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Our Immaculate

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2014-12-03
http://hdl.handle.net/10539/15899

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1. Introduction

From the French Fantastique, to weird fiction and Giallo cinema, directors and authors like Dario Argento and H.P. Lovecraft have managed to shock and terrify their audiences for generations with their unique styles, codes and conventions utilized in their works, and their examination of the subgenres they work in. This essay takes a look at how I pay homage to these great forerunners of horror, from the writing style I chose to adopt, as well as the structure of the novel and the perspective from which one reads it. It shall also investigate various mythologies I draw inspiration from, and the subgenres in which I work in and the how I invert certain conventions and aspects found again and again in literature and cinema of this kind to suit the context of my novel. *Our Immaculate* deals with an extra-terrestrial threat lurking under an old all-girls school in the Magaliesburg.

2. About

The novel takes place over a period of twenty-four hours. Electra Almacy, a Matric pupil who used to be head girl at the school, is the protagonist of the story. She is restless, hates the teaching staff (in particular the ruthless principal Doctor Hamilton) and yearns to start living her life outside of the school and dreams of exploring the world. One night, after going to detention, she and a friend are attacked by another Matric pupil and they are forced to hide in a tunnel underneath the school. While in the tunnel, Electra passes out and wakes up in a room with nine other girls. Over the intercom in the room, Doctor Hamilton addresses the girls, telling them there are other students locked in different rooms similar to the one Electra finds herself in. Her principal tells them she will call two girls out of every room and that the others whose names are not called must wait behind. Electra and one of her best friends, Delphi Makholwe, are both called out of their room and are forced to leave, only to enter into their worst nightmare. What happens next is gory, violent, and will leave both girls grasping hold of what little sanity they have left, as they fight their way through hordes of sinister nuns, demented creatures and an entity known only at the Boy with Red Feet (hereafter referred to as BWRF), to get back to the surface. Although this is a horror novel, it is also a story of friendship. How far would you go to protect your friends, when you can barely protect yourself?

3. Target Market

My target market ranges from people between the ages of seventeen to twenty five. Although *Our Immaculate* has an all- female cast (save Coach Vikus who takes students for PT), both male and female readers within this age bracket (and perhaps older) could enjoy this novel.

Our Immaculate is aimed at people who enjoy horror, especially horror films, the novel is short and to the point for this exact reason. My target market would be people who are far too busy to sit down and read a thick novel. It is geared towards ‘the reader on the go’, someone who would be able to either read it in one sitting, or over a short period of time. My target

market would also include those who are familiar with works by Koji Suzuki, Chuck Palahniuk, Stephen King, Ryu Murakami and H. P. Lovecraft.

The readers who I am aiming my novel at would have an appreciation for gore and violence as an art form, rather than for shock value. Although my readers who enjoy a good scare would like my novel, my actual target market is not easily scared, horrified or disturbed, and may realize that although I am intending to write a genuine horror story, they could read *Our Immaculate* more as a tribute to great authors and of the genre than anything else.

4. Research

While writing my novel I read many essays and books on writing, especially writing within the horror genre. One of the most helpful books I came across during this time was *On Writing Horror: A Handbook* (1997), an anthology of essays by various authors within the genre, compiled by Mort Castle. The book was very useful in the sense that it provided me with different opinions of authors and ways to go about writing a novel of this nature. As mentioned in the introduction I was inspired by filmmakers and authors to write *Our Immaculate*. In one of the essays found in the anthology by Ramsey Campbell, author of *The Hungry Moon*, titled 'Avoid What's Been Done to Death', the writer explains how "…It's not a bad thing to follow the example of writers you admire… but only as a means to finding your own voice. You won't find that, of course, unless you have something of your own to say…" (Campbell in Castle, 1997). Having read that, I approached the novel from a slightly different angle.

Instead of paying tribute to filmmakers and authors I admire by providing my readers with a storyline similar to one already created, I decided to figure out what I wanted to say first with my novel before attempting to continue further. Eventually, after a few days of speculation I came to the conclusion that I wanted to use traditional conventions in various forms of horror and turn them on their heads, providing the reader with a unique reading experience. I borrowed elements used in weird fiction, spaghetti thrillers (also known as Giallo films) and the French Fantastique, and aimed to incorporate them within the South African context. What these various genres of horror are shall be discussed in sections 11, 12, 13 and 14 of this essay.

When it came to researching the story, I wanted to use a setting not only familiar to the horror genre, but to my readers- the setting of a school. Whether or not my readers attended a private Catholic boarding school is beside the point, the idea of a school setting is that of a nostalgic one, be it in a positive or negative sense. I, as mentioned, wanted to provide the reader with a cinematic experience, so I studied many horror films from across the globe, most notably Tobe Hooper's *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974), Kinji Fukusaku's *Battle Royale* (2000) and Dario Argento's *Suspiria* (1977). The setting of a school as the epicentre of evil in horror is not an original one. Shinichi Koga's *Dark Angel Trilogy* (1994-1996) takes place in schools, as well as Andrew Fleming's *The Craft* (1996). *The School* (1988) by Ed Kelleher is set in an all-girls boarding school with a disturbing and mysterious past. In

terms of South African horror literature, only *The New Girl* (2013) by S.L. Grey comes close to a high school themed horror novel, but even then most of the action takes place in the suburbs of Bedfordview and the menacing Downside, and the two points of view of the novel belong to a library volunteer and the school's janitor.

I wanted to bring the traditional 'haunted high school' theme to South Africa and play around with the idea that a boarding school in the Magaliesburg could be infested by an otherworldly evil, told and seen from the perspective of a young student. I've always enjoyed a good school ghost story and I included as many as I could find. I used a few I remembered from my own school days, to piece together a tale and, in a sense, create my own school myth for South African students and readers in general to enjoy, no matter what their age.

While writing about school life I tried to remember what my own experiences were like of going to a private Catholic school, the rules and regulations which were set, and how students interacted with staff and our principal, and one another. Gossip played a large role in my school as I'm sure it did (and still continues to) in many others, as it was a small school similar to *Our Immaculate*, and everyone knew each other's business. I tried incorporating the gossip element in the first part of my novel, where rumours fly about Electra in connection with another student, Liezl van der Walt.

I interviewed various girls attending schools like Saint Andrews, Saint Mary's Waverly, and Höerskool Bekker, and received a new perspective on school life today and a sense of what it means to attend an all-girls school. I didn't want the main characters in *Our Immaculate* to be exactly like school girls in general, I wanted them to be superior in how they felt about and reacted to certain things and situations, the ideas they expressed and the thoughts they believed in. When it came to researching for my main characters, especially Electra, Cha Cha, Lana, Phumla and Delphi, I tried to base their personalities on older women between the ages of twenty-three and twenty-five, as I wanted them to have a certain sophisticated 'maturity' that the other students lacked, setting them apart from the likes of characters like the Celibacy Girls, or Julia and Sonali. To do this, I looked at and examined the way some of my female friends interact with people and spaces, and was eventually able to get a clear idea of how I wanted my main characters to be. I would say that a lot of my research when it came to certain characters was influenced by my female friends.

5. Style and Technique

When it came to style and technique, I originally incorporated different points of view in order to tell the story of *Our Immaculate* in the present tense. I felt that various points of view were not only to be used to describe different parts of the dystopian world in the original novel, but brought about potential for conflict and allowed for my characters to drive the plot of the novel. The original narrative voice I had chosen to write the novel in was the first person narrative voice.

5.1 First Person Narrative Perspective

This method of writing puts the reader in the shoes of the characters, in order to drive the story. I wanted to write using this voice because I felt it allowed the reader to gain access to the mind of the character, making the whole reading experience personal and intimate. This form of narration is found in many texts, *American Psycho* by Bret Easton Ellis being one of the most famous:

> "…I place the tumbler on the nightstand and roll over on top of her. While I kiss and lick her neck she stares passionlessly at the widescreen Panasonic remote-control television set and lowers the volume. I pull my Armani shirt up and place her hand on my torso, wanting her to feel how rock-hard, how halved my stomach is, and I flex my muscles, grateful it's light in the room so she can see how bronzed and defined my abdomen has become." (Ellis, 1991)

This voice/form of narration is also found in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*:

> "…A balcony ran around the room, for the spectators, and I thought I could smell, faintly like an afterimage, the pungent scent of sweat, shot through with the sweet taint of chewing gum and perfume from watching girls, felt-skirted as I knew from pictures, later in miniskirts, then pants, then in one earring, spiky green-streaked hair." (Atwood, 1985)

Originally inspired by films like Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction* (1994) and Frank Miller's *Sin City* (2005), my novel was structured in different sections or parts. Each part was dedicated to a different character and told seemingly unconnected stories through the characters' points of view, but when read altogether would have made up and completed the entire story of the novel. Here is an example of the original story below, written from Electra's perspective:

> but then we decided that it was freakin' lame so we headed to the beach instead and just ate shrooms and stared at the sky."
>
> I try to apply lipstick. I pretend I'm listening.
>
> "It's like life is brighter on mushrooms. Colours are beautiful. The sea is beautiful. Your body just vibrates with ecstasy."
>
> "Wow," I mutter. I've been staring out our dorm window for the past half hour, gawking at a hadeda pecking apart a frail Protea flower, as the last few rays of sunlight disappear behind the Magaliesburg. I can't decide whether to laugh (the fucking thing looks just like Doctor Hamilton) or throw the empty bottle of Jose Cuervo at it. Forgetting I'm only testing the latest Dior, I stop smearing, put the lid on and gently drop it on the floor. I probably have hooker lips right now. God I'm ridiculous. Besides that, I still can't decide whether to sort my wardrobe out colour coded, or just stuff last season's crap in the back and file my newest collections in front. I'm a little jet lagged from my twelve hour flight from Amsterdam, and Lana and I just smoked a jay fifteen minutes ago in our bathroom, so my mind is a bit fried and I can't decide.

> "Apparently the visuals are different with each batch… Ricky said he once managed to control a bonfire by using this radiant force that was just leaking from his hands, at some trance party. Can you imagine that Electra? Can you imagine being able to wield that power in your fingertips? Can you?"

5.2 Problems with multiple points of view

After using about five different points of view, I realized there were too many voices in the novel itself and it was starting to cramp the story. The readers in my writing group felt they had nothing to hold on to, had no idea whose point of view needed to be prioritized over others and I felt as though the novel was nothing more than a disorientating collection of unconnected monologues. I decided to limit the points of view in the novel to Delphi and Electra, who I decided were going to be the two protagonists, and continued to write the novel in the first person narrative.

My struggle continued however, because even with only two points of view both girls had a backstory which demanded more attention than I as the author was willing to give them. Electra was suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder after a hellish vacation in Holland with a serial killer known as Grin-Maker Geldenhuys. He was written into a previous draft of the novel, but in the final draft I decided to remove him. Delphi was tormented by an abusive soccer star boyfriend named Kagiso and a cold tempestuous mother, both removed from the final draft too. I personally felt as though readers were also getting confused between the two voices (each girl had her own chapters and shared the chapters of the novel accordingly-similar to S.L. Grey's *Downside Trilogy*) and far too much was happening at once, so I decided to focus on just one character, being Electra Almacy.

Continuing to write in the first person narrative voice, but now in the past tense rather than the present (a tense I was far more equipped and confident to write in), I slowly found myself becoming more and more uncomfortable writing in this style, as I didn't feel I had the capacity to write a serious horror story from the intimate perspective of an eighteen year old girl. I began to research different narrative styles once more, and finally settled on what is known as the third person limited narration, which is described by Nathan Bransford, author of the children's series *Jacob Wonderbar* (2012-2013) as follows:

> "…Third person limited is, well, limited. The perspective is exclusively grounded to one character… this means that you have all the constraints of first person (all the reader sees is what the protagonist sees)…" (Bransford, 2012)[1]

With the third person limited narration, I not only felt the story begin to flow better, but I was more comfortable when it came to writing it. I was able to tell the story from the perspective of Electra in a more authentic and genuine way without being held back by the constraints of the first person narrative.

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[1] Bransford, N. (2012) Third Person Omniscient VS Third Person Limited. Accessed on 05/01/14 from the World Wide Web: blog.nathanbransford.com/2012/11/third-person-omniscient-vs-third-person-limited.html

6. Transition from Science Fiction to Horror

I originally intended for *Our Immaculate* to be a science fiction novel, a sprawling dystopian epic set against the backdrop of a high school in post-apocalyptic South Africa, where students were trapped in the confines of the school by a totalitarian principal. Although I thoroughly enjoyed researching this idea and building the world of that *Our Immaculate*, I wasn't happy writing science fiction, nor felt I had it in me to write a decent and coherent novel of that genre within the two years provided by the Masters course. My passion has always lain in all things horror, and so using what I already knew, I set about rewriting the novel to suit the new genre, providing it with elements of horror that I love and what I felt made a good horror story.

7. Cinematic Effect

I tried to fuse both cinema and literature into one piece, being the final draft of "Our Immaculate". The amalgamation of cinema and literature has been done before, famously so by author Anthony Horowitz in his *Alex Rider* (2000-2013) spy series. Similar to how Horowitz combines spy films with spy literature, I incorporated elements of horror cinema as follows:

7.1 Influence of scripts

I tried to keep the writing style basic, with very little description save the bare necessities, reminiscent of the way in which film scripts are written. An example of this can be seen in the revised final draft of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* remake script written by Brandon Mau and Aubrey Stafford:

INT. ROOM_OLD HOUSE_(CONT.)

Leatherface continues to pound on the door while Andy looks around for a place to escape. There is nothing.

ANDY

SHIT!

As the pounding continues, we see Andy run towards a closed window. He pounds on it, but it does not move! As he runs towards the door, Leatherface's hand comes crashing through it, reaching for him, but he backs away. Suddenly, the door comes crashing down and Leatherface stands there, screaming through the thick mask. Andy backs away into a corner and tries to

fight him off.

Leatherface tries to grab him just as Andy runs out

of the room and down the stairs.

(Mau and Stafford, 2003)

This can be compared to the way in which various flight or fight scenes in "Our Immaculate" are written, in particular on page 149:

> She was in a bathroom, similar to the one in her dormitory. She pressed her back against the door, praying she would find a way out. The light was on, coating the bathroom in a dull green and Electra could make out four cubicles, a large pipe nailed to the ceiling, and a sink. At the end of the bathroom were two windows, one already open. She ran towards it. Lana burst through the door as Electra climbed onto the window sill and jumped out.

I used a script-like style of writing scenes and action because I wanted my reader to feel as though he/she was watching a film unfold through the pages of this novel. I tried to emphasize action rather than internal conflict as I wanted *Our Immaculate* to be somewhat of a visual experience. While researching the style of scriptwriting I came across and studied different scripts- a handful of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* drafts, and *Ringu* (1998) in terms of the supernatural element, were most helpful.

7.2 Structure

Using a structure similar to that of Aristotle's Three-Act structure (see Appendix) I set up my chapters in such a way that they had a filmic quality to the way the story panned out. The way in which I dealt with the Three Act structure for *Our Immaculate* is seen below:

Part One/Act One (Set Up)

-Beginning

Electra contemplates life inside Our Immaculate. She has just lost her head girl position.

-Inciting Incident

Liezl masturbates in Delphi's bedroom.

-Second Thoughts

Electra thinks Liezl has just gone a little crazy and thinks nothing more about the incident.

-Climax of Act One

Liezl attacks Electra and Phumla in the Prayer Gardens. They retreat into the tunnels and Electra passes out.

Part Two/Act Two (Confrontation)

-Ascending Action

-Obstacle One:

The girls find themselves locked in Room B and try to find a way out.

-Obstacle Two:

The girls from Room A are slaughtered and Delphi and Electra are told to leave Room B and are forced to separate.

-Midpoint (A big twist)

Electra finds out Lana is on the side of Doctor Hamilton and the BWRF.

-Obstacle Three:

Cha Cha, Phumla and Delphi find Electra and see the way out is blocked. They try find a room to hide in.

-Disaster

The girls are attacked by a doll. Phumla dies and Delphi goes blind.

-Crisis

Electra forces Malin the Celibate to meet with her. The meeting with Malin goes awry and Electra kills Julia accidently. Delphi and Electra manage to escape the tunnels.

Part Three/Act Three (Resolution)

-Descending Action

Electra wakes up back in the tunnels. The ritual begins.

-Wrap Up

Delphi and Electra, with the help of Malin, manage to stop the ritual and kill Doctor Hamilton.

-End

They fight the ‘reject’ dolls and make it out of the tunnels alive.

The chapters in Part One are longer than the other parts, because I wanted to capture the boredom suffered by school students who feel a school day lasts an eternity. I wanted the reader to feel the mundaneness of waking up, attending an early assembly and classes. I wanted to play with the idea of an ordinary school day dragging on. It’s also a contrast to the second and third parts which are broken up into smaller chapters, where the attention is focused on the action to bring out the cinematic experience in the novel. In Part One, I decided to rather highlight the hierarchy at *Our Immaculate*, and the decay of the school. I used Part One to introduce the characters and setting to the reader.

7.3 Terminology

Lastly, in order to convey the idea of *Our Immaculate* as a film where the reader takes on the role of the director in a sense, I used phrases popular in screenwriting such as ‘fade to black’ to reinforce this idea. My use of asterixes in chapters, although frequent, is to signify a change in scenes. The asterixes cut the story into different scenes similar to the ‘CUT TO:’ of a script.

Although my novel is heavily influenced by horror films and cinema in general, one of the main objectives for *Our Immaculate* was to turn certain conventions around in order to approach this high school horror story in a unique way, starting with the subversion of what is known as the Final Girl trope.

8. Subverting the Final Girl Trope

Carol J. Clover, in her book *Men, Women and Chainsaws: Gender in Modern Horror Film* coined the phrase by defining the final girl as a “victim-hero” (1992), an asexual, moderately androgynous female protagonist who basically survives the horror by being the only one out of a group of tormented girls to rise up against the villain and defeat him. However, what Clover notes is that towards the end of the film or book, when the final girl takes down the villain and avenges the deaths of the other characters known as the ‘immoral’ (1992) she takes on a masculine role by picking up an object, such as a knife, hammer or chainsaw, and turns it against the villain, emasculating, and in a sense ‘raping’, him (1992).

We see a subversion of this in S. L. Grey's novel *The Mall* (2011), where one of the protagonists, Rhoda, is introduced as a tough, 'no-nonsense', rugged masculine female when she meets the male protagonist Dan. As the novel progresses her character changes. She becomes more dependent on him, and a stereotypical femininity infects her as she takes on the role of the 'mentored' as opposed to the 'mentor' that she adopts at the beginning of the novel. By reversing the psychological process of a final girl trope, even though S.L. Grey subvert this trope in a sense, we as readers later find out through a hint in the sequel, *The Ward*, that Rhoda has passed away, along with Dan, ultimately becoming the archaic version of the final girl. One may wonder if Rhoda would have survived the horror had she still been the tough character she was at the start, rather than the stereotype she became.

An example of how this trope is subverted successfully can be seen in the character of Nancy in Wes Craven's horror masterpiece *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984).

> "Over the course of the film, it becomes apparent that the men in Final Girl Nancy's life are as ineffective as they can possibly be. Her boyfriend, whom she asks to protect her on two separate occasions, falls asleep both times. Her father is often absent, and when she specifically asks him to come home to protect her, he doesn't. In the face of this, Nancy becomes more and more active on her own behalf, including building a number of booby traps in which to lure the killer when he comes for her. Eventually the killer is vanquished and sent back to his hell-world."
>
> (Scott, 2006) [2]

Nancy, as the quote by Scott suggests, is a very powerful feminist figure in the horror genre. She takes matters into her own hands, knowing all too well that she can only protect herself. Instead of taking up a phallic object at the end of the film, she instead relies on her smarts in order to defeat Freddy Krueger. As Scott states, she sets up booby traps (she does this in the film after studying *The Art of War*) and draws energy from Freddy at the end of the film in order to destroy him, rather than assume a masculine role in defeating him. I found the character of Nancy to be incredibly interesting when writing my female characters, who I also consider to be strong empowered females who only rely on themselves when it comes to confronting the Boy with Red Feet and the horror he (or it) brings to Our Immaculate Academy. However, due to issues of practicality, I chose to adapt the idea of a female character taking on a masculine role by using a phallic object, by having my characters use numerous weapons (some of which are considered phallic) not to 'bend' or alter their gender, but rather to use these weapons solely to the characters' advantage, for the protection and defence they provide. Disagreeing with Clover and other various theorists, I believe that weapons or objects necessary to a specific situation do not masculinize or feminize female characters. I believe that in today's society it is an archaic (and ironically sexist) belief that a female takes on a different gender role when picking up an object like a chainsaw, a machete/panga or a knife, as in a dangerous situation they will use whatever weapon is at

[2] Scott, C. (2006) Is the Final Girl an Excuse? Accessed 08/06/13 from the World Wide Web: cinemademerde.com/Essay-Final_Girl.shtml

their disposal in order to protect themselves, regardless of the connotations that come with wielding such a weapon.

There is still a sense of the phallic, and the feminine being invaded (and to an extent, raped) by the masculine in my novel, and I have chosen to use the world of the convent to subtly convey this idea. Convents in general are known as spaces of serenity and purity. In this novel an element arrives and occupies this space, rotting it from the core outwards. Not only does this defamiliarize a familiar image or idea one might have of a place like a convent, but the unknown entity eating away at what is left of the purity of a convent like Our Immaculate Academy may be seen, in sexual terms, as the demonic phallic.

One of the ideas I had when approaching this novel was to create, not a feminist text per se, but a story about modern independent women who are removed from society (in Electra's case, thrown into a boarding school by her careless mother for no apparent reason, just like the other student characters in *Our Immaculate*). I wanted the story to revolve around women who are faced with an unimaginable horror, and how they choose to be survivors rather than victims – 'victim' being a label that is identified far too many times with women in all forms of literature (even Clover defines the final girl as a 'victim-hero' rather than a 'survivor-hero'). The last thing I wanted to do with *Our Immaculate* was tell the story from the perspective of the 'final girl', in fact, more than anything I tried to subvert this trope by having one of the 'immoral' survive. I wanted to provide the unfortunate 'immoral' with a voice. A female character should be able to 'have fun' (in this sense smoke weed, bunk class, be mean, selfish and a somewhat disagreeable and nasty character) and still be able to survive the horror. Those in my novel who fall into the 'final girl' trope are the Celibacy Girls, who are not only a few of the first to die, but are transformed into hideous creatures who in turn are the ones who slaughter the other girls trapped underneath the school in the tunnels.

Having an 'immoral' character survive the horror, and the conventional 'final girls' be the first to fall prey to it, are only two examples of how I went about subverting horror conventions within the novel. Other examples shall be discussed further on when discussing the weird fiction and Giallo genres.

I also found that powerful female characters from history helped immensely with reinforcing the subversion of this trope in my novel, one being the monster Medusa.

8.1 Medusa and the Dolls

The dolls in the novel are based on the ancient Greek myth of Medusa. In the book *Greek Myths and Legends* by Cheryl Evans and Anne Millard, the Gorgon is described as: "…the daughter of [the] sea-god Phorcys… She offended Athene [also known as Athena, the goddess of war], who turned her and her sisters into monsters; from then on, turning humans into stone became her main pastime; was killed by Perseus, with the help of weapons from the gods…" (Evans and Millard, 1985). Publius Ovidius Naso, the Roman poet simply known as Ovid, wrote in his mythological narrative Metamorphoses that Medusa had angered the goddess of war when she caught the fair maiden being raped by Neptune (also known as Poseidon), the god of the sea. In a fit of rage, Athene/Athena transformed Medusa into an

ugly serpentine creature, so hideous that anyone who looked into her eyes turned immediately to stone (Ovid, 2002).

"…in 'The Odyssey'… Medusa is the guardian of terrifying places, either the nocturnal borders of the world or the underworld…" (Dumoulie', 1996). She appears in this role in Dante' Alighieri's *The Divine Comedy*, in Canto 9, verses 55-57 of Inferno as seen below:

> "Quick, turn your back and cover up your face,
>
> for should you see the Gorgon if she shows,
>
> there would be no returning up above!"
>
> (Alighieri, 2005)

According to Currie (2011) in her article 'Transforming Medusa', interpreters and theorists of the myth have simply forced Medusa to become a reflection of their own beliefs, fears and aspirations (2011). The idea of this mythological creature as a mirror of sorts has always fascinated me, and it was an idea I sought to explore further while creating different antagonistic forces opposing the students locked in the tunnels under Our Immaculate Academy.

Just as Medusa was regarded initially as the epitome of purity and innocence (being one of the goddess of war's priestesses), so are the girls who joined Doctor Hamilton's obscure Celibate Girls Society. They are held in high regard by their principal, for their virtuous ways and classic morals, but are viewed by students outside of the society in a rather unflattering and negative light. The protagonist Electra simply hates them, not because she sees them as enemies, rather because she views the society as pathetic, and refers to the girls as 'brown-nosers' and the like frequently in the novel.

The traditional final girl trope is used against the survivors in my novel as I invert the convention into one of the main antagonistic forces at work. Doctor Hamilton, who the Celibates worship to some extent as an almost deified figure, at the command of the BWRF, transforms them into the dolls, as they are considered by their principal to be perfectly suited to carry out the BWRF's plan.

The dolls are similar to the idea of a cyborg, in that they are both natural and biological. They represent and reflect the ugliness of an institution like Our Immaculate Academy, and the inherent nastiness of the student body. Not only is their sole purpose to eat the students trapped in the tunnels, only to be eaten in turn by the entity the BWRF represents, but, like Medusa, they are guardians of the tunnels. They make sure no student makes it out alive. One may say that because the students under the tunnels have seen the dolls with their own eyes, there is little (if any) chance of escape. In fact, the only way Electra and Delphi leave the tunnels both times is because of the help of Malin, one of the Celibates.

However, as the rejected dolls are still left in the tunnels at the end of the novel, the reader may speculate over whether or not Electra and Delphi shall be forced to return under the school and confront the three remaining dolls a final time in order to truly survive and defeat

the terror. Although the ritual ended prematurely and the nuns, Coach Vikus and Doctor Hamilton were slaughtered, the rejected dolls represent remnants of the BWRF's power, as do the Gorgons who represent the goddess of war's scorn. What little is left of the BWRF's power shall continue to fester and exist at Our Immaculate for as long as the rejected dolls are alive.

Examining the myth of Medusa as a reflective terror further, I used the dolls as a device to hint to the survivors, the prey and the readers of the novel, at what horror is truly at work. The true antagonistic entity, the BWRF in its original form, cannot be understood. As it is from another dimension, it is unfamiliar in all aspects, from its appearance to its true intentions. The dolls represent this unknown fear, as Medusa does according to Dumoulie': "…It would seem that fear experienced at the sight of Medusa's head is the terror of discovering the secret behind the representation of the image…" (Dumoulie', 1996:8). The dolls are keepers of a secret too horrifying to uncover, and besides what they are capable of in terms of mutilating and killing their prey, that is where their true horror lies: the representation of unfathomable terror.

8.2 Electra

Electra, the main protagonist is loosely based on the vengeful princess of Mycenae, Electra (or Leodice as she is referred to by Homer in *The Illiad*) who witnessed the brutal murder of her father Agamemnon by the hands of her mother Clytemnestra and her uncle Aegisthus. The Grecian princess is a powerful character, cast out by her mother after her father's death and forced to be a slave until the arrival of her twin brother Orestes prompts her to take vengeance on the people who wronged her and Agamemnon. She has been described in the past as vindictive and manipulative, but she is empowered by her anger and her determination to right all her misfortunes (Leodice actually means "people-justice" in Greek).

The female characters in *Our Immaculate* are also based loosely on the convention of Gothic horror characters which is described below by Ann Trent in her online paper *Conventions of Gothic Horror*:

> "…The Gothic hero is often an isolated or 'marked' figure who must restore himself [or herself] to society… A figure of evil, sometimes with a relationship to the supernatural, is often in opposition to the hero. Women play significant roles in gothic novels, they are depicted as victims of tyrannical and evil men…" (Trent, 1999)[3]

Electra Almacy has become a seemingly isolated and marked figure when she is stripped of her title as head girl when her principal Doctor Hamilton catches her smoking marijuana behind a bush on campus, a day before the events of the novel take place. She has a falling out with one of her best friends, Delphi, when she tries to stop a fight between her and Liezl, and her reputation within the student body becomes worse. However, as I have stated before, my characters refuse to see themselves as victims, rather, like the mythical Electra, they fight

[3] Trent, A. (1999) Conventions of Gothic Horror. Accessed 13/05/13 from the World Wide Web: http://www.ehow.com/info_8297238_conventions-gothic-horror-genre.html

back when confronted with the unknown evil. I wanted to subvert the final girl trope as a way to get clarity on what it means to be either male or female in the horror genre, and what a specific gender implies, and whether or not these implications can be changed. Other ways in which I played around and incorporated conventions into my novel are revealed in my discussions of the French Fantastique.

9. The French Fantastique

In Randy and Jean-Marc Lofficier's book *French Science Fiction, Fantasy, Horror and Pulp Fiction*, the French Fantastique is described as a literary or cinematic genre which combines the efforts and conventions of horror, fantasy and science fiction, which evokes phenomena and is left unexplained and inexplicable to the reader (2000). In my novel, not only are the origins of the BWRF left to the reader's imagination, but so are the entity's intentions, other than the fact that the BWRF is 'hungry'. This was deliberate on my part, as I didn't feel the need to go into any more detail about the entity itself, as I found the mystery shrouding the statue, the ritual and what eventually reveals itself during the ritual at the end to be very powerful.

What has always bothered me about certain works of horror, is when the actual horror is explained and 'figured out' by characters, as I feel the supernatural antagonist loses the power it built within a text when an explanation for its existence is revealed. An example of this can be seen in *The Ring* (2002) or even its original counterpart *Ringu* (1998). Both films are just as horrifying as the other, but both lose their sense of horror when the antagonist is discovered to be a vengeful psychic girl (or in *Ringu's* case, a young woman, or a hermaphrodite in Suzuki's novel *Ring* [1991]). All antagonists in horror hold power in the unknown, the moment a character or a reader becomes acquainted with what the antagonistic force really is, is when the entity's/serial killer's etc. identity is revealed and loses the mystery shrouding it, and therefore, it's power.

The true fear in *Our Immaculate* is not what happened at the academy, rather that those who survive, and the reader, still aren't sure what caused the tragedy, and whether or not it shall surface again.

10. Giallo/ The Spaghetti-Thriller

Giallo is the forerunner of the slasher subgenre of horror films, which brought about some of the greatest films of our time such as *Halloween* (1978), *A Nighmare on Elm Street*, *Hellraiser* (1987) and *Child's Play* (1988).

"…It should be understood then that the Giallo is something different to that which is conventionally analysed as a genre… the Giallo is not so much a genre, as its literary history might indicate, but a body of films that resists generic definition…" (Needham, 2011)[4]

As Gary Needham states above in his article 'Playing with Genre: An Introduction to the Italian Giallo' (2011), Giallo is quite flexible when it comes to the use of the term 'genre', as one film or novel deemed a Giallo may contain conventions that another may not have. Generally speaking, the framework a Giallo works with is that of a gruesome murder-mystery thriller where a psychotic killer stalks and murders a group of young and beautiful women. From my own experience of watching many Giallos while researching my novel, I have come to the conclusion that the murders of these young women are always brutal and visual, and that these poor victims are attacked when they are most vulnerable, whether they be alone in a library or a classroom, or taking a shower or sleeping. A popular example of this is Dario Argento's *Tenebrae* (1982), the story of a writer visiting Rome while a serial killer murders people associated with the writer, in the same fashion as the characters die in his latest novel.

According to Mikel J. Koven, author of *La Dolce Morte: Vernacular Cinema and the Italian Giallo Film* (2006), Giallo films and literature sometimes incorporates supernatural elements, where victims are faced with hellish monsters as opposed to demented killers.

This is seen in Lamberto Bava's *Demons* (1985) written by Dardano Sacchetti, Dario Argento, Bava himself and Franco Ferrini. In the film, random people are invited to an opening of a beautiful art nouveau cinema, only to be locked inside. One by one, people begin to transform into ghoulish demons which start to attack and feast on the others locked inside the cinema.

The supernatural is also used in Dario Argento's *Phenomena* (1985) about a girl who uses her strange ability to communicate with insects to solve the disappearances of other girls at her school in Aspen, and again in Argento's *Suspiria* (1977), about an elite ballet academy run by a coven of evil witches.

I would say that besides any other genre, *Our Immaculate* was influenced by Giallo the most. The way in which the stories are told, as well as the flexibility of the genre was very appealing to me, and, in true Giallo fashion, I changed a few of the conventions to not only suit my story within a South African context, but also what I wanted to say with it.

For starters, one of the ways in which I went against a typical Giallo convention was that the students, at least those within Electra's close circle, are always alert, and are never truly 'vulnerable'. Electra and Delphi especially are always carrying a weapon, whether a panga or a chainsaw. Even when Delphi goes blind, Electra stays by her side to protect her and keep on the lookout for any attackers, and is on the defence in case they are attacked. Although I love Giallo films I find it tiresome, especially in *Tenebrae*, how easy the female characters are to kill, and how pathetic they become when faced with terror. I didn't want those up against the BWRF to all 'sell out' to the entity and the horrors it brings with it, nor did I want

[4] Needham, G. (2011) Playing With Genre: An Introduction to the Italian Giallo. Accessed 12/10/13 from the World Wide Web: www.kinoeye.org/02/11/needham11.php

to inject them with a hyper-masculinity of sorts. I wanted them to be able to take care of themselves without a man or male character to protect them.

In Rick Worland's *The Horror Film: An Introduction* (2006) he describes the usual Giallo ending as one that involves finding out the identity of the killer, who always turns out to be a character, one the audience would least suspect, who puts on a façade of being sane throughout the film, only to show off his/her true mentally deranged colours in the last few moments of the finale (2006).

In the case of *Our Immaculate*, the BWRF is always regarded not so much an evil, as an otherworldly force, using Doctor Hamilton and the nuns at the academy to carry out his/its bidding. Going against this typical Giallo convention of the madman/woman 'wearing a mask' throughout the entire novel/film, I always wanted my readers to be suspicious of the principal and the nuns who have always been regarded, especially by Electra, as cruel and hateful, because they are only part of a fraction of the true horror taking place at the school.

The subversion of the final girl trope and the way in which I incorporated elements of the Fantastique and played with conventions of Giallo literature and cinema, is particularly suited in the sub-genre of horror known as 'weird fiction', which is a more speculative approach to the horror genre where an author is allowed to experiment and play around with current tropes and conventions to suit his/her intentions.

11. Weird Fiction

"Weird [fiction] ranges from the unsettling to the unknowable. From the disturbed to the destroyer of worlds. Weird is an antidote to the mundane. Fiction asks "what if" and offers possibilities. Weird threatens "what if" and shows things larger or more occult than our feeble minds can process." (Hall, 2013)[5] As the above quote suggests, weird fiction is a subgenre of speculative fiction which encompasses the ghost story and tales of the macabre (Joshi, 2001). One of the predecessors of weird fiction is H.P. Lovecraft, the author responsible for works such as *The Cult of Cthulu*, *Dreams in the Witch House* and *Colour Out of Space*. Lovecraft coined the phrase from Gothic horror author Sheridan La Fanu, author of *Uncle Silas*, while writing his essay Supernatural Horror in Literature where Lovecraft states that 'true' weird fiction is:

> "…something more than secret murder, bloody bones, or a sheeted form clanking chains according to rule. A certain atmosphere of breathless and unexplainable dread of outer, unknown forces must be present; and there must be a hint, expressed with a seriousness and portentousness becoming its subject, of that most terrible conception of the human brain--a malign and particular suspension or defeat of those fixed laws of Nature which are our only safeguard against the assaults of chaos and the daemons of unplumbed space." (Lovecraft, 1927)

[5] Hall, N. (2013) Weird Fiction: An Ode to the Weird. Accessed 20/11/13 on the World Wide Web: www.apexbookcompany.com/2013/05/weird-fiction-an-ode-to-the-weird

Basically, one of the major pillars that defines weird fiction is the inexplicable horror that threatens the protagonist and other characters in a novel or short story, which goes unexplained and remains unknown throughout the course of the story (similar to the French Fantastique). Unknown horror fuels the suspense and fear in stories such as *Uncle Silas* and *Colour Out of Space*, because as humans nothing frightens us more than the unknown.

While writing *Our Immaculate*, I found that writing within the weird fiction genre allowed me to incorporate elements of different horror genres and subgenres, in order to create a certain uniqueness in the novel. Just as Joshi and Lovecraft suggest, the horror in *Our Immaculate* is never explained as mentioned before, which intensifies the fear for both the reader and my characters. There are few hints to what is causing the horror – a boy described as having red feet, grotesque student-creature hybrids and an insane principal. There are also references to the occult in the novel, as well as human sacrifice and mutilation.

One of my intentions from the beginning was to modernize the weird genre by bringing in new ideas and themes which are relevant in today's world, some of which have existed in different genres (or sub genres) of literature for some time. Some of these ideas and themes include examining gender in the horror genre, by subverting the age-old convention known as the Final Girl trope (which I have already discussed), as well as having not only one survivor, but two. The main antagonist is not your typical grotesque slasher –killer, a blood-thirsty maniac who carries around an axe or chainsaw, but an entity which appears in our dimension in the form of a little boy.

12. Conclusion

Our Immaculate started with an image. As if a polaroid picture, in my mind I saw a school girl, her uniform covered in blood, with a panga in one hand and a decapitated head in the other, and from this image throughout the two years the Masters course ran I worked out the story. The novel went through many phases during the course. What started off as a dystopian science fiction novel ended up as a homage to the subgenres of horror which over the years I have grown fond of and which have inspired my own works in the past. From Giallo/spaghetti-thrillers to slasher film scripts and the French Fantastique, I wanted to combine all my favourite subgenres and write them all into the story within the South African context. Although on the surface Our Immaculate seems nothing more than a fast paced splatterpunk, it contains many ideas I have, not only of the horror genre and the conventions that follow it, but of gender roles in the genre itself. I wanted to bring something new to the South African literary scene, something that had never been written before in terms of the gore and the grotesque of the novel, and the characters in it that find themselves caught up in the incident which plays out. I played with common conventions and stereotypes found in the subgenres, one of which being the Final Girl trope. I inverted this convention by choosing instead to have the story revolve around the perspective of a protagonist who would have been considered in the early 80s-90s by Carol J. Clover as 'the immoral'. Instead of creating 'victims' who would succumb almost instantly to the terror, I chose to focus on the idea of

survivors, some who were prepared to fight the threat head on, others who, although coming across as scared, were determined to outlive the horror.

Another way in which I inverted conventions, especially when it comes to Giallo cinema, is by writing the primary antagonist in the form of a boy. The Boy with Red Feet, although not a boy, is a tribute to the Cthulhu Mythos. With the boy, I was able to play with the ways in which some children are viewed in the horror genre. Excluding works like *The Omen, Silent Hill* and *The Children of the Damned/ The Midwitch Cuckoos*, children in horror cinema and literature are usually vulnerable, fuelling the audience with the primitive instinct to protect them. This idea is twisted and warped when, like in the films above, the child takes on the antagonistic role which leaves audiences with unease.

This reflexive essay looked at the various mythological stories from ancient Greece that I was inspired by while designing characters- the tales of Electra, the vengeful daughter of Agamemnon, and the plight of Medusa. Both characters were discussed, in particular Medusa, in terms of the reflective and representative qualities found in the mythological creature itself.

In terms of the structure and narrative style I used, this essay explored the way in which I followed Aristotle's 3 Act Structure and my reasons for formulating the plot this way. I wanted to bring across a cinematic element to Our Immaculate, almost as if the reader were watching a film or reading a script, each page purposefully written to read like a scene in a script written by Dario Argento or Hideo Nakata. Aristotle's 3 Act Structure was able to accommodate my intentions and I was able to work out a coherent plot by referring to that structure. When it came to narrative style, I chose to take on the third person omniscient style, a perspective which allowed me to tell the story from my protagonist's point of view, with a few advantages.

Our Immaculate is gruesome, the characters are wicked and some are even cruel, and it ends in such a way that leaves the reader wandering not only what caused such a calamity within the confines of the school, but leaves many unanswered questions in the reader's mind: Where do Electra and Delphi go from the ending? Do they make it out the school alive? Is the horror over? Who is the Boy with Red Feet? I wanted the novel to end on a speculative note more than anything else, because nothing irritates me more than when a horror film or novel ends neatly, with the author or director 'cleaning up the blood' afterwards so to speak.

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