Lucio Fulci's *The Beyond*.

Released by Fulvia Film (Rome) in 1981, the film takes up the motif of the gateway to hell

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from *The Sentinel* (Michael Winner, 1976) and living dead imagery based on Romero's first two zombie films. Here are some of the major points of the narrative, which opens in Louisiana, 1927. A posse, bearing torches, rifles and chains, is rowing across a lake towards an isolated hotel. Inside the hotel, Schweik, an artist, is completing an indistinct landscape, littered with grey shapes, perhaps corpses. The men burst into the hotel and seize him, the leader of the group accusing him of being a warlock. They beat him mercilessly across the face with a heavy chain. They then take him to the hotel's cellar, crucify him, and throw acid over his head, watching him as he dissolves in agony. At the same time, a young woman, Emily, is reading from the Book of Eibon, which contains ancient prophecies concerning the seven sacred gateways into hell. Schweik is then walled up.

In 1981, Liza Merrill arrives from New York to claim the hotel, which she has inherited. On the way, Liza meets Emily, who now is blind. Emily takes Liza to the house where she lives, and warns her to leave immediately. Instead Liza

decides on the hotel's renovation. At the same time, Martha, the hotel's Mrs Danvers-like housekeeper, guides Joe, a local plumber, towards the far end of the hotel's cellar, which is flooding, to find out where the water is coming from. He knocks down the wall entombing Schweik's body, and is killed by a hand that reaches out and seizes him.

Mary Ann, Joe's wife, goes to the hospital mortuary to prepare her husband for his funeral, when she stumbles and falls, lying unconscious at the foot of a cupboard, on top of which stands a large bottle of acid. The bottle falls forward, spilling its contents over her head, which dissolves into a sea of bloody foam. John McCabe, a doctor, investigates Emily. He goes to her house, only to find it in ruins. Here he discovers the Book of Eibon and reads in it that the hotel stands on one of the seven gates of hell. In the hotel, Martha is cleaning the bathroom of Schweik's former room. She puts her hand into a bath of foul black water, and frees the plug. As the water drains away, Joe arises from the water, and drives Martha back,



- Joe, arisen from the black waters of the bath.

impaling her head on a large nail sticking out of the wall.

Schweik appears before Emily, summoning her back to hell. She refuses to obey. Her guide dog tears out her throat. Liza is set on by the dead in her hotel, but escapes with McCabe to the hospital, pursued by 'living' corpses from the morgue. They escape down to the basement, only to find that they are back in the cellar of the hotel. They pass through the gap in the cellar wall, and enter a landscape that seems everywhere the same. It is the landscape of the painting that Schweik completed at the time of his destruction, and it is the site of hell.

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As this summary should indicate, the plot is anything but concisely organised. Elements are pulled in from many sources, and strung together in a series of set-pieces, involving various degrees of violence and bodily mutilation. Of these, the opening sequences are the most striking, as Schweik is crucified by the posse and dissolved in acid. The score, by Fabio Frizzi, dominates the sound track, carrying over to the reading by Emily from the Book of Eibon. The same musical motif recurs throughout, especially at moments of violent death, such as Mary Ann's and Martha's. The music here is at least as effective as the narrative in providing a cohesive force for the film. Its repetitious insistence draws the disparate narrative events together, emphasising pace and rhythm at the expense of motivation or psychological insight. Visuals and music cohere in a unified sound-image. This is brought home at the end of the film, when Schweik's painting has come to fill the screen, accompanied by the throbbing musical score. It is precisely at this point that Liza and McCabe are recognised as having become part of Schweik's landscape, which he completed as the film began, a painting which does not simply depict hell – it *is* hell. The film's end is established at a point prior to its beginning, and the organisation of its temporal development identified with that of a painting internal to it. In this way, a disruption of temporal order takes

place in *The Beyond*, and it does so at the moment when image and what is imaged become one, a unity achieved as the film concentrates at the end on Schweik's painting. What occurs here displaces the dominance of narrative, and reveals the film's fixity and subordination to a time impotent to go anywhere except interminably back to its beginning.

Seen in this light, the film is nothing other than a catalogue of notations of its own aesthetic, and it exhibits them everywhere, in the blind yet seeing eyes of Emily, in the eyes of Liza and McCabe as they are abandoned in hell, the hotel itself, the undead, and, as I have argued, most significantly in Schweik's painting. Liza and McCabe become elements of its plastic composition, in a transformation that defines the aesthetic undertaking of the whole film. Characters constantly die into the beyond constituted by their images, a doubling we first see in the death of Schweik himself, who returns from the dead, still in the atrocious condition in which he died. He is not resurrected into the sunlight; he remains in the tomb, and of the tomb, and is evil, lost.

Similarly with the hotel: putrescence and rot pervade it, and the dead dwell there. As with the 'old houses' in Dario Argento's *Suspria* and *Inferno*, the hotel exists suspended in the empty place between life and death, and ultimately no character is possessed of the power to escape it. The degradation of the world represented in Fulci's film is in effect a degradation marking the reversal by which reality is removed, and replaced by the shadow of the image. All darkens into the shadow of the beyond, and this peculiar death of the shadow serves in Fulci's hands to undo the narrative from within, inverting it into what is at once an image of death and a dead image. This view of the film is supported by the longest Italian version of the film's title, which translated reads as: '. . . And you shall live in terror! The beyond'. It is a title that points towards the notion of a future that is conditional on the past – a terror *beyond*, beyond the grave, beyond the end and before the beginning, in which you shall live.

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- The Sea of Darkness.

The Beyond is in many ways a failure, as its detractors have been quick to note, remarking on its haphazard and derivative narrative, and its often crude effects. However, its concluding sequence acknowledges it to be a failure in a different, more far-reaching sense. Liza and McCabe are lost in a place where to go forward is to go back, and where every beginning is simply a repeated end. This is what characterises the abomination of Fulci's hell. As the voice of Eibon has it, in the penultimate shot of the film: 'And you shall face the sea of darkness and all therein that may be explored'. At the end, Liza and McCabe dissolve into the nothingness of the image and the image prevails over them.

What I have been attempting here is to show something of how Fulci creates the unique thing that his film is. One obvious strategy would have been to interpret *The Beyond* in terms of the Lacanian theory of the Real, a theory based in large part on the Hegelian concept of the word as the murderer of the thing. The idea is that the use of language emerges against the background of an essential abyss of non-

meaning, of the empty nothingness that is organic life. When we begin – as human subjects – to use language and reach towards self-consciousness, we negate this nothingness. We do so by entering into a pre-existing structure of language, which, in contrast to the nothingness it negates, is inorganic and external. Human subjectivity is therefore always already subjected to an external authority – an authority that is always alien to us. As Richard Allen and Malcolm Turvey have written:

This subjection is at once essential to concealing the abyss of nothingness that is organic life and, at the same time, is only made possible and sustained by the existence of that concealed abyss and the 'pressure' exerted by it.¹²

This abyss of nothingness is what Lacan calls 'the Real'. It is a traumatic core at the heart of human society and culture and is always threatening to return. Its return will disrupt the inert structure of human civilisation and meaning that its concealment serves to make possible. From this perspective, one might argue that a major

purpose of art is to bring about the return, the disruptive intrusion, of the Real. Inasmuch as representation is a function of the lack or abyss without which it would not exist, a lack withdrawn or concealed beneath it, the overriding aim of art must be to make that lack effectively present. The result is to be a process of representation subverted from within.

That there is an overlap between the Lacanian account of the Real and the position for which I have been arguing is clear. Both Lacan's theory of language and the tradition of writing to which I have alluded – namely, the post-symbolist strand of modernism – are based on concepts of language deriving from, or similar to, those of Hegel. It has to be said, however, that the overlap lends no support to a general explanation or theory of human behaviour or psychic functioning. My projection in this paper of certain procedures of symbolist poetry onto features discernible in *The Beyond* has been no more than a way of clarifying an elucidation or appreciation of certain aspects of the film in

question. I have adduced no grounds for appealing to any general theory of psychic structure in order to justify an interpretation of the film, or to vindicate an explanation of its aesthetic effect. What I have attempted is to allow *The Beyond* to speak out of its own specificity – in terms of the relations of presence and absence that it irreducibly confronts us with. It is this that has been the point of my reference to the post-symbolist strand of modernism. The post-symbolist poem is nothing other than the enactment – the foregrounding – of the unique act of its own coming into being. In this connection, I would suggest, Collingwood's ideas on art are of immediate pertinence, as are those of Stanley Cavell, who has written of aspects of the post-symbolist poetry of Wallace Stevens and Hart Crane in the following terms: 'One may be able to say nothing except that a feeling has been voiced by a kindred spirit . . . [Poems of this kind] may be left as touchstones of intimacy'.¹³

In conclusion, I would like to return to *Vampyr*, in order to suggest that the



• Crucifixion: the death of Schweik.

consciousness induced by it is exterior to itself, and attenuated, incapable of mastery over its own negativity. In *Vampyr*, in the classic scene of Gray's dream, Gray sees himself being buried alive, while he is nonetheless dreaming elsewhere. It is as though my consciousness were present to me, but without me, lacking me. There are parallels in this to the state of consciousness that a symbolist poem like *The Waste Land* aims to induce. The central consciousness of the poem is that of Tiresias, an old man with wrinkled breasts, who has walked amongst the lowest of the dead, a prophet gazing, like Orpheus, into the night at what the night is concealing.

So with *Vampyr*: the characters and figures called up are similarly spectral, their identities shifting and uncertain. Their existence is an existence coterminous with the existence of the sounds and images that create the film, and to participate in that existence, as a spectator of the film, is to participate in something neuter, as Tiresias is neuter, and the vampire, Marguerite Chopin. Gray's experience is like that of the narrator of Poe's 'The Premature Burial', who, though beyond death, is unable to die. Gray is caught up beyond himself, as we are with him. He is solicited by images from which he cannot escape, condemned to the empty interval of dying, of the impossibility of dying. In *Vampyr*, as

in *The Beyond*, the dead are conscious of being dead, and so unable to die. They induce us to approach them, but in doing so we find ourselves as other, where what we hear is the echo of our own step, a step towards silence, towards the void.

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Notes

- 1 Slavoj Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom!* (New York and London, Routledge, 2001), p. 54.
- 2 R. G. Collingwood, *The Principles of Art* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1958), p. 121.
- 3 Aaron Ridley, *R. G. Collingwood* (London, Phoenix, 1998), p. 26.
- 4 Collingwood, p. 109.
- 5 Ridley, p. 27.
- 6 Collingwood, p. 111.
- 7 *Ibid.*
- 8 Collingwood, p. 112.
- 9 Collingwood, p. 114.
- 10 Ridley, p. 29.
- 11 David Bordwell, *The Films of Carl-Theodor Dreyer* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California, 1981), p. 103.
- 12 Richard Allen and Malcolm Turvey, eds, *Wittgenstein, Theory and the Arts* (New York and London, Routledge, 2001), p. 29.
- 13 *Must We Mean What We Say?: A Book of Essays* (New York, Scribner, 1969), p. 81.