Pennywise Dreadful
The Journal of Stephen King Studies

Issue 1/1
November 2017
Contents

Foreword ........................................................................................................... p. 2

“Stephen King and the Illusion of Childhood,” Lauren Christie
........................................................................................................... p. 3

“Go then, there are other worlds than these’: A Text-World-Theory Exploration of
Intertextuality in Stephen King’s *Dark Tower Series*,” Lizzie Stewart-Shaw
........................................................................................................... p. 16

“Claustrophobic Hotel Rooms and Intermedial Horror in 1408,” Michail Markodimitrakis
........................................................................................................... p. 31

“Adapting Stephen King: Text, Context and the Case of Cell (2016),” Simon Brown
........................................................................................................... p. 42

........................................................................................................... p. 58

Review: “Maura Grady & Tony Magistrale. *The Shawshank Experience: Tracking the History of the
........................................................................................................... p. 59

........................................................................................................... p. 60

........................................................................................................... p. 62
Greetings Constant Readers, and welcome to issue 1/1 of *Pennywise Dreadful: The Journal of Stephen King Studies*.

*Pennywise Dreadful* is a peer-reviewed online journal that seeks to exhibit quality scholarship on the work of the American writer, Stephen King. Our intent is to create a platform for the publication of research which will sustain an emergent critical demonstration of King’s worth as a subject of scholastic interrogation initiated by publications such as Tony Magistrale’s *Landscape of Fear* (1988) and John Sears’ *Stephen King’s Gothic* (2011), and which has continued through the publication of a special issue of *Science Fiction Film and Television Studies* on Stephen King’s Science Fiction, edited by Simon Brown and Regina Hanson (2017), in addition to Brown’s forthcoming monograph, *Screening Stephen King: Adaptation and the Horror Genre in Film and Television* (2018).

*Pennywise Dreadful* represents a timely scholastic enterprise which recognises Stephen King’s heightened profile in academic and cultural spheres, as well as the enduring popularity of his literary fiction. Since we instigated the journal, and its accompanying podcast, in September 2016, King has continued to write prolifically, co-writing *Gwenty's Bottom Box* with Richard Chizmar and *Sleeping Beauties* with son Owen King. Several filmic and television adaptations of King’s work have also been released in the last twelve months. Nicholaj Arcel’s *The Dark Tower* and Andrés Muschietti’s *IT* brought King’s fiction to the cinema screen, while *Mr Mercedes*, *The Mist* and *Gerald’s Game* were all adapted for television. The propagation of King’s cross media convergence was highlighted further in July 2017 through the British Film Institute’s announcement of *Stephen King on Screen*, a season of film and television dedicated to Stephen King to commemorate the occasion of his seventieth birthday.

*Pennywise Dreadful* welcomes contributions from scholars and academics that offer innovative, original and scholarly rigorous readings of King’s oeuvre, and that examine the tensions and intertextual resonances that cultivate relationships between King’s fiction and contemporary literature and culture. The journal is a celebration of the cultural longevity of King’s work and provides a forum for presenting new research on King’s fiction and his contemporary context.

Those celebrations begin at Rereading Stephen King: Navigating the Intertextual Labyrinth at Kingston University on Saturday 11 November 2017; an event which culminates in *Pennywise Dreadful*’s official launch. Both the papers presented at the symposium, and the articles in this journal will afford both established and emerging voices in King Studies to showcase King’s status as an enduring literary and cultural phenomenon as well as continuing the process of addressing King’s apparent lack of critical recognition for his contribution to American letters.

Alan Gregory
Dawn Stobbart
Stephen King and the Illusion of Childhood

Lauren Christie

University of Dundee

Abstract

Stephen King and the Illusion of Childhood explores the application of magic and illusion in IT and The Shining. This article details the function of child characters in both novels, and demonstrates how their presence heightens and accelerates terror.

In IT, Pennywise the Clown changes his appearance according to each character’s personal fears, acting as a manifestation of their individual traumatic memories. The first section of this article explores the need for children to acknowledge and confront their fear. Instances that are uncomfortable to the child result in an inadvertent tendency to repress this fear, destined to remain dormant until moments of stress and uncertainty where it will plague the individual throughout later life. The eventual confrontation of Pennywise symbolises each character confronting their darkest childhood fear in order to move on.

While Pennywise embodies a variety of external fears and childhood monsters, The Shining’s Jack Torrance represents the fine margin between sanity and insanity. As opposed to a visible monster, Jack is a restructured creation of modern society: a silent monster suppressing a violent temperament and plagued by self-doubt and eventual insanity. The Shining explores the danger of a family unit pressurised by isolation (physical and societal), a wealth of internal psychological battles, and the malevolent forces at work in the Overlook hotel. These forces prey on Jack’s weaknesses in order to accelerate his insanity and attempt to kill his family.

Many iconic Stephen King novels explore a world of monsters, only visible through the ‘marvelous third eye’ of imagination. Nowhere is this more noticeable than during childhood. Samantha Figliola accentuates the link between imagination and perception, pinpointing the fact that children are not yet restricted by the “rational” adult world. This article will consider Stephen King’s illusion of childhood by highlighting key factors in two of his most popular novels: nostalgia for childhood and understanding of reality in IT, and vulnerability as experienced through innocent eyes in The Shining. Children naturally possess a robust imagination. They are certain both magic and evil exist in their world, revealing the

wonder (and fear) of an active mind. For every fanciful creature the imagination can create, there lurks a monster coexisting in the shadows. This belief in the unbelievable fades with age; many adults are immune to the monsters of childhood. Stephen King’s literary children remind the adult reader of this world long forgotten. King ensures a loosened grip on reality, allowing the reader to embrace their imagination (and all of the nightmares therein).

The adult tendency to repress fear and imagination is present in both novels. Repression is traditionally understood as ‘Some… emotion, or feeling- which has been submerged… The… appearance of the repressed create an aura of menace and “uncanniness,” both in [Sigmund] Freud’s sense of “unheimlich” - something that becomes apparent although one feels it “ought” to remain hidden’ (Clems 1999, 4). Fear of the ‘unheimlich’ compliments Figliola’s reasoning on the effectiveness of King’s work. Adults abide by the strict rules of rational logic (suppressing juvenile fears). They are immune to supernatural events due to a diminished imagination, requiring proof in order to believe. ‘To experience fear, calamity, and human savagery, however vicariously, is also to gain some appreciation of their reality’ (Clemens 1999, 6). King invites adults to rediscover childhood fear. In accepting this invitation, repressed ‘phobic pressure points’ (King 1981, 19) are brought to the forefront of the mind (re-establishing their existence). The interior disintegration of Jack Torrance demonstrates the danger of allowing these monsters to fester.

An overactive imagination during childhood is the cause and origin of many so-called monsters. They are created, expanded upon, and then destined to reside in the closet of a child’s imagination until summoned by uncertainty or fear. King declares that ‘we make up horrors to help us cope with the real ones… The dream of horror is in itself an out-letting… it may well be that the mass-media dream of horror can sometimes become a nationwide analyst’s couch’ (King 1981, 27). Tony Magistrale and Michael Morrison argue that regardless of how well ‘Americans… [insulate] themselves against the random intrusiveness of violence’, one can never predict an erratic mind. ‘Children are pushed from rooftops for candy bars… Some people escape… reality of such horrors by denying their existence… Horror… prefers to see the reality flushed out into the open… watching our collective and personal fears… affords the audience… control over such experience’ (1996, 2-3). Realising the frequency and close proximity of horror enables society to acknowledge and process these fears. Edwin Casebeer discusses King’s ability to ‘create fiction… about that which we would rather avoid… is his appeal understandable in a way that affirms our… willingness to deal with… dilemmas?’ (1996, 42). Uncomfortable issues that are ordinarily overlooked are given centre stage, resulting in a mixture of shock and therapy for the reader. It can be argued that King’s obsession with collective anxieties, originates from traumatic experiences in his own childhood:

The event occurred when I was barely four… I had gone off to play at a neighbour’s house- a house that was near a railroad line… I came back… as white as a ghost. I would not speak for the rest of that day… It turned out that the kid I had been playing with had been run over by a freight train while playing on or crossing the tracks... I have no memory of the incident at all… To which… Janet Jeppson (who is a psychiatrist as well as a novelist) said: “But you’ve been writing about it ever since.” (King 1981, 102-103).

Jeppson correlates a link between King’s subject matter and the influence this event has had on his psyche. King’s writing focuses on traumatic incidents and anxieties in order to draw personal horrors out of the subconscious and into the open. King admits to the plethora of internal monsters that plague him on a daily basis. Writing about them raises awareness, thereby limiting their control. Regardless of origin, failing to confront the monster at this early age results in a latent fear within the depths of the mind.

King creates monsters that represent the wealth of internal struggles children face whilst growing up. For maximum impact to the adult reader, King’s work often reflects themes which are present in fairy tales. Examples of corrupt adults, ‘King’s… child-heroes must at some point do battle against… the evils affiliated with, adulthood’ the strength of friendship, ‘his protagonists, like Grimm’s Hansel and
Gretel… form strong small-group allegiances to overcome the adult evil’, and an ongoing supernatural presence (Magistrale 1992, 36). The key point to note is the desire to target ‘the evils affiliated with, adulthood’ such as parental neglect, alcoholism and child abuse. This alerts the adult reader to the juvenile helplessness of innocent children. ‘King considers fairy tales the scariest existing stories… the stories for children form a conduit leading to what adults call horror stories’ (Stengrell 2007, 111-112). Acknowledging this link solidifies a positive connection between the two genres. In order to truly terrify, the writer must target weaknesses of an adult reader. ‘Fairy tales… [make] us regress… into childhood. King… employs fairy tales… to address the child inside every adult’ (ibid: 111-112). Heidi Stengrell observes that King wishes to create adult fairy tales in order to transport readers to a state of juvenile wonder, adrenaline and fear. The adrenaline experienced from horror is not dissimilar to the childlike adrenaline evoked from Jack rushing down the beanstalk to flee the giant.

**Manifestation and Magic in *IT***

*IT* explores illusion, deceit and the power of imagination. Effective disguise provides a contrast between the external and internal appearance of the monster, and of Derry itself. The first section of *IT* tests the power of friendship and bravery of the seven child protagonists (the Losers’ Club). As the novel progresses these characters return to Derry as adults summoned by the reawakening of IT. As with their predecessors, ageing has resulted in repressed memories and loss of imagination. Returning to Derry signifies the necessity of each character to confront fears of their past. As with *The Shining*, children are forced to realise that not all adults can be trusted. Adult negligence is evident throughout the novel, ‘Derry’s adults profess a love for their children, but… there are no concrete examples of… panic… surrounding the disappearance of so many young people… the seven children are brought together… by virtue of parental neglect or cruelty… Denborough realises that the imaginative gap separating children from their parents is responsible for their blindness’ (Magistrale 2003, 185). These adults who are not intentionally cruel are merely ignorant. This ignorance results in their blindness regarding the monsters of Derry.

Personal turbulence is often utilised to build a relationship between the reader and character, ‘Like the fairy tale, the horror story relies upon… the breakup of familial relationships, death, isolation, separation. In both genres the reader is forced to engage these issues [and] confront them’ (Magistrale 1992, 34). King places his child characters in traumatic situations as a form of therapy for the reader, these issues can only be resolved through confrontation. On discussing the inspiration for the novel, ‘I had something fixed in my mind about bringing together all my thoughts on monsters and the children’s tale, “Three Billy Goats Gruff,”… I walked all over town… I would notice these four-foot-deep drifts of dead flowers… This is what we don’t see aboveground’ (Magistrale 2003, 3-4). King’s exploration of Bangor demonstrates a contrasting world above and below ground. This children’s tale he refers to explores three goats tempted by the promise of food, ‘They loved to eat sweet grass… in the distance they could see a field that was full of lush sweet scrummy grass, but alas there was only one way to get to it- over a rickety bridge over a stream. But under the bridge lived a terrifically terrifying terrible troll called Trevor’ (Asbjørnsen 1841). In order to reach paradise these goats must first confront the dangerous troll. Bravery and strength triumph over evil in the conclusion, as the Big Billy Goat ‘bent his head and bravely charged at the troll… tossing him into the stream below… never to be seen again’ (Asbjørnsen 1841). ‘Bravely’ charging towards the monster mirrors the bravery required to destroy IT. Creating a horror story that is thematically influenced by a children's tale subconsciously transports the reader back to their childhood. *IT* becomes a modern day fairy tale, as a group of children unite to battle a monster that is a culmination of childhood fears. Critic Jack Zipes considers the positive influence of fairy tales, ‘I believe that we have been attracted to fairy tales because they are survival stories with hope… However, only certain ones remain with us… attach themselves to our brains so that we will remember them’ (2006, 27). This inbuilt desire that good will prevail is a feeling that remains from childhood, and one that is often applied to horror stories.
Amalgamating different viewpoints and time periods demonstrates the confidence of the Losers’ Club as children, and their apprehension as adults; thus offering synthesis for the reader. A subconscious desire to forget results in memory gaps as adults – memories that gradually return the closer the protagonists are to the vicinity of Derry. Stan Uris describes to his wife a vague awareness of memories resurfacing ‘Sometimes…I have a… bad dream… Something that should be over and isn’t… My whole pleasant life has been nothing but the eye of some storm I don’t understand… But then it just… fades. The way dreams do’ (King 1987, 62-64). King is disclosing key information to merit an explanation, but withholds enough to maintain intrigue. Stan’s word choice in describing this ominous feeling as a ‘bad dream’ and his awareness of an ‘eye of some storm’ represents the resurface of memories and monsters. The underlying feeling of terror begins to reveal Stan’s fragile mind:

The bathroom was lit by fluorescent tubes. It was very bright. There were no shadows. You could see everything, whether you wanted to or not… Stanley lay… His head had rolled so far back on his neck… His mouth hung open… His expression was one of abysmal, frozen horror… He had slit his inner forearms open… He had dipped his right forefinger in his own blood and had written a single word… in two huge, staggering letters… his final impression on the world… It seemed to cry out at her: IT’ (King 1987, 68-69).

The harsh lighting in this passage mirrors the harsh reality of the situation for both Stan (with the return of IT) and for his wife. Lack of shadow represents the exposure of repressed memories that normally reside in the silhouette of the subconscious, the bright lights symbolising Stan’s recollection, and suicide reflecting his inability to cope. Stan’s suicide is a representation of the decline of the fairy tale in modern society, ‘The fairy tale had lost its deeper significance by the beginning of the twentieth century because it had not and could not develop the… means to deal with the torn relationship between the imagination and reality’ (Zipes 2006, 92). Stan’s suicide represents horror seeping into reality. The frequency of horror in society has destroyed previous boundaries between imagination and reality.

Anxiety and panic are exhibited from each character as they are summoned back to Derry. King accentuates this through interior monologue. Richard Tozier considers that ‘…at some point during the next hour… it was as if he had died and had yet been allowed to make… his own funeral arrangements’ (King 1987, 71). Ben Hanscom explains fear, and loss of memories:

I was just a kid… What scared me was… realising… I’d forgotten everything about being a kid… Did you ever hear… of having an amnesia so complete you didn’t even know you had amnesia… I’m scared almost insane by whatever else I may remember before tonight’s over, but how scared I am doesn’t matter, because it’s going to come anyway (King 1987, 90-91).

Acceptance of the inevitable return is present as Ben explains ‘how scared I am doesn’t matter, because it’s going to come anyway’. Stan’s suicide and Richie and Ben’s ominous feelings offer an ideal segue between the first phase of the novel, and the reunion of the Losers’ Club as adults. Although they are unable to pinpoint exact reasoning, an overwhelming desire to avoid Derry is felt by each character. King’s gradual revelation of information mirrors the gradual return of memories for the characters.

The pacing of this work heightens the imminent danger of the situation. A slower pace is applied to describe the exact details of character deaths, and the appearance of various monsters. King’s employment of in-depth character portrayal ensures a close bond between reader and character; therefore when a character is brutally murdered, it is more horrific for the reader. Once the Losers’ Club return to Derry, alongside the literal application of homecoming each character is aware of the passing of time:

although it may be immortal… we are not… when it awakes, it is the same, but a third of our lives has gone by. Our perspectives have narrowed; our faith in the magic that makes magic possible, has worn off… And now, now that we no longer believe in Santa Claus… or the troll under the bridge, it is ready for us. Come on back, it says… Bring your jacks and your marbles and
your yo-yos! We'll play. Come on back and we'll see if you remember the simplest thing of all: how it is to be children, secure in belief and thus afraid of the dark (King 1987, 880).

The Losers’ Club express their internal anxiety regarding ageing. This has not only made them physically weaker, but has diminished their mental agility and belief in the unbelievable. Referring to childhood images such as ‘jacks’, ‘marbles’ and ‘Santa Claus’ King conjoins these emblems of innocence with the unshakeable faith of childhood ideals. ‘Secure in belief and thus afraid of the dark’ refers to the union of confidence, imagination and juvenile fear. This passage highlights the necessity that all adults must eventually return to their juvenile state in order to confront the monster of their past. The reawakening of IT has summoned the children back to Derry, in their current adult state. Revisiting favoured haunts from their past accelerates the return of memories:

He turned one of the skateboard’s scuffed wheels… It called up something very old in Bill’s chest… Bill put the skateboard on the sidewalk and put one foot on it… In his mind Bill saw himself… on the kid’s avocado skateboard… his bald head gleaming in the sun… He saw himself coming down on his ass… “You were guilty of two major lapses, Mr Denbrough. The first was mismanagement of a skateboard. The second was forgetting that you are now approaching forty years of age”… “I guess not,” he said (King 1987, 589-590).

Derry is inviting Bill back to his past through this skateboard. This passage emphasises the lack of bravery, and the adult tendency to over-analyse a situation. These thoughts originate with an initial ‘very old’ instinctive desire to ride the skateboard, then transform into overwhelming anxiety. Bill is applying adult imagination, tarnishing an innocent activity with doubt and self-preservation. John Sears highlights this mixture of desire and fear, as he explains ‘It explores at great length the mixed desire for and horror of returning to and re-acting childhood events’ (2011, 16). The detailed description of the ‘avocado-green skateboard’ and the young child starkly contrasts with Bill’s ‘bald head gleaming in the sun’, furthering the unnatural combination of an adult in a child’s world. Bill can only imagine injury and consequence.

Traumatic flashbacks frequently interrupt the internal journey back to childhood:

Too many shadows… Richie… suddenly wondered what he would do if a hand or a claw sprang out of those leaves… Richie heard snarling sounds… He saw loafers descend…Richie stood frozen, suddenly knowing what was coming for them… The face of the Werewolf suddenly swam out of the dark… There was no zipper on the thing’s jacket; instead there were big fluffy orange buttons, like pompoms. The other thing was worse. It was the other thing that made him feel as if he might faint, or just give up and let it kill him. A name was stitched on the jacket… RICHIE TOZIER (King 1987, 375-381).

Stricken with anxiety at the thought of ‘a hand or a claw’ coming out to grab him is a typical example of imagination removing logic in order to accelerate terror. This thought process is one King admits to personally, ‘I don’t like to sleep with one leg sticking out… if a… hand ever reached out from under the bed and grasped my ankle, I might scream…The thing under my bed waiting to grab my ankle isn't real… I also know that if I’m careful to keep my foot under the covers, it will never be able to grab my ankle’ (King 2007, 7). An overactive imagination enhances the reality of Richie’s terror. Richie is the only character that can identify the monster and therefore is ‘frozen’ with fear. Acknowledging the lack of zipper represents the reality of the situation; there is no way of unmasking something that is real. The ‘orange buttons, like pompoms’ are a stark reminder of the culprit behind these illusions. Recognition of his own name on the jacket evokes feelings of terror due to the fact Pennywise binds the monster to Richie, as it is a manifestation of his personal fear.

From the macabre opening of IT, one particular disguise has resulted in decades of nightmares and numerous cases of coulrophobia: Pennywise the Dancing Clown. King frequently transforms innocent objects (a paper boat), into objects of fear:
“Want your boat, Georgie?” The clown smiled. George smiled back. He couldn’t help it; it was the kind of smile you just had to answer… He reached forward… and then drew his hand reluctantly back. “I’m not supposed to take stuff from strangers… How did you get down there?” “Storm… blew the whole circus away. Can you smell the circus, Georgie?” George leaned forward… he could smell… cotton candy and… the cheery aroma of midway sawdust. And yet… under it all was the smell of… dark stormdrain shadows (King 1987, 25-26).

Ellipses elongate George’s death and the introduction of Pennywise. George’s inability to resist the clown’s allure is highlighted as he insists the smile is ‘the kind of smile you just had to answer’. This simultaneously emphasises horror of the clown and the naivety of a child. King’s decision to present IT as a childhood figure (symbolic of the circus, a childish pleasure) offers a demonic twist. The paper boat that George built with the help of his brother (a brotherly bonding experience), and the smell of the circus further Pennywise’s trap. At this point he is so enthralled by the magic, George is unaware of his proximity to a monster. Vulnerability is demonstrated as each child reveals their encounter with IT:

I saw the clown. He was handing out balloons to kids… Silver suit, orange buttons, white makeup on his face, big red smile. I don’t know if it was lipstick or make-up, but it looked like blood… it scared me. And while I was looking at him, he turned around and waved at me, like he’d read my mind… And that… scared me worse… the music too loud, the sky too blue… his bloody grin too red and too wide, a scream turned upside-down (King 1987, 700).

Innocence and horror are present as Pennywise distributes balloons. The reader is aware of the danger of Pennywise, however the parents remain unaware. This furthers the separation between adults and children with regard to awareness of danger. Details such as ‘the music too loud, the sky too blue’ completes a layer of exaggeration that is present with illusion, surroundings appearing too focused to be natural. This horrific illusion is furthered as characters recollect the make-up, and a smile that is either ‘lipstick’ or ‘blood’. The telepathic quality of Pennywise fuels the power of the monster, offering the most horrific entity personalised to each individual. Pennywise is symbolic of the corrupt adult luring children, ‘When adults think of clowns, they often associate them with childhood, but the children… always view the clown as an “adult” that preys upon children. Pennywise’s jocular persona first lures the unsuspecting child with the promise of pleasure and fun, and then turns… revealing that underneath… is actually an adult wearing a disguise’ (Magistrale 2003, 186). A clown provides a dual meaning for adults and children. Although an adult views the clown as a symbol of childhood, the child questions the figure underneath the make up.

Make-up and magic, objects that will attract children (balloons) and scents (‘smell the fair Georgie?’) are successfully combined to create a powerful, seemingly indestructible monster. Once the illusion is broken, reality sets in with the decaying smell of the monster underneath. The child characters realise that the secret to conquering IT is by understanding identity, ‘It was a werewolf for y-you… D-Don’t you s-s-see? It was a wuh-wuh-werewolf for y-you because y-you saw that duh-humb movie… I think It’s a gluh-gluh… glamour…The Himalayans called it a tallus or taelus, which meant an evil magic being that could read your mind and then assume the shape of the thing you were most afraid of’ (King 1987, 663-664). Once the characters grasp the origin of the creature they are equipped to tackle this monster.

The nightmare of Derry is concluded through the victory of the Losers’ Club. Mirroring the return of memories at the beginning of the novel, leaving Derry triggers memories beginning to fade:

He awakens from this dream unable to remember exactly what it was… he has dreamed about being a child again… he thinks that it is good to be a child, but it is also good to be grownup… Or so Bill Denbrough sometimes thinks on those early mornings after dreaming, when he almost remembers his childhood, and the friends with whom he shared it (King 1987, 1116). The fading memories of childhood signifies a loss of imagination. Relating events to a dream, ‘unable to remember exactly what it was’, offers a balance as each character returns to their state of ignorance.
before the phone calls. The passive word choice throughout this passage mimics uncertainty, and furthers the fading memories. King comments on the necessity for each adult to return to their adult world:

> After a while… Wendy and her brothers finally left Peter Pan… No more Magic Dust and only an occasional Happy Thought… the gods of childhood are immortal… it’s childhood itself that’s mortal… we have each exiled the Tooth Fairy… murdered Santa Claus… The imagination is an eye… As children, that eye sees with 20/20 clarity. As we grow older, its vision begins to dim… the job of… the fantasy-horror writer is to make you, for a little while, a child again (King 1981, 454-456).

In *Danse Macabre* King argues that adults must find a balance that allows them to embrace imagination and adulthood. Expectations assume adults will ‘murder Santa Claus’ as they grow older and embrace their own understanding of reality. However, as King points out, fiction can reunite the adult reader with their inner child. King’s illusion of childhood in this text awakens fear and imagination for the adult reader. This fear can take many forms: bullying, parental negligence, child abuse and isolation. Returning to Derry as adults, the Losers’ Club must rediscover imagination in order to confront IT. King demonstrates that ‘Adults without imagination are the worst of his monsters’ (Strengell 2007, 14). The key to departing childhood is to balance maturity, purity of ethics and juvenile imagination. Naturally with age the Tooth Fairy and Santa Claus will fade. As King demonstrates this magic can remain through the power of imagination, imagination that is reawakened through literature. Experiencing fear through the vulnerable eyes of children is a technique applied in many of King’s novels. *The Shining* demonstrates vulnerability as a child places trust in an abusive adult.

**Unmasking the Monster**

> Jack Torrance became a more realistic (and therefore more frightening) figure… I believe these stories exist because we sometimes need to create unreal monsters… to stand for all the things we fear in our real lives: the parent who punches instead of kissing… none shine so bright as the acts of cruelty we sometimes perpetrate in our own families.²

Jack Torrance possesses the qualities necessary to depict a terrifying killer. A monster masked by society, a ‘false face’ that is wrestling with failure, violence and addiction internally, forces the reader to determine which persona is the real Jack. This ‘cruelty we…perpetrate in our own families’ is present in both novels through child abuse. Tanya Gold argues that ‘The supernatural element is not the dread part of his fiction; this is what makes it palatable because King, essentially writes fairy tales. The real horror is domestic, as it is in life’ (2017, 38-39). Magistrale notes that ‘King’s… truest terrors are psychological in nature- emerging from daily life and besieging us with reminders like those articulated in *The Shining*… when a family comes unraveled no individual member is spared’ (1991, vii). Returning to reality can destroy a fictitious villain; a true villain resides within that reality, and succeeds in trapping the child. As with Norman Bates in *Psycho*, Jack Torrance represents a monster immersed in the everyday, one of insanity and brutality. Clive Bloom pinpoints ‘No longer does the external world threaten as much as the internal, and within that the ineffable demands of the will’ (1998, 3). The isolation that locks in the Torrance family with the monsters depicts the dangers of the internal world. Combining the pressures of maintaining a ‘family unit’ and the isolated setting of the Overlook hotel, Jack loses control of his sanity, the hotel and his family in the explosive conclusion. This setting mirrors the internal isolation experienced by each family member. The deterioration of a family and Jack’s sanity is detailed through Danny’s vulnerable interior monologue. Focusing primarily on Jack and Danny throughout the novel, enables the reader to appreciate the different functions of each character. Although one is an adult and

---

one is a child, they reflect each other. Danny’s presence is a constant reminder of Jack’s turbulent childhood, Jack heightens fear for the reader as terror is documented through a child’s eyes. Jack emphasises the adult inability to accept magic and illusion as part of reality due to a lack of imagination. As with the Losers’ Club, Danny is a representation of a character living by the logic of a juvenile world.

Literary devices such as premonition, flashbacks and epistolary narration inform the reader of vital information and heighten the terror through emphasising danger. This is most effective when Wendy uncovers Jack’s writing “All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy.”... the grammatically incorrect phrase... is written in third-person narrative voice, affirming that Jack Torrance, the professional author... did not compose this sentence- the hotel did’ (Magistrale 2003, 96-97). Magistrale observes that Jack is no longer in control of his mind furthering this mentally disengaged character. Gold notes that ‘King... fears insanity and... when he writes his nightmares stop... he wonders if he might have become a mass murderer without fiction’ (Gold 2017, 38-39). A character that mirrors King’s personal qualities and flaws (writer and addict) indulges this repressed portion of his brain: experiencing insanity through fiction.

As demonstrated in IT, the fairy tale influence continues in The Shining

“One is a child, they reflect each other. Danny’s presence is a constant reminder of Jack’s turbulent childhood, Jack heightens fear for the reader as terror is documented through a child’s eyes. Jack emphasises the adult inability to accept magic and illusion as part of reality due to a lack of imagination. As with the Losers’ Club, Danny is a representation of a character living by the logic of a juvenile world.”

Ronald T. Curran observes that ‘King uses fairy tales... to take the reader back into the archaic world... when parental power was both fantastic and absolute’ (Curran 1992, 33). The Shining succeeds in reminding Danny (and the reader) of Jack’s authority. The natural tendency is for a child to trust a parent; however there is nothing natural or logical about the Overlook hotel. Alice in Wonderland explores a young child entering a world of illusion masking social unrest, with adults such as the Mad Hatter and the evil Queen. Danny is a reflection of Alice, as he enters a hotel utilising illusion to disguise the evil forces within. Referring directly to Wonderland in The Shining ‘(the white rabbit had been on its way to a croquet party to the Red Queen’s croquet party storks for mallets hedgehogs for balls.)’ (King 1978, 237). King is highlighting the white rabbit that mirrors the topiary rabbit, and the croquet reference mirroring the roque mallet.

Illusion fades to expose the cracks of a broken family and a broken mind. Interior monologue highlights the flaws of each character, forcing the reader to question the strength and sanity of this family unit. The tone of the novel develops with the worsening weather, enforcing isolation for the family and locking in the monsters. King has invited a broken family with a stereotypical Americana façade into an isolated building full of malevolent intent. The opening of the novel details a seemingly idyllic American family, moving into a magnificent grand hotel:

The Torrance family stood together on the long front porch... as if posing for a family portrait. Danny in the middle... Wendy behind him with one hand on his shoulder, and Jack to his left, his own hand resting lightly on his son’s head... They watched until the car was out of sight... When it was gone, the three of them looked at each other for a silent, almost frightened moment. They were alone. (King 1978, 108-109).

Positioning in this scene exposes the superficial nature of the portrait. Danny is aware of underlying tensions between Jack and Wendy through telepathic exposure. Jack resting a hand on Danny’s head symbolises the dominance he expresses in his son’s life – Jack claims Danny as his property. Placing a hand on Danny’s shoulder, Wendy accepts a secondary role in her son’s life allowing the primary focus to remain on Jack and Danny. The emphasis on silence mimics traditional family paintings of the past. Silence is significant throughout the novel to highlight lack of communication within the Torrance family; each character battles their issues internally. King’s reliance on the superficiality of the ‘family
unit’ criticises the conventional sense of family and safety, as even those closest can never fully comprehend the inner workings of another’s mind. Portraying the Torrance family in such an idealistic way highlights the illusion of tranquility, masking an undercurrent of panic and rage.

Mirroring influences between Jack and Danny highlight their internal struggles. Danny is cursed with the ability to see into his parents mind, yet the inability to comprehend the information. Jack’s internal fear of failure is present from the beginning: failure as a teacher (due to his temper), as a writer, and as a father.

Childhood is a prominent theme regarding Danny’s lack thereof, and the revelation of Jack’s violent childhood. The more isolated the family become, the greater build up of pressure. This reveals distressing similarities between Jack and his father, and Danny and Jack:

Love began to curdle at nine, when his father… had beaten their mother… without warning. They had been at the supper table… And suddenly Daddy had been wide awake… the cane was whickering through the air, smashing against her face. Blood spurted from her nose… Momma’s spectacles dropped into her gravy. The cane had… come down again, this time on top of her head, splitting the scalp. Momma had dropped to the floor (King 1978, 246).

Disclosing an abusive father mirrors the current violence that Jack is attempting to suppress. As Jack shifts between use of juvenile language with ‘daddy’ and ‘momma’, this mirrors Danny’s behaviour. Unable to accept what Jack witnessed as a child, he has repressed this memory and has been psychologically damaged ever since. Considering this behaviour, ‘Jack is the child of an alcoholic; he himself, is an alcoholic, has an uncontrollable temper; is unable to hold a job… and abuses Wendy and Danny physically and psychologically’ (Ferreira 1991, 28). Patricia Ferreira argues that the flaws of Jack’s father have remained dormant in Jack’s psyche. Jack is now succumbing to the pressure of the Overlook and is inflicting the same fate upon his family. ‘Wendy and Danny are able to withstand Jack’s beating and escape his grip because they are able to see beyond the stereotypes of husband and father and comprehend the villain Jack really is’ (Ibid: 31).

Ferreira furthers this idea through highlighting that Wendy and Danny are not blind to Jack’s violence. They are able to maintain distance in order to defend themselves against Jack’s violence. In order to further anatomise dynamics it is vital to examine the male history of the Torrance family, and the significance of Danny’s imaginary friend Tony:

Only gradually- if at all- does a reader come to suspect an interrelationship between the middle names of Danny’s grandfather (Mark Anthony Torrance), Danny’s father (John Daniel Torrance), and Danny himself (Daniel Anthony Torrance)… when Tony stands close, Danny realises that he is looking at a kind of older doppleganger, a “magic mirror” of himself… “Tony” is the invisible dark half of a divided psyche, a malign dark-half that recognises its bleak kinship with the biological father. (Reino 1988, 38).

Joseph Reino explores the complex connection between son, father and grandfather. Flashbacks alert the reader to Jack’s unpredictable nature mirroring his father. Linking the Torrance men by name is King’s way of suggesting the same volatile instincts run in the family. If Tony represents the ‘invisible dark half of a divided psyche’ then Reino is portraying Tony as the Dionysian element to Danny’s impressionable mind. Due to his innocence Danny’s future is yet to be established, however he is visited by a character connected to his predecessors by name. King refers to the distinction between the desire to inflict chaos, and the need to repress it, ‘What we’re talking about… is… the… split between the Apollonian (the creature of intellect, morality, and nobility, “always treading the upward path”) and the Dionysian (god of partying and physical gratification)” (King 1981, 94). Relating a conflict of the subconscious with Apollonian and Dionysian instincts, furthers the implication that Tony’s character forces Danny to question the difference between right and wrong.

Danny’s character highlights both his lack and abundance of innocence simultaneously. Lack of innocence is present through exposure to adult scenarios and thoughts. Abundance of innocence and vulnerability is demonstrated through Danny’s inability to understand these thoughts. In one prominent
section Danny’s innocence is evident through his inability to read. Exploring fear through the eyes of a child, emphasises the strained relationship between Jack, Danny, and Tony:

“Danny… Dannee…” He looked up and there was Tony… part of him got up and ran after Tony into the funneling darkness… Snow swirled and danced… “Too deep,”… other signs flickered past his eyes… DANGER! LIVE WIRES… He understood none of them… Across the room was a mirror, and deep down in its silver bubble a single word appeared… REDRUM… A hoarse voice, the voice of a madman, made the more terrible by its familiarity: *Come out! Come out, you little shit! Take your medicine!* (King 1978, 33-35).

The complexity of Danny’s subconscious is explored as ‘part of him got up and ran’ after Tony. As with Jack’s ‘false face’, the reader must consider Tony’s actions and determine the purity of his intentions. Following him ‘into the funneling darkness’, signifies Danny’s ability to indulge his subconscious. In the darkness Danny panics, as the snow is ‘too deep’; this is the first warning of future events. The presence of literal warning signs that Danny cannot read build up to the ultimate warning, the ultimate sign: REDRUM. The mirror not only reverses the warning of MURDER, but also acts as a subverted universe of Danny’s subconscious- emphasised by the presence of Tony. The horror felt through recognition is established as Danny recalls the ‘voice of a madman’ is more horrific due to ‘its familiarity’. In this instance King subtly links Jack’s demonic calling with Jack and the Beanstalk, and the giant’s call of ‘Fee Fi Fo Fum’. This warning plagues Danny throughout the novel developing his frustration, whilst alerting the reader to the dangerous outcome ‘REDRUM flashes before Danny’s eyes… in… the same manner as “Tony,”… both… appear in moments of anxiety and loneliness… A frightening and malevolent figure, Tony appears at the “very limit of [Danny’s] vision, calling distinctly and beckoning.”’ (Reino 1988, 37). If Tony appears in ‘moments of anxiety and loneliness’ then this questions the intentions of this ‘frightening and malevolent figure’.

Throughout the novel Danny’s mind forewarns him of certain objects, such as a croquet mallet:

“What’s R-O-Q-U-E, Daddy?” “A game,” Daddy said. “It’s a little bit like croquet”… “Do you play it with a croquet mallet?” “Like that,” Jack agreed, “only the handle’s a little shorter and the head has two sides. One side is hard rubber and the other side is wood.” (Come out, you little shit)… “I’ll teach you how to play it, if you want.” “Maybe,” Danny said in an odd colourless little voice (King 1978, 72-74).

King often interrupts narration through parenthesis conjoining external communication and internal premonition. This technique offers an inconsistent chronological order, as it is not until after the family is isolated that Jack’s volatile nature and past demons are disclosed. Through utilising premonition as a literary device, questioning ‘roque’ piques Jack and Wendy’s curiosity with Danny’s ‘odd colourless little voice’. The reader understands the reason behind this, as Danny is unlocking future events. Once physical and social isolation sets in, the demonic forces in the hotel accelerate the deadly conclusion. The pressure of cabin fever furthers internal tension as each character becomes aware of the supernatural life within the Overlook:

Jack turned around… “what do you see?”… “Only my tracks, Daddy. But-“ “What about the hedges, Danny?”… “All covered with snow,” he whispered… “They scratched me, Daddy. My leg!”… Then Wendy was between them… The strangeness in his eyes seemed to break then. I’m trying to help him find the difference between something real and something that was only an hallucination…” “Daddy… I didn’t cut my leg on the crust. There isn’t any crust”… Suddenly he had it… “You know I’m telling the truth,” he whispered, shocked… The sound of Jack’s open palm striking Danny’s face was flat… For a moment they were still… In the fireplace another pine knot exploded like a hand grenade, making them all jump (King 1978, 322-323).

This interaction between Jack and Danny portrays the tension between characters, and the family (and mental) deterioration. Jack emphasising the difference between ‘something real and something that was
only an hallucination’ furthers King’s use of magic and illusion in the novel and the necessity for children to learn the difference. Ordinarily the distinction between realism and illusion is clear, however in supernatural circumstances it is impossible to reveal the truth. Danny’s telepathy enables his realisation of Jack’s awareness, but also his refusal to relinquish adult rational logic. The word choice of ‘the strangeness in his eyes’ breaking refers to the physical changes in Jack through possession:

With his own personal history of family violence, Jack, like the defective boiler, is always in danger of “blowing.”... Ironically, in trying to resist the promptings of his unconscious mind by relying increasingly on a rationalistic perspective, Jack only makes himself more vulnerable to possession by the unconscious. Even when he is already experiencing his own daemonic visions, he attempts to deny both his own and Danny’s experiences by dismissing them as merely hallucinations (Clemens 1999, 202-203)

Referring to the growing pressure of the boiler mirrors the pressure of Jack’s mental decline. Noting that Jack is resisting ‘the promptings of his unconscious mind’, Clemens argues that this preys on Jack’s unstable mind. Danny’s firm stance in this incident with the snow tracks as he confronts his father reflects his necessity to act beyond his years for the safety of the family; this is conflicted with repeated use of ‘Daddy’ reminding the reader of Danny’s age. The knot in the fireplace exploding ‘like a hand grenade’, is symbolic of the hotel’s omnipresence and responsibility for the growing tension within the family.

Danny is forced to relinquish his childhood at the end of the novel where he must confront the monster that has consumed his father. Danny’s ability to comprehend the difference between reality and illusion, provides him with the courage to attack the monster behind the mask:

The thing that was after him screamed and howled and cursed. Dream and reality had joined together without a seam... what Danny felt was relief. It was not his father... Danny said: “You’re not my daddy... you’re a mask... just a false face... And if there’s a little bit of my daddy left inside you, he knows they lie here”... The face in front of him changed... The body trembled slightly... suddenly his daddy was there, looking at him in mortal agony... He took one of his father’s bloody hands and kissed it. “It’s almost over.” (King 1978, 473-476).

This final confrontation between father and son demonstrates the extent to which Danny has prematurely aged. Recognising that Jack is ‘a mask... just a false face’ detaches Danny from his father therefore providing him with the courage to directly confront and defeat the hotel. Noting that ‘dream and reality had joined together’ emphasises the combination of childhood fear and imagination. The strength of mind exhibited at the loss of his father demonstrates how far Danny has come from the innocent child at the start of the novel. Taking ‘one of his father’s bloody hands’ and kissing it depicts Danny’s ability to confront the monster, as he is secure in the knowledge that his father remains in the possessed body; therefore he reassures his father directly. Noting how the monster ‘howled and cursed’ Alan Cohen observes ‘As Jack Torrance’s self-pity and mental agony mount, his ability to speak and think diminish proportionately. King thus depicts the horrifying transformation of an articulate, rational man into a howling, irrational monster’ (Cohen 1991, 48). Referring back to the lack of communication before the family move to the Overlook, the malevolent forces have abused this weakness to transform Jack into an inarticulate monster.

Stengell notes that ‘In King’s view children, like Danny Torrance, are able to deal with fantasy and terror on their own terms better than adults because of the size of their imaginative capacity’ (Stengell 2007, 170). This ability to cope with horrors through fantasy is present in the explosive conclusion, where Danny breaks through illusion to address his father directly. Jack’s inability as an adult to accept fantasy and terror results in his loss of sanity. Contrasting with the peaceful ending of IT, the destruction of the Overlook symbolises the end of the Torrance family unit, Jack’s sanity and Danny’s innocent childhood. Jack’s deceptive characterisation is a reminder of how daily struggles can manifest. Jack is the product of stress, violence and addiction: a monster of insanity.
Whilst this article initially addressed homecoming and the illusion of childhood, I will leave you with the thought of departing childhood, Derry and the Overlook. I am retiring King’s fictional towns and monsters that transported the reader to a vague recollection of something resembling childhood. As depicted by Jack Torrance, not all monsters are vanquished through confrontation. Some linger, some monsters live silently amongst us. It is the journey that forces a child into maturity through confronting fear, and urges adults to reawaken their inner child. King heightens fear for the reader through creating relatable child characters. As with traditional fairy tales, transporting the adult reader to their childhood inspires long forgotten imagination, magic and monsters; this enables the reader to question the adult understanding of reality. King dedicates \textit{IT} to his children, explaining that ‘fiction is the truth inside the lie, and the truth of this fiction is simple enough: the magic exists!’ (King 1987, 7). This personal message enables King to stress the existence of magic. If fiction represents magic, then the lie represents adulthood. Therefore this dedication allows King to remind his children to always retain the magic.

Awakening the imagination invites the monsters into the psyche. Some may be manifestations of personalised fears, others are psychological. The journey of vulnerable children in both novels acknowledge the necessity to confront their fear:

\begin{quote}
You can live with fear… Maybe not forever, but for a long, long time… it opens up a crack inside your thinking, and if you look down into it you see there are live things down there, and they have little yellow eyes that don’t blink. And there’s a stink down in that dark, and after awhile you think maybe there’s a whole other universe down there, a universe where a square moon rises in the sky, and the stars laugh in cold voices (King 1987, 430).
\end{quote}

Depicting fear as an alternative state of mind emphasises the significance of the subconscious. \textit{IT} addresses the darkest fears of the subconscious in order to terrorise children and adults alike. Tony represents the Dionysian subconscious, tempting Danny down the same destructive path as his predecessors. In both novels, embracing imagination mirrors the necessity to embrace darkness and fear. As our child characters mature into adulthood, and the adult reader leaves Derry and the Overlook behind, King emphasises the necessity to retain a childlike belief:

\begin{quote}
So you leave… as the sunset fades… But it is perhaps not such a good idea to look back… Best to believe there will be happily ever afters all the way around… You don’t have to look back to see those children; part of your mind will see them forever, live with them forever… So drive away quick… drive away from Derry, from memory… but not from desire. That stays… all we believed as children, all that shone in our eyes even when we were lost and the wind blew in the night. Drive away and try to keep smiling… Be true, be brave, stand. All the rest is darkness (King 1987, 1113).
\end{quote}

The mark of childhood that is left on the adult reader is a diminished sense of ‘happily ever afters’. Although ageing is natural, it is vital to retain a sense of childhood; the best qualities being that of hope, positivity and imagination. With these qualities fear will inevitably linger, however the juvenile desire for adventure will combat this fear. The urge to look back mirrors the childish desire to look under the bed, or in the closet. The child is conflicted with fear of the outcome, yet overcome with a burning curiosity. This represents the confidence that comes with childhood; what is unearthed, entirely depends on the restrictions of one’s own imagination. This article has outlined childhood nostalgia, understanding of reality and the significance of childhood imagination by taking the reader on a journey of adventure, monsters and fear.

As demonstrated in \textit{IT}, who is to say when the balloons are real, and when they are imagined? You once thought you could recognise a monster in a crowd, however Jack Torrance furthers the modern representation of the anonymous monster in society. Through retaining magic, illusion and imagination, the inner child remains alive in every adult. It may be clouded by the mundane responsibilities of adulthood, however a spark will remain. A vague recollection, a reminder of something you once knew is all that is required to reawaken this child within. A red balloon, an invisible friend, a phone call perhaps?
References


“Go then, there are other worlds than these”: A Text-World-Theory Exploration of Intertextuality in Stephen King’s Dark Tower Series

Lizzie Stewart-Shaw

University of Nottingham

Abstract

Although intertextuality is multi-faceted and variously defined, it broadly denotes the way in which texts are shaped by and can shape the meaning of other texts. Intertextuality is a common feature of the authorial style of Stephen King. Although King uses intertextuality throughout his works, it is especially prevalent within his magnum opus, the Dark Tower series. Like the eponymous Dark Tower, this series serves as the point at which nearly all of King’s fictional worlds intersect, making it a suitable text to explore in terms of intertextuality.

The objective of this paper is to explore the phenomenon of intertextuality from a cognitive-poetic perspective. I argue that such an approach is an appropriate complement to existing studies of King’s intertextuality because it uses current findings from the cognitive sciences to account for reader’s experiences of the stylistic features of texts. Text World Theory is a suitable cognitive-poetic framework to adopt for such an analysis because its three-tier framework takes into account the language of the text itself, the knowledge and experiences of the reader, and the context of the reading experience as it occurs. Drawing on Text World Theory and on cognitive approaches to intertextuality, namely by Shonoda (2012) and Panagiotidou (2010, 2011, 2012a, 2012b), I present a combined cognitive-poetic approach to intertextuality in King’s Dark Tower series and apply this model to various excerpts from the series.

Introduction

Stephen King is an author known for his distinct style. This recognizable authorial tone contributes to his “Constant Readers” enjoyment of his texts. One stylistic feature that King often uses in his writing is intertextuality, which adds to the rich fictional worlds of King’s multiverse. This paper aims to explore King’s intertextuality using cognitive-poetic (also known as cognitive-stylistic) analysis, which systematically focuses on the language of texts and its effect on readers by drawing on cognitive-scientific advances in language, thought and consciousness. The specific cognitive-poetic framework applied is Text World Theory (Werth 1999; Gavins 2007), a cognitive model of human discourse processing which can be used to map readers’ experiences of a text.

Stephen King’s Dark Tower series (1982, 1987a, 1991a, 1997, 2003, 2004a, 2004b) is a suitable work to explore in terms of intertextuality because it is a densely wrought text with an abundance of intertextual references with varying degrees of intensity. Within the current King scholarship, intertextuality has been a focus of theorists such as Patrick McAleer (2009). I propose to complement this research by focusing on the language of the text itself by undertaking careful stylistic analysis of various passages from the Dark Tower series. I intend to examine this intertextuality further, and more
methodically, by using Text World Theory. Since this theory claims to be applicable to any text, I aim to demonstrate this using King’s non-canonical work as the object of my analysis.

**Text World Theory**

Text World Theory is a cognitive model of human discourse processing originally created by Paul Werth (1999), and further developed by Joanna Gavins (2007). The holistic model considers the language of the text itself, the reader’s knowledge-base (including emotional experiences, dreams, hopes, beliefs, knowledge, memories, imagination, and intentions of each reader), and the context at the time of reading (for example, the reader’s disposition, environmental noise levels, etc.). All these factors affect the reader’s experience of a text. Text World Theory has an interrelated three-level structure conceptualized through a WORLDS metaphor. The first level is the discourse-world, or the ‘actual’ world, which includes at least two discourse participants. In written communication, the discourse participants are the author and the reader. This level deals with the immediate situation of the discourse participants and all their personal and cultural knowledge pertinent to the language situation. As the discourse participants engage in communication, they create mental representations of the discourse in their minds, ‘in which the language being produced can be conceptualised and understood’ (Gavins 2007, 10); this constitutes the second level, which is the text-world. The text-world represents the process by which the text is read and experienced; it is not an objective thing, but rather a subjective experience which varies slightly from reader to reader. The third level occurs when the text causes readers to depart from the original text-world and create new embedded text-worlds. This can occur through spatio-temporal world-switches, for example, when Roland and his ka-tet use doorways to travel to different times and places, and modal-worlds, for example, when Roland is given a vision of the universe by the man in black at the end of the first book. The intertextual-worlds that I propose below function similarly. The text-world and subsequent world-switches and modal-worlds include world-building elements (hereafter world-builders), such as deixis and characters, which creates the backdrop of the text. They also include function-advancing propositions (hereafter function-advancers), such as verbs, which propel the discourse forward. These three interrelated levels allow for a holistic consideration of a discourse; the discourse-world contributes contextual information to the analysis while the text-worlds and world-switches provide a framework ‘through which the precise structure and cognitive effects of individual mental representations can be examined’ (Gavins 2007, 10).

Text World Theory depends upon the text itself to trigger information pertinent to the discourse; this is text-drivenness. This information is stored in frames, or schemas (Fillmore 1982). What constitutes a frame is decided by human experience; essentially, frames are created when multiple similar experiences are consolidated into one collection. For example, multiple instances of reading Stephen King novels or short stories may constitute similar experiences for a reader. Therefore, when sitting down to read a Stephen King novel, a reader will activate their ‘Stephen King’ frame, if one is present, which holds previous pertinent knowledge of Stephen King specific to that reader; perhaps it will include information regarding his biographical self, his writing style, or his previous works. Although generally readers may share a good deal of frame knowledge in the form of cultural frames (see Werth 1999, 97), there is certainly degree of idiosyncrasy inherent in individual knowledge-bases. As Werth indicates, frames can be a bit fuzzy-edged and may overlap with each other (ibid: 106). Therefore, a reader’s ‘Stephen King’ frame may overlap with their ‘horror novel’ frame. The activation of this frame knowledge is key to intertextual meaning.

**Intertextuality and Cognitive Poetics**

Generally falling under the domain of Literary Criticism, intertextuality has been only recently examined using cognitive frameworks, most notably by Mary-Anne Shonoda (2012), Maria-Eiereini Panagiotidou (2010, 2011, 2012a, 2012b), and Jessica Mason (2016). Shonoda (2012) discusses how a reader’s

Shonoda’s (2012) primary premise is that the processing of intertextuality is similar to how cognitive theorists propose the processing of metaphoric expression, which, she claims, ‘involves the negotiation of networks of words, semantic relations and/or concepts, making the expression as a whole cognitively richer than a literal phrase that conveys the same general meaning’ (2012, 84). Shonoda indicates how, like metaphor, readers must use cues from the primary text to make connections by sifting through all the associations with the intertext stored in their knowledge-base. She further contends that processing both metaphor and intertextuality in this way allows for a cognitively richer discourse because of the textual-negotiation effort, which she calls ‘interpretive playfulness’, required on the reader’s part (2012, 84–5). Shonoda (2012, 90) argues that intertextuality encourages non-linear reading practices because it requires the reader to re-read the text (at least partially) to decipher the intertext’s meaning. For example, when a reader recognizes an intertextual reference to be present, but must backtrack a few sentences to decide how relevant it is to the text. This idea of the necessity of re-reading is similar to McAleer’s claim that King’s numerous intertextual references requires the reader to engage in circular reading to find all possible connections (2009, 138). Shonoda assumes the position that conceptual blending occurs in the processing of metaphor, but focuses on the interpretation within the blend as opposed to accounting for how the blending occurs. I agree with Shonoda’s position that intertextuality is understood in a process analogous to understanding metaphor, however I aim to explain how this process occurs in cognitive terms using Panagiotidou’s model and Text World Theory. I then apply my proposed cognitive-poetic approach, which combines elements from these models, to textual examples from the Dark Tower series.

Panagiotidou’s Model
Panagiotidou draws on Evans’ (2006, 2007, 2009) LCCM Theory to explore the readers’ role in producing intertextual connections and how these connections are identified and processed. This theory accounts for meaning construction based on the notions of ‘lexical concepts’ and ‘cognitive models’. According to Evans, lexical concepts contain purely linguistic information while cognitive models are ‘large-scale coherent body[ies] of non-linguistic knowledge which lexical concepts provide access sites to’ (Evans 2007, 12). This model illustrates how linguistic and conceptual knowledge work together and how meaning can be generated from the interaction of linguistic meaning and non-linguistic information. Panagiotidou (2012a, 40) points out how LCCM develops the ‘principle of the semantic potential of words’, which posits that lexical concepts can activate several cognitive models that sometimes differ from person to person. Panagiotidou (ibid) gives an example of a lexical concept and its subsequent cognitive models. The lexical item [FRANCE] can trigger many cognitive models stored in a reader’s knowledge stores, such as: GEOGRAPHICAL LANDMASS, NATION STATE, POLITICAL SYSTEM, and HOLIDAY DESTINATION (ibid: 32). Evans calls these primary cognitive models, which may give rise to secondary cognitive models. For example, the primary cognitive model POLITICAL SYSTEM gives access to secondary models such as ELECTORATE, CONSTITUTIONAL SYSTEM, and HEAD OF STATE (ibid: 32).

Panagiotidou (ibid: 50) claims that a certain lexical item can give access to a certain cognitive model she terms LITERARY ENTITY. She posits that a prerequisite for this cognitive model is that readers adopt a literary cognitive stance, which results from their engagement with the text. Adopting this literary attitude primes the LITERARY ENTITY cognitive model, which ‘contains the potential knowledge an individual reader possesses about the occurrence of the particular lexical item in another literary text’ (ibid: 50). She gives the example of the lines ‘Rose leaves, when the rose is dead’ from the poem ‘To—’ by Percy Shelley (1824), suggesting that readers may be reminded of Blake’s famous poem ‘The Sick Rose’ (1794) because of the lexical-item trigger. She claims that the lexical item [ROSE], found
in both poems, activates the cognitive model LITERARY ENTITY, which contains any stored information readers may have about Blake's poem. Panagiotidou calls these combined elements an intertextual frame, where text-specific information and intertextual knowledge triggered by the lexical item are brought together (2012a, 50). To summarize then, the lexical item [ROSE] can activate the cognitive models FLOWER, PROPER NAME, or LITERARY ENTITY. The last model, however, requires the reader to assume a literary cognitive stance.

Panagiotidou (2011, 174–5) also distinguishes three types of intertextual frames: 1.) A semantic intertextual frame contains one specific lexical item, such as a noun or verb. The aforementioned [ROSE] example is a semantic intertextual frame. This type of intertextual frame allows for more reader idiosyncrasy because of several possible associations with the lexical item [ROSE] (2012b, 166). 2.) A topical intertextual frame is constructed based on the identification of multiple semantic frames and has a more complex structure that can contain more expansive and more detailed information, such as settings, events or characters involved in particular texts. 3.) A stylistic intertextual frame is prompted when readers identify occurrences of formulaic phrases or genre similarities between texts. This paper focuses primarily on topical intertextual frames in King's *Dark Tower* series.

**Intertextuality and Text World Theory: Double-vision**

Before I consider how elements of Panagiotidou’s theory can be combined with Text World Theory, I will turn my attention to metaphor, another notion considered in text-world-theory terms by Werth (1977, 1994, 1999) and Gavins (2007). This concept must be considered to test Shonoda’s (2012) claim that intertextual meaning is generated analogously to metaphorical meaning.

Werth (1977, 1994) claims that metaphor, ambiguity, and irony all function in terms of double-vision, however he mainly focuses on metaphor. According to Werth (1999), a metaphor operates on at least two levels – which are labelled by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (1980) as the target domain (the familiar component) and the source domain (the unfamiliar component which is described in terms of the familiar one). Not only do they operate on two levels, both of those levels are seen simultaneously, as Werth claims metaphor ‘does not merely substitute one area of experience for another, it combines the two kinds of experience into a third new way of seeing’ (1994, 317). He suggests that metaphor is participant-accessible, which means that its content is assumed to be reliable and true because it is created by discourse participants, not characters. Because of this participant-accessibility, Werth claims ‘we can see that [metaphor] works by opening up an area of experience in terms of which the discourse topic can be (partially) interpreted’ (1994, 95). Werth calls this ‘double-vision’.

Further evolving Werth’s text-world-theory model, Gavins (2007) develops the way metaphor is processed in text-world terms. Drawing from Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner’s (2002) Conceptual Integration Theory, Gavins (2007, 149) proposes blended-worlds (termed as much to maintain the consistency of the world metaphor) to denote how metaphor is processed as ‘double-vision’ during reading. She proposes that metaphors are processed by blending two distinct spaces into one. Because discourse is fundamentally text-driven, the point where two mental representations meet is designated by the text and by its surrounding context. The specific background knowledge frames necessary to understand the metaphor are activated by the text as well. The blending process occurs when the discourse participants identify the connections between the two mental spaces. These spaces merge together as one new space, as opposed to one space mapped over another. This new blended space has its own emergent structure, which in Conceptual Integration Theory means it consists of components which do not exist in either input space independently (ibid: 148). Additionally, the text indicates the specific features of background knowledge needed by discourse participants to comprehend the metaphor (ibid: 148). She points out how the metaphor world ‘has a structural complexity which is greater than the sum of its component parts: rather than simply bolting two images together, we forge a rich mental representation’ with the emergent structure (Gavins 2013, 40). For example, consider the metaphor found in the fourth volume of the *Dark Tower* series, *Wizard and Glass*.
“If it’s ka it’ll come like a wind, and your plans will stand before it no more than a barn before a cyclone.” (King 1997, 178).

This quote is said by Pat to Susan in Mejis regarding the nature of ka. First, let me note the definition of ka, which is essentially fate or destiny, and also implies karma (Furth 2003, 197). There are actually multiple metaphors in this sentence. First, there’s KA (DESTINY) IS WIND, which is modified to KA IS A CYCLONE in the second independent clause. In the blended space, ka/destiny takes on the attributes of wind (perhaps strength, unpredictability) and those of a cyclone (danger, destruction). Also, there is the metaphor PLANS ARE A BARN BEFORE A CYCLONE, which suggests that Susan’s plans are flimsy and will be destroyed by ka/cyclone. Gavins suggests that the common points between the two input spaces merge together to create a blended world, which has its own emergent space. Consider Figure 1: Metaphor for a text-world-theory diagram of the blended-world. The world-building elements are the enactors ka–wind–cyclone and Susan’s plans–barn. The function-advancers are deciphered through the negated action of the barn not standing before a cyclone. Therefore, it can be deduced that a barn would fall during a cyclone, and therefore so would the plans ‘fall’, or not succeed in the face of ka/destiny. That the text utilizes a metaphor to explain how ka works instead of a straightforward sentence adds to what Shonoda (2012, 84) terms the ‘interpretive playfulness’ of the negotiative reading process, thereby enriching its aesthetic effects on the reader.

![Figure 1: Metaphor, based on Gavins’ (2007, 158) text-world diagram of blended worlds](image)

**Bringing it All Together: The Current Approach**

I aim to draw from Panagiotidou’s model and combine it with Text World Theory. Both are holistic theories and thus necessarily address textual information as well as each reader’s individual stores of knowledge. Each theory requires the reader to adopt a cognitive stance, which is common to Text World Theory and LCCM. Text World Theory’s concept of text-drivenness activating the reader’s background knowledge is the same as LCCM and Panagiotidou’s notion of lexical concepts triggering the reader’s
cognitive models. Finally, both theories offer an account of frames which compartmentalize a reader’s knowledge stores.

First, I will return my attention to knowledge, an essential property of both Text World Theory and Panagiotidou’s model. As aforementioned, in both models an individual’s entire knowledge-base is organized in different frames, or a collection of multiple similar instances into one conceptual storage-unit. Fillmore (1982) specifically discusses a semantic frame, which models the idea that specific words owe their meaning to greater knowledge structure. Evans (2006, 2007, 2009) draws on Charles Fillmore’s semantic frames, as well as Ronald Langacker’s (1987) notion of a domain or base to develop his theory that word-meaning is constituted in the interface between conceptual knowledge accessed by specific lexical concepts (Evans 2007, 21). I argue that Evans and Panagiotidou’s notion of the relationship between lexical items and cognitive models is the same as Text World Theory’s principle of text-drivenness, which refers to the notion that the language of discourse, be it spoken or written, decides which particular frame or domain of knowledge is activated in order to process the discourse (Werth 1999, 149–53; Gavins 2007, 29). When a reader sees Stephen King’s name on the spine of a book, that lexical item ‘proper noun’ activates the ‘Stephen King’ or perhaps ‘horror novel’ frame or domain. Gavins (2007, 29) describes text-drivenness as a control valve that regulates the amount of personal knowledge accessed from each participant’s own enormous store every time they engage in discourse. Therefore, when reading Carrie (1974), for example, a reader will not be inundated with impractical personal knowledge (for example, algebra or cricket games), but rather only those relevant to the novel (religious mania, telekinesis, prom, and teenage outcasts, to name a few).

Again returning to the Stephen King example, the text-world-theory principle of text-drivenness can be translated into LCCM terms. According to Evans and Panagiotidou’s framework, the cognitive models activated by the proper noun Stephen King would be primarily [PROPER NAME], with secondary models [RESIDENT OF MAINE] and [AUTHOR], the latter which may have a deeper model [HORROR], and also primary (for those who have read the sixth volume of the Dark Tower series) [LITERARY ENTITY], with the secondary model [METAFIGCTION]. In both theories, it is the lexical items that decide which knowledge frame or cognitive model is activated.

Panagiotidou’s model, however, differs from Text World Theory in that it concentrates on developing the intertextual frame rather than the text-world itself. Panagiotidou (2012b) did touch on Text World Theory in her chapter on topical intertextual frames. She claims that when topical intertextual frames are activated, they increment an ‘intertextually-built text world’ (ibid: 173). In her understanding, Panagiotidou does not think a separate text-world occurs because of intertextuality, only that current text-worlds are incremented via intertextuality. She also claims that Conceptual Integration Theory (Fauconnier and Turner 2002) works to explain how intertextual frames are created, where two input spaces, one containing text-specific information and the other containing the reader’s intertextual knowledge, come together as a blended space, which she calls an intertextual frame (2012b, 77–8). It seems then that there is a consensus between my model and Panagiotidou’s that intertextual processing can to some degree be accounted for by blending theory, however we differ in terms of conceptualization. Although Panagiotidou develops useful contributions to the cognitive understanding of intertextuality, I feel that my approach would offer a more comprehensive and richer account of this phenomenon.

On one hand, it seems that the reader simply draws upon their intertextual knowledge to create an intertextual frame, and increments it into the text-world to create an ‘intertextually-built text-world’, according to Panagiotidou. On the other hand, if the intertextual frame is particularly strong (what Panagiotidou (2010, 10) terms ‘fine intertextuality’; arguably, intertextuality in the Dark Tower series is especially strong), the aura of the intertext persists. Because this impression may continue to be noted by the reader, that reader may be aware of what Werth calls double-vision, where both text and intertext are present simultaneously. As the prefix inter-in intertextual suggests mutuality, the intertextual knowledge would never be activated if it were not for the matrix-world, or the originating text-world, and the textual
evidence represented in the matrix-world would not be understandable without background knowledge. I posit that the mutual effort of both elements occurs concurrently. Therefore, I propose that a conceptual blending takes place between the two components.

I suggest that this conceptual blending occurs similarly to the way Gavins (2007, 146–62) treats metaphor blended-worlds because of the double-layering inherent in intertextuality. Similarly, Panagiotidou’s notion of lexical items and Text World Theory’s text-drivenness account for textual evidence being the trigger for specific background knowledge frames, or cognitive models, being activated, in this case intertextual knowledge. Like Gavins says of blended-worlds, ‘the originating text-world is the target world of the discourse: the metaphor has been created to facilitate a better understanding of the target, which remains the central point of reference for the discourse-world participants’ (2007, 149). Similarly, I argue that the originating text-world, in this case the Dark Tower series, presents intertextual references so that it will provide a richer literary landscape for readers as well as a more complex understanding of the discourse.

As Shonoda (2012) points out, metaphor and intertextuality function similarly. In basic terms, they both explain (or enrich) one thing in terms of another. Therefore, based on this and the text-driven nature of both, I propose that intertextuality does function in the same manner, and so can likewise be represented in text-world terms as a blended-world. In my model of cognitive intertextuality, what I term a blended intertextual-world is formed when a reader makes connections between the primary text and its intertext(s). The connections are triggered via text-drivenness, specifically by one or more lexical items. These textual cues lead the reader to search their knowledge-base for the suitable intertextual knowledge, in Panagiotidou’s terms the cognitive model. When the appropriate cognitive model is found, the lexical item and that model combine to form an intertextual-world, which acts in the same manner as a metaphor blended-world.

Drawing on Panagiotidou’s (2012b) terminology, I propose that there are different types of intertextual-worlds, namely semantic-intertextual-worlds, where worlds are triggered by a single lexical item, and topical-intertextual-worlds, where worlds are activated by multiple semantic frames. This paper focuses particularly on topical-intertextual worlds because they appear to be more prevalent in the Dark Tower series. Analogous to Gavins’ (2007) metaphor blended-worlds, intertextual-worlds exist on the same plane as the originating text-world. As Gavins says of her blended worlds, ‘while [they] have their own structure – their own world-building and function-advancing components – they maintain a direct connection with the world in which they are constructed’ (2007, 149).

I argue that the plethora of intertextual-worlds in the Dark Tower series may lead to a deeper reader interpretation, of the series as well as of other King works that function as intertexts. The meaning contained in the intertextual-worlds can lead to building more complex text-world structures, greater character development, and stronger overall aesthetic texture (see Stockwell 2009) of the series.

**Intertextuality in the Dark Tower Series**

The Dark Tower series tells the post-apocalyptic tale of Roland the gunslinger, the last of his kind, and his group of followers (Jake, Eddie, Susannah, and Oy) called *ka-tet*, literally ‘one made from many’ (Furth 2003, 198). All the worlds in the Dark Tower multiverse, a term notably used by fantasy author Michael Moorcock to describe ‘infinite alternate realities that sometimes intersect’ (Vincent 2004, 285), are dependent upon the Dark Tower, the so-called lynch-pin of existence (Furth 2012). Bev Vincent (2004, 285) claims ‘It’s not unreasonable to speculate that the parallel universes in King’s creation all began from the same spark and were propagated independently, which would explain why so many of them are similar’. These parallel universes make up King’s multiverse, which spans across his whole oeuvre, thereby making the Dark Tower multiverse fundamentally equal to the Stephen King multiverse because so many of his books somehow intersect with the series. This interconnectedness of King’s work with the Dark
Tower series echoes the story told, where all the worlds – and universes – intersect at one point, which is the Dark Tower itself.

Many critics have noted the self-referentiality of King’s works (for example, see Reese undated). McAleer (2009, 138) points out how King’s Constant Readers have undoubtedly seen him ‘recycle characters, locations, and references in his stories, all to the effect of somehow linking his tales together’. For example, many stories take place in King’s invented city, Castle Rock, Maine, such as The Dead Zone (1979), Cujo (1981), and Needful Things (1991b). Clotilde Landais (2013) has recently discussed King as a postmodern author because of his use of metafiction and intertextuality. Also noting King’s use of intertextuality, McAleer (2009) illustrates how this phenomenon is prevalent throughout the series, but especially prominent in the last three volumes. Intertextuality with King’s own works outside of the series is the most dominant, however he also references Robert Browning, T.S. Eliot, and L. Frank Baum. The connections with the rest of King’s oeuvre have already been thoroughly mapped by ‘Tower Junkies’ on various websites and blogs (for example, see themdarktower.org; stephenking.com/darktower/), but McAleer examines it in more academic detail. I feel that the intertextual nature of the text also requires an additional reading, if not of the Dark Tower series, then of his other works to enrich the worlds presented by understanding all their components. Although McAleer asserts that the intertextual references do not necessarily add anything to the plot, I feel that they can enhance understanding of the series and that they do contribute to the overall texture of the series as well as the rest of the King canon. I find that connecting the stories engages the reader by re-activating the knowledge of stories previously read.

McAleer (2009, 138) suggests that if a reader was to re-read King’s canon while considering the entire Dark Tower story, with all its intertextual references, then ‘such becomes an endeavour to unmask the entire story behind King’s fictional universe’, particularly ‘as King’s works, presumably all come together to compose an epic tale told throughout King’s stories which culminates in the gunslinger’s quest’. McAleer suggests that King’s extensive use of cross-referencing perhaps forces his readers ‘to consider their role and function in the reading process, as well as the writing process, in that they cannot be passive vessels into which words are delivered’ (ibid: 139). This highlights the importance of readerly involvement in textual interpretation.

Intertextuality works to link two distinct conceptualizations, one being the originating text-world of the current discourse and the other being the reactivation of the text-world knowledge from a previous discourse that is now stored in one of the reader’s knowledge frames. By linking the two, the current text-world in focus is enriched and expanded. The reader’s attention is then shifted back towards the previous text-world knowledge (more so if it is indeed a text the reader is familiar with), only to be shifted again to the matrix-world; however, this time the reader has incremented information from one world to another, evolving the world-structure.

In many cases, King’s works are already rather self-referential and therefore the text-worlds depicted have many intertextual connections with other previous text-worlds. For example, many works are set in the same place in Maine. In King’s novel Pet Sematary ([1983] 2007, 20), Jud Crandall says ‘Lot of rabies in Maine now. There was a big old St. Bernard went rabid downstate a couple of years ago and killed four people’. Followers of King’s work may recognize this as a reference to his novel Cujo (1981). King’s other works are already elaborately interconnected, and therefore add an even richer layer to the text-world in the Dark Tower series. The stylistic conventions match with King’s thematic one – the text-worlds of his multiverse find their common link in the Dark Tower series the same way the characters’ worlds are described as the spokes of a wheel, joined together (and dependent upon) the Dark Tower itself. Opposite the title page of King’s novels published after 2003, there is a list of King’s works with the Dark Tower-related novels and short stories bolded (for the full list of thirty-four related stories, see stephenking.com). Although many of these share minute connections with the Dark Tower series, a fair few of them have a large influence. Several have characters that return to take part in the action of the Dark Tower series. For example, Randall Flagg (a.k.a. the man in black) from The Stand (1980) and The
Eyes of the Dragon (1987), Father Callahan and the vampires from ‘Salem’s Lot, Dinky Earnshaw, a breaker from ‘Everything’s Eventual’ (2002), and Ted Brautigan from Hearts in Atlantis (1999). These re‐occurring characters from King’s canon can be depicted as different enactors, a term explained by Catherine Emmott (1997, 188) as ‘past and present realisations of the same referent’.

The following analysis focuses on key instances of topical‐intertextual‐worlds in the Dark Tower series. As a caveat, I assume that an attentive reader, and indeed one who is familiar with King’s body of work, will make intertextual connections in the Dark Tower series. However, as with the application of most theories, if the reader is not attentive for whatever reason (for a discussion of readerly disposition and ‘literary alertness’ see Stockwell 2009, 43–4), then no intertextual‐world is created. Again, text‐worlds are subjective experiences that may vary from reader to reader, and potentially amongst different readings by the same reader. Therefore, intertextual meaning is not necessarily achieved, but I argue that this type of meaning is sought after by attentive King Constant Readers. I do not claim to offer a comprehensive analysis of the entire seven‐volume Dark Tower series, but I will attempt to address representative passages of intertextuality from the novels.

**Topical‐intertextual‐worlds**

As early as the second volume of the series, The Drawing of the Three (1987a), references to King’s oeuvre can be seen. Take, for example, this passage:

One of these men had been a creature the gunslinger believed to be a demon himself, a creature that pretended to be a man and called itself Flagg. He had seen him only briefly, and that had been near the end, as chaos and the final crash approached his land. Hot on his heels had come two young men who looked desperate and yet grim, men named Dennis and Thomas. These three had crossed only a tiny part of what had been a confused and confusing time in the gunslinger’s life, but he would never forget seeing Flagg change a man who had irritated him into a howling dog (King 1987a, 282).

Here the proper nouns ‘Flagg’, ‘Dennis’, and ‘Thomas’, all being the names of characters in the novel, trigger the reader’s intertextual knowledge of King’s The Eyes of the Dragon (1987b). This passage intertextually links the characters and setting from The Eyes of the Dragon to the gunslinger and his world as it was ‘moving on’, or being destroyed. This forges another link between the text‐worlds of the Dark Tower series and King’s previous works. The world established here is a topical‐intertextual‐world because of the multiple elements pointing to The Eyes of the Dragon, which are the three characters’ names. Because of the blend between characters of both novels, the enactors of this topical‐intertextual‐world are Roland, Dennis, Thomas, and Flagg. The blend between both settings (Flagg, Dennis, and Thomas’ Kingdom of Delain and Roland’s crumbling land of Gilead) gives the reader more world‐building information about both places, which enhances the reader’s conceptualisation of both worlds independently. For example, the reader can place all their background knowledge of the Kingdom of Delain (such as the royal hierarchy and manner of speaking) in the same time‐frame as the fall of Gilead, thereby increasing their understanding of both worlds. This meaning is generated in the blended topical‐intertextual‐world.

Apart from providing more information about ‘a confused and confusing time’ in Roland’s life, this topical‐intertextual‐world allows the reader to increment new function‐advancers into their background knowledge of The Eyes of the Dragon. That novel ends with Dennis and Thomas chasing after Flagg, who poisons their king. The final sentences of the novel are: ‘All I can tell you is…that they did see Flagg again, and confronted him. But now the hour is late, and all of that is another tale, for another day’ (King [1987b] 2007, 470). It seems then that the passage from The Drawing of Three is the place for that tale to conclude. The description of Dennis and Thomas looking ‘desperate and yet grim’ is a function‐advancer that suggests the pair has been pursuing Flagg for a long time. The phrase ‘Hot on his heels had come two men’ is another function‐advancer that alerts readers that the pair’s chase is almost
over, and the confrontation with Flagg is almost upon them. Because Roland’s final memory of Flagg turning a man ‘into a howling dog’ immediately follows the reference to the three men, this function-advance may anaphorically suggest that either Thomas or Dennis may be turned into a dog. This possibility may seem more likely if the reader recalls Flagg’s magical abilities with animals playing a big part in The Eyes of the Dragon. Therefore, this information can re-activate the previous text-world knowledge of the novel and extend its ending. Indeed, revival of this previous story may invite a re-reading.

The blending between Dennis, Thomas, and the gunslinger is short-lived because they are not mentioned again in the story, therefore it decays. The intertextual reference to Flagg, however, primes this character for another appearance in the series. The affective nouns ‘creature’ and ‘demon’ and neuter pronoun ‘itself’ used to describe Flagg help to demonstrate Roland’s perception of the character as inhuman. The world-builders ‘a creature that pretended to be a man’ and Flagg changing ‘a man who had irritated him into a howling dog’ further suggest malevolence and inhumaness. Finally, the phrase ‘called itself Flagg’ suggests Flagg names himself, and thus his name may be false. This deceptiveness is strengthened by his ‘pretend[ing] to be a man’. It later becomes apparent that the man in black, also known as Walter or Martin, among other names (most with the initials R.F. (Furth 2003, 101)) is indeed also Randall Flagg. As one of King’s most intertextual characters, Flagg makes appearances in The Eyes of the Dragon (1987), The Stand, the Dark Tower series (1982, 1987a, 1991a, 1997, 2003, 2004a, 2004b), Hearts in Atlantis (1999), and The Wind Through the Keyhole (2012). His description as inhuman, malevolent, and untrustworthy matches with the man in black’s character from The Gunslinger (1982), as well as the characters in the other stories. Therefore, introducing Flagg as an intertextual reference creates connections with at least four other discourses, all of which can feed into the blended topical-intertextual-world if the reader activates these links, thereby enriching the conceptualization of Flagg’s character.

While every reader may not necessarily engage further than acknowledging that there is a connection between both novels, I argue that an especially attentive Constant Reader will seek out such intertextual links and will subsequently engage more fully with the intertextual blend, thereby finding more meaning which may enrich their conceptualizations of both text-worlds and the characters that inhabit them. I find that the subtle text-world and character development that can be gleaned from the above example is not necessary to the basic understanding of the series, but it does enrich the fictional worlds for those attentive readers; this arguably leads to stronger reader enjoyment.

In addition to intertextual links with his own works, King also draws upon many other authors. An excerpt from the third volume of the series, The Waste Lands (1991a), illustrates a more canonical instance of intertextuality:

I can tell him, Jake thought excitedly. He threw back the covers, suddenly knowing that the door beside his bookcase no longer led into the bathroom but to a world that smelled of heat and purple sage and fear in a handful of dust, a world that now lay under the shadowing wing of night. I can tell him, but I won’t have to . . . because I’ll be IN him . . . I’ll BE him! (King 1991a, 102).

This passage comes at the point in the story where Jake is having schizophrenic-like episodes where he is at the same time the enactor Jake in New York, who was never sacrificed by the gunslinger, and the enactor Jake of Midworld, who died when Roland allowed him to drop in the cave under the mountains in The Gunslinger (1982). The land that Jake imagines is on the other side of the door, which is a plausible thought because in the Dark Tower series doorways often lead to other worlds. Here he is convinced that if he opens the door, he will be back in Roland’s land, where he had died previously as another enactor of himself. He believes that he will be able to talk to that other version of himself about dying (‘I can tell him!’), then decides that he will actually be one with him once he opens the door (‘I’ll BE him!’).

Here the lexical items which make up the noun phrase ‘fear in a handful of dust’ may be recognized as a literary reference. If the reader recognizes this, they may then make the connection

25
between this phrase and T.S. Eliot’s poem *The Waste Land* (1922), which specifically comes from the first section ‘The Burial of the Dead’. This potential connection may be strengthened further by the title of the present novel, *The Waste Lands*. Additionally, if the reader is interested particularly in this intertextual connection, they may think back on other previous passages to make more connections, or strengthen existing ones, much the way McAleer (2009) and Shonoda (2012) suggest that re-reading practices are helpful for processing intertextuality. The reader may then find that the novel has as part of its epigraph a stanza from Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, and that the novel is organised into two books: one called ‘Jake: Fear in a Handful of Dust’ and the other ‘Lud: A Heap of Broken Images’, both including noun phrases from the aforementioned stanza. Hence, even if readers are not previously familiar with Eliot’s poem, they are given obvious clues to make world-building connections between King’s novel and Eliot’s *The Waste Land*.

The topical-intertextual-world that is created based on the intertextual reference from Eliot consists of a blend of elements from the poem, coupled with Jake’s character development. The reader must try to make sense of the intertextual reference by seeing what elements of Eliot’s poem can be mapped on to the present plot-line. For a reader to understand this intertextual reference in relation to the present text, they must first understand the phrase’s meaning in Eliot’s poem. As aforementioned, a stanza from the *Waste Land* is part of this novel’s epigraph:

A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,

And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,

And the dry stone no sound of water. Only

There is shadow under this red rock,

(Come in under the shadow of this red rock),

And I will show you something different from either

Your shadow at morning striding behind you

Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you;

I will show you fear in a handful of dust.

(Eliot 1922)

The phrase ‘shadowing wing of night’ may parallel Eliot’s repetition of shadow in lines 25, 26, 28, and 29. The synesthetic depiction of a world ‘that smells of heat and purple sage and fear in a handful of dust’ draws similarities between Eliot’s world description and Jake’s. In the poem, heat is suggested through several phrases: ‘where the sun beats’, ‘the dry stone no sound of water’, and ‘this red rock’. Both descriptions (one sourced from frame knowledge and the other from textual evidence) match with a ‘desert’ frame (heat, dust, rocks, no water), so they blend together so that the reader can process what Jake is thinking in the current text-world.

Once the connection is established and the blend starts, the reader may continue to feed more background knowledge of the poem into the blend. These processes may occur quickly, and without the reader referring back to the actual stanza from the poem. The understanding may take place only based on vague recollections of the poem’s initial meaning, or conversely, the reader may take time to revisit Eliot’s poem to better grasp the reference. For example, combining the title of the section this stanza comes from ‘The Burial of the Dead’ and the phrases ‘the dead tree’ and ‘the dry stone no sound of water’ suggest a place not sustaining life. This aligns with the plot of King’s novel, where Jake is being driven mad by remembering his own death. I would argue the fragmented flashbacks he has about dying under the mountain (‘Come in under the shadow of this red rock’) could be described as ‘a heap of broken images’. Conceptualizing the world Jake is imagining requires the reader to return to the setting and action of *The Gunslinger* (1982), where Roland meets Jake in the desert, which is ‘the apotheosis of all
deserts’ (King 1982, 1). Therefore, this topical-intertextual-world depicts triple-vision because of the three input spaces—the series’ first two volumes and Eliot’s _The Waste Land_.

Roland takes Jake on his journey through the desert, which lasts for weeks. I argue that drawing on lines 28–29 from Eliot’s poem, the image of a day passing ‘shadow at morning striding behind you’ and ‘shadow at evening to meet you’ can be mapped on Jake and Roland’s passage of time in the desert in _The Gunslinger_. Because their journey through the desert to the mountain leads to Jake’s death, I would argue that for Jake remembering that world, and trying to process feeling like two people at once, would generate distress described as ‘no relief’ or ‘fear in a handful of dust’. In this passage, it appears that Jake’s realization that he could travel back to Roland’s land and become one again marks a sudden sense of relief for him, marked by adverbs ‘excitedly’ and ‘suddenly’ and the verb ‘threw’ also suggests suddenness. The use of the deictic ‘now’ shows that he is convinced that Roland’s world really is on the other side of the door. Finally, the use of all capital ‘IN him’ and ‘I’ll BE him!’ and exclamation point further show excitement, which I feel shows a sense of relief and so suggests that his other enactor is quiet at that moment. Therefore, the reader can draw elements from King’s _The Gunslinger_ and _The Waste Lands_ and Eliot’s _The Waste Land_ and combine them where they intersect to generate understanding of Jake’s current thoughts. This example shows how topical intertextuality can function as a subtle means to elucidate aspects of a character. The reader may very well not even be consciously aware that such intertextual meaning is being assigned to the current discourse; I nevertheless argue that if the reader has read the Eliot stanza in the epigraph, there will at least be an aura of this intertextual reference when the reader encounters the above passage with Jake’s thoughts.

_Wizard and Glass_ (1997), the fourth volume of the series, relies heavily on intertextual references from King’s _The Stand_ (1990) and L. Frank Baum’s _The Wizard of Oz_ (1900). Consider the passage:

Below the newspaper’s name, taking up most of the front page’s top half, were screaming black letters:

“CAPTAIN TRIPS’ SUPERFLU RAGES UNCHECKED” (King 1997, 90-1)

Contextually, this reference occurs when the _ka-tet_ are transported from Mid-World to an alternate version of Earth via a deranged train named Blaine. They exit the train in Kansas only to find it deserted, save for a few mummified bodies. They find the above newspaper headline and realize that America has been decimated by a superflu. The lexical items ‘CAPTAIN TRIPS’ and ‘SUPERFLU’ activate the reader’s intertextual knowledge of _The Stand_ (1990), which tells the story of post-apocalyptic America after the Captain Trips superflu destroys most of the population. In making this connection, the reader must then blend what they know about _The Stand_ and the superflu with the text-world of the present storyline. A reader can decipher what is happening in the current text-world by processing the intertextual reference to _The Stand_; that is, it becomes apparent through world-builders that all the people in the current text-world are dead because of the superflu that devastated the country. Applying background knowledge from _The Stand_, such as how the flu came about and the level of its destruction, helps the reader to understand the current situation.

This passage creates a topical-intertextual-world because of the multiple elements which indicate the literary reference to _The Stand_. The blending that occurs is the superimposition of the reader’s text-world knowledge of _The Stand_ onto that of the Kansas text-world of _Wizard and Glass_. If the reader identifies the reference and commences with the blend, then the topical-intertextual-world is populated with joint enactors, namely, the _ka-tet_ and the characters from _The Stand_, such as Randall Flagg. Stylistically, the passage illustrates the feeling of devastation that the characters encounter in Kansas through lexical choices such as the affective adjective phrase ‘screaming black’ to modify the newspapers letters, where ‘screaming’ brings to mind people in fear and anguish. Naming the pandemic “‘Captain Tripps’ Superflu’, where the prefix ‘super’ of superflu suggests overwhelming power, may remind readers of some sort of absurd superhero, which highlights the bizarre nature of the world-wide disease. ‘Super’, coupled with ‘black’ also suggest a sort of supernatural darkness, which is indeed an element present in _The Stand_ in the form of Randall Flagg, who is evil embodied in the story. The verb ‘rages’ also
suggests the noun form ‘rage’, indicating intense anger. Finally, the adverb ‘unchecked’ shows how the superflu has the agency in this situation, indicating the powerlessness of the people.

Bringing together stylistic elements, textual evidence pointing to *The Stand*, and background knowledge of that novel form a topical-intertextual-world that allows the reader to draw conclusions about the world that the characters have entered, and perhaps to predict how this information will affect the *ka-tet* in the future action, specifically whether Randall Flagg poses a threat to the characters. A reader familiar with *The Stand* may speculate that because the *ka-tet* has seemingly entered the world depicted in that novel, that Randall Flagg or some enactor of him will be present there. Based on Flagg’s mention in the previous *Dark Tower* volume, as discussed above regarding *The Eyes of the Dragon*, the reader has been primed to know that Flagg and Roland have met before. This may create anticipation that they will meet again and likely that Flagg will try to thwart the *ka-tet* from continuing their quest along the Path of the Beam, as it would make sense for the antagonist of *The Stand* to be lurking in this devastated world Roland and his *ka-tet* have encountered. Whether or not the reader is correct in their predictions is not important – I claim that such hypotheses triggered by intertextual references are resultant of deeper readerly engagement with the story (the ‘interpretive playfulness’ Shonoda discusses) and create excitement through anticipation on the part of the reader. This engagement and subsequent enjoyment contribute to the reader’s aesthetic experience of the text, or the work’s texture.

**Discussion and Conclusion**

The examples that I discussed above have shown how the intertextual-worlds of King’s works can enrich readers’ current understanding of past and present fictional worlds, through world-building information and character development. As McAleer (2009, 140) points out, however, ‘[S]ometimes the information learned in King’s fiction with respect to the connections made between his works, despite resulting in interesting discoveries and interpretations is just that: *information*. I nevertheless claim that this additional information can make readerly conceptualizations of the worlds more complex, which potentially leads to deeper readerly engagement. I furthermore argue that King’s inclusion of so many intertextual references to his own works actually thematically strengthens the premise of the *Dark Tower* series, which is that all possible worlds intersect at the *Dark Tower* itself. King prompts his Constant Readers, especially those who are *Tower Junkies*, to become more involved in the overarching story through these intertextual references. These nods to the Constant Reader may not be noticed – especially to those not familiar with King’s work, or may even be considered annoying to some, and therefore ignored, because they do not *necessarily* develop the plot of the current story. This intertextuality may, however, be exciting to others because it re-activates background knowledge of other King works that they may have enjoyed and may cause them to hypothesize more possible connections. For some Constant Readers, these references can be seen almost as rewards or ‘Easter eggs’ to find; this can lead to greater aesthetic enjoyment of, and engagement with, the current text and may invite a re-reading of the intertext(s). Indeed, for those who are not overly familiar with King’s work, the prevalence of intertextual references to other King works may prompt them to seek out the intertexts, potentially encouraging them to become Constant Readers themselves.

The above analysis has illustrated how King’s use of intertextual references in the *Dark Tower* series can add to the reader’s understanding of world-builders, function-advancers, and character development of the previous text-worlds of the intertexts, often previous King novels, as well as the current text-worlds of the *Dark Tower* books. I argued that the evolution of the text-world information adds to the richness of King’s fictional worlds. In summary, intertextuality, like metaphor, contributes to negotiative (and sometimes circular) reading practices, which encourage more reader interaction and can thus generate more intertextual meaning. This study has shown that utilizing Text World Theory’s blended-worlds to explain intertextual processing can account for a range of multi-layered readings and stresses the importance of the role of the reader as well as the text, encouraging a more holistic view of intertextuality.
References


Evans, Vyvyan. 2006. “Lexical concepts, cognitive models and meaning-construction”, *Cognitive Linguistics* 17(4); 491-534.


Lakoff, George, and Johnson, Mark. 1980. *Metaphors We Live By*. Chicago: Chicago UP.


Claustrophobic Hotel Rooms and Intermedial Horror in 1408

Michail Markodimitrakis

American Culture Studies, Bowling Green State University

Abstract

The adaptation of a work from the page to the screen offers a variety of challenges which affect the story’s cohesion and possibly mutate the desired effect the creator of the source material intended. At the same time the adapted material has different sets of standards to be considered a success, especially taking into consideration a different medium’s conventions and limitations. The Gothic as a mode also undergoes various transformations in the last fifty years due to the impact several literary theories have on it and the continuous media evolution. This essay will be primarily concerned with how the transformation of the medium affects the atmosphere the writer is attempting to create, the efficiency of the adapted work in relation to the original and the reformulation of Gothic conventions as a means of emanating the desirable effect to the targeted audiences, readers and viewers. I use Stephen King’s short story “1408” and its film adaptation (2007), as King is an author who has enjoyed and encouraged numerous transformations of his own work. Through specific examples from the story and the film I showcase how terror, horror, and gross-out are presented to the viewers, while at the same time the film stays faithful to the original material. To generate those responses, I argue that the term intermedial horror best describes the process through which the film produces feelings of uncanniness by tapping into tropes common in print and audiovisual media.

Introduction: Stephen King, the Gothic, and 1408

In his non-fiction book Danse Macabre, Stephen King discusses how the evolution of the ‘horror genre’ contributes on the discourse regarding the Gothic by stating that ‘[i]t has often been able to find national phobic pressure points’ (1980).¹ His books, graphic novels, and movies are considered by critics and readers alike as the most successful, always seeming to express fears that exist ‘across a wide spectrum of people’ (1980). King’s fiction has been the subject of numerous academic works (see Bloom 2007, Stefoff 2011, Hoppenstand 2011, Anderson 2017); in his non-fiction work scholars can trace terminology which can be used as analytical tools for the Gothic. 1408 is a story that Stephen King initially (and partially) wrote as a case study for his book, Memoir of the Craft, in an attempt to demonstrate to the readers how his rewriting process works (King 2009, 1). The homonymous film based on the story, released in 2007, built upon the best parts of King’s original work, while adding more layers in the uncanny atmosphere the author created for his textual work. This essay’s main purpose is to examine and demonstrate how, in the film adaptation of King’s “1408”, intermedial techniques are facilitated in

---

¹ The book (Danse Macabre) is not easily available for purchase in printed format; therefore for the purpose of this essay a Kindle device was used. Page numbers were not available, only device specific locations. Therefore page numbers that are cited come from the conversion of the AZW file into PDF format.
recreating a haunting atmosphere through the audiovisual experience the movie creates, as well as how the cinematic adaptation of the story transfers uncanny elements from the text to the silver screen.

Before I continue with the analysis, a note on terminology I use is necessary. Regarding the use of the term ‘intermedial’ I follow Jarkko Toikkanen’s general definition of the intermediality concept as, ‘acts of ubiquitous sensory stimuli feeding one’s cognitive faculties’ (2013, 33). For the use of the terms ‘terror’ and ‘horror’, I follow King’s previous writings. King makes three separate distinctions of both the techniques and the affective responses evoked from works of (graphic) literature and cinema; terror, horror and gross-out. For the purpose of this essay I borrow the aforementioned terminology to also include cinema, as I find it helpful to use the vocabulary the author chooses in the past to describe adaptations of his own work. Terror then ‘often arises from a pervasive sense of disestablishment; that things are in the unmaking’ (King 1980). A commonly referenced example would be that of a person entering their house, and sensing that all their stuff had been displaced and then put back in order. It cannot be explained, and therefore it is unsettling. Terror is as King brilliantly notices about the mind; what the mind sees is exactly what makes these kinds of stories into ‘quintessential tales of terror’ (King 1980). Horror on the other hand is more tangible, retaining though a sense of mystery in its manifestations: it is ‘that emotion of fear that underlines terror’ (1980). King uses as an example of the horror comics of the fifties’ such as those of Weird Tales and Tales from the Crypt (1964). Horror is an emotion ‘slightly less fine’ than terror, as it is not entirely ‘of the mind’, while at the same time invites a physical reaction by showing something ‘physically wrong’. The third level, that of ‘revulsion’ or ‘gross-out’, a ‘gag-reflex’ (King 1980). A contemporary example of this technique or feeling would be that of the movie franchise Saw. Kings puts on a scale these three emotions, recognising terror as ‘the finest’, admitting that his primary goal is to ‘terrorize the reader’ (King 1980). Failing to do that, he will attempt ‘to horrify.’ If all else fails, he will go, not ‘proudly’ though as he admits, for the gross-out (King 1980). By using the term ‘intermedial horror’ I underline the instances in the film where horror manifests through tangible uncanny acts of ubiquitous sensory stimuli feeding the audiences’ cognitive faculties, producing an unsettling sensation.

King’s works are numerous, and their intermedial appeal is noteworthy; his stories, novellas, and novels appear in all media possible in the twenty-first century. From theatrical adaptations, straight-to-video releases, audio collections, films, and comics (even music), the attempts of recreating the effect King has on his readers are numerous, while not all of them successful. King’s work continuously finds ways to be contemporary and attracts new audiences and readers alike: for example, his movie adaptations start as early as 1976, when Carrie was adapted into the silver screen from the homonymous novel published in 1974, to the 2013 television adaptation of Under the Dome, and the 2017 one of The Mist, along with the cinematic adaptations of The Dark Tower and It.

The story 1408 is based on first appeared in its final form in the audiobook collection called Blood and Smoke released in 1999, while in 2002 it was first included in King’s collection Everything’s Eventual. Introducing the story in the collection, King writes that ‘this story scared me while I was working on it’, while the audio version ‘scared me even more. Scared the hell out of me’ (King 2002, 365). The plot of the story, according to King, constitutes a version of “The Ghostly Room at the Inn” (King 2002, 365) with some twists that the author decided to add to complicate the extensively used motif. While the story was initially supposed to be a case study for aspiring writers, the depiction of his protagonist intrigued King; he decided that a story where a ‘cynical hack churning out books debunking supposedly haunted locations’ only to find himself once facing ‘the real thing’ would be worth finishing (King 2009, 1).

The movie adaptation of 1408 entered cinemas in 2007 with John Cusack starring as the writer, Mike Enslin, and Samuel L. Jackson as Mr. Olin, the hotel manager. The movie was a commercial success, being nominated for the Saturn Award for the best horror film and best actor awards (John

---

2 The author expands on the definition of intermediality in Ch.3 of his book (2013), to include genre specific variations while tapping into the idea of the evolution of media in visual culture.
Cusack) in 2008, while in its opening weekend, the film opened in second place at the box office, grossing US$20.6 million in 2,678 theaters and went on to gross US$132 million, with a production budget of US$25 million.³

What is striking about 1408, as regards its written form is the lack of information about the protagonist of the story and his general whereabouts; it is one of the rare occasions that a lack of backstory, an ‘old Hollywood trick, always dangerous and rarely successful’ actually works (King 2009, 2). Attention to similar details in the adapted work are part of what Henry Jenkins calls transmedia storytelling, as each bit of information is exclusive to another medium (2006, 96). While the details of how the movie made the backstory functional will be examined.

Expanding an Intermedial Hotel Room Haunting

It is clear from the outset of King’s short story, and Mikael Håfström’s subsequent adaptation, that something supernatural inhabits the hotel room the protagonist chooses to spend his night in. Thus the effect that the writer and director are aiming at is clearly that of horror; for the readers and the audience there is no doubt that there are incomprehensible forces at play. Nigel Kneale describes horror as:

> what you might feel if you went, for example, into a jungle, or a place where you had lost all your bearings, where you were no longer sure of anything [...] where you began to suspect that there was something present which you couldn’t pin down; something which you wouldn’t be able to identify but which would be dangerous and could destroy you (as cited in Wells 2000, 12).

The audience of the movie in particular is led to believe from the very beginning of the film that there is something strange going on with the particular hotel room. The perspective through which the audience experiences the movie is that of a subjective point of view as they follow Mike Enslin’s actions before he enters room 1408, during his stay in Dolphin Hotel. It is a choice of the movie makers not to provide the audience with an omniscient observatory role, securing the empathy that is inevitably generated as protagonists face forces that threaten their ‘moral universe and material presence’ (Conrich 2010, 22).

Peter Hutchings, in his book The A to Z of Horror Cinema, also argues about the importance of the horror movie; he underlines the effect of horror movies in creating ‘horror fans’ who are in some cases ‘agents’ in the construction of meanings that may affect the development of the genre (2009, i). Therefore the choice to facilitate horrific elements rather than play with the uncanny on the level of terror is strategically affected by the medium in question. The audiences are invited to be more engaged than the readers of the source material, and the desired effect has a more immediate reaction by the recipients, with the potential though to have a shorter duration.

In adapting the story, one of the first concerns would be to create a relatable protagonist. While in the written text it is unclear how the writer comes to hear about 1408, in the movie the scriptwriters create a backstory which bridges the gap King has in his tale by using the medias res technique. The audience, prior to Mike’s entrance into the room, learns from a discussion between Enslin and his publisher that New York carries some special importance connected to supernatural events, and that his visit to the city would be exceptionally brief. It is also known that the cinematic Enslin is at a decline as a writer, while his novelized counterpart’s works are three times New York Times bestsellers. The ‘Hollywood trick’ of the expanded character background is rarely functional in contemporary works as it is overused in the cinematic medium; however, taking into consideration that it would be otherwise difficult to fill in a 104 minutes (or 112 according to the Director’s Cut release) movie solely based on a 56 pages short story, it is a necessary tactic.⁴ Nonetheless, based on the transformation of the tale into a

---

³ Information retrieved from IMDB and Box Office Mojo.
⁴ All quotes referring to 1408 are taken from the publication of the tale into the story collection Stephen King Goes to the Movies, which is not the original collection the story appeared in.
The intermedial technique of filmic letters play their role from the very beginning of the film, unconsciously reminding the audience of the contemporaneity of the cinematic medium and the reliability of written speech. In the first minutes of the movie, Enslin receives a postcard depicting Dolphin Hotel, warning him to stay away from room 1408. A scholar whose discussion is applicable in this case study regarding the importance of letters in the cinematic medium is Celestino Deleyto. Deleyto explains that the written word, especially in the form of a personal letter (or diary entry) works as a reminder of the modernity of the medium (in this case the cinematic medium) as well as an inscription of the past (2007, 43). While the (cinematic) image, as he argues, may be ephemeral, 'the written word feels reliable', which is why, as he speculates, (filmic) letters are often filling plot gaps in a subtle way (Deleyto 2007, 43). What distinguishes that particular postcard from Deleyto’s original argument is its presentation, as there is no known sender, and the text is far from offering new clarifying pieces of information, only containing a direct warning; therefore the film establishes an atmosphere dominated by uncanniness from the first minutes of the film, and sets the tone for what is about to come next, long before the protagonist enters the room.

Apart from the investigative effect that horror movies can generate though, the choice of a subjective narrative through the protagonist can function towards what Agnes Pethő calls a ‘metaleptic leap’, a transgression ‘from the narrative level of reality’ into one of subjective consciousness (dream, fantasy, memory flashback, altered mental state, etc)’ (2011, 128). This narrative device is used in a number of ways that will be traced below, all in the service of intermedial horror that is attempted to be conveyed by the director and the rest of the cast. One of the many concerns of the protagonist early in the film, and consequently of the audience, is whether what he sees is real or not. These scenes in movies of different genres, such as Hitchcock’s dream sequence in Spellbound (1945) or the day-dreaming of Amelie (2001) are purposefully depicted as artificial, distinguishing the dream world from real life. In 1408, nonetheless, the sequences are intruding in the protagonist’s life, deriving in many cases from either the history of the room and its past habitants or the personal life of the protagonist.

On the most explicit intermedial level, a metaleptic leap aims at leaving the audience questioning its own eyes, contemplating whether what it saw was real or not. As the movie progresses, the audience gradually comes to understand that most of the ‘haunting incidents’ that take place in the room are somehow related to Enslin’s past, yet there are unarguably certain events that are abstract and uncanny, as the radio turning on by itself, or the alarm clock working even after it is violently unplugged. On a secondary level though, through the depiction of a series of supernatural occurrences, the audience is provided with an opportunity to realize, along with the protagonist, that all the supernatural incidents he confronts, that are mostly uncanny, are those related to his past and family. The history of the horror film is, after all, a history of anxiety in the twentieth century, a reaction to the ‘rationale of industrial, technological, and economic determinism’ (Wells 2000, 3). Through this prism the viewers experience Enslin’s anxiety as their own, and the room exploits in fact both the vulnerability of the protagonist and the audience. It is the lack of faith in anything along with sheer cynicism that leads Enslin to write his stories, and it is this cynicism that is exploited during his residence the room, when Enslin is confronted with various audio, video even live images from his family life and events that have shaped his current character. Wells again is right to observe that one of the main functions of horror films is the rehearsing of the deepest of fears and visualization of ‘our worst nightmares’ (2000, 108). In the case of Enslin, his worst fears were about his daughter dying and him eventually becoming like his father, accompanied by the fact that for once in his life he actually finds a room that is genuinely haunted.
The subjective point of view of the incidents is also transformed in more than one occasion to a director’s interpretive first person point of view of the world, succeeding in conveying both the uncanniness and the horrific surprise of the protagonist towards the incidents he comes across. The film director chooses at certain parts of the film to adopt an interpretive perspective, especially when the writer is coming across startling occurrences, or to demonstrate how the room affects Enslin’s perception of the world. Oblique angles were chosen from the director in various points to depict the tension the protagonist faces, and, at the same time, export his agony to the audience (Giannetti 2010, 13). The following movie sequences depict some of those moments, with the angles always aiming at disorienting the audience and providing stimuli that would accomplish the primary intent of horror movies: ‘to unsettle the audience and inspire fear— to scare us and horrify us, ideally instilling an enduring sense of dread and fright that lasts beyond the duration of the film’ (Hantke 2010, 38). This horror is intermedial in its nature, with static shots and quick turns that resemble photographic techniques and the use of appropriate background music effects.

The startling of the audiences is one of the primary narrative devices in horror movies, being unique in generating responses that are in many occasions primal or unconscious: a serial killer appears out of nowhere, Enslin discovers massive blood stains with UV light, the room suddenly is experienced through a tilted perspective, a mummified corpse appears out of nowhere in the air vent, all in first person perspective to startle the audiences and engage them in noticing uncanny details. Right before Enslin faces the mummified corpse in the vent the director has chosen to disorient the audience with a quick turn of the camera that follows the protagonist’s perspective. As a result of that, the claustrophobic effect of the vent scene is magnified by an intruder in the confined room space. As Ronald C. Simons accurately notes audiences of horror movies actually seek the feeling of being startled, and traces that desire in the ‘essence’ as he describes the latter: ‘[I]t is the mechanism designed to ensure that the startled organism responds to a potential danger as rapidly as possible, even before the eliciting stimulus is consciously classified and evaluated’ (1996, 82). Startling is a reflexive response that protects the individual from possible danger. It is an ‘induced emotional state’ that is ‘like the pleasurable arousal sought from roller-coaster rides’ (Simons 1996, 82). The ‘blur’ effect the audiences will experience in fast paced scenes is also an intermedial technique of ‘filmic’ manner, the aim of which varying according to the genre it is applied; in this case, it is employed as a projection of what Pethő would call ‘mental disturbance’ (2011, 109).

Another agent of intermedial horror, the most influential ‘character’ in both media, is the room 1408 itself. A piece of information both readers and audiences learn early on is that in that specific room a great number of people have suspiciously died. Suicides that occurred in a number of ways including jumping from the windows, self-mutilation, neck sewing (on and off), auto-erotic asphyxiation, as well as madness, heart-attacks, choking with chicken soup, and chronic diseases. Olin, the hotel manager of ‘Dolphin’ describes his brief stays in both the movie and the story as if he entered ‘a room filled with poison gas. If one holds one’s breath, one may be all right’ (King 2009, 22). His movie counterpart, played by Samuel Jackson, is more direct: ‘It is an evil fucking room’.

Aside from the history of the room, the description of it in the short story as well as the depiction of it in the movie bring in a number of intermedial elements, asking from the readers and the audience to feel the texture of the dusty glasses, ‘like silk just before it rots’ (King 2009, 35), or the wallpaper that felt ‘like old dead skin’ (King 2009, 40). This synesthetic description with the uncanny similes is replaced onto the silver screen by a short introductory monologue that the writer dictates to his recorder, as part of his writing process. Through the monologue the audience is conveniently introduced to some of the most prominent intermedial icons that will later generate horror, even gross-out: the floral wallpaper, a carpet with a conspicuous stain (later revealed by a close UV light investigation to be blood), three paintings and ordinary furniture. Enslin prophetically comments about the ‘banality of evil’ and makes another intertextual reference ironically positioning himself into the ‘7th circle of Hell’, the circle in Dante’s Inferno where sinners are punished for being violent against people and/or property,
for committing suicides, and for sodomites and blasphemers, (un)consciously including all the deaths that have occurred in the room in the past.\(^5\)

The feeling of uneasiness though is magnified by the introduction of a startling event that will serve an intermedial motif of horror, that of the radio/alarm clock. The song lyrics “we’ve only just begun to leave... a kiss for luck and we are on our way... a kiss for luck and we are on our way” that are heard in the film create a sudden foreshadowing effect for the suspected audience (with Enslin completely unaware of his situation and what is about to follow).\(^6\) The ‘kiss for luck’ verse is immediately connected with the two chocolates left on the pillow of his bed (a gesture of good faith from the ghost before the haunting one could speculate), and the sighting of supernatural occurrences begins right after that.

As Pethő argues on the intermediality of the cinematic works of Michelangelo Antonioni, it is also here the case that the ‘imposing sight’ of the room as well as the presence and the commentary of the details of the room function as a reflection of ‘the centering of the human figure within a [micro] world that the individual is no longer control of’ (Pethő 2011, 112). Room 1408 is constantly changing, and no matter what Enslin wishes, he always tends to follow the room’s desires. For instance, weirdly crooked and shifting paintings that would not be straightened out despite Enslin’s efforts, a floral wallpaper producing uncanny sounds, and a carpet that is ‘unremarkable’, except for a stain that looks like it was caused by blood; they all constitute elements of a room that is familiar and yet threatening through its banality. He is unable to leave, no matter how many different ways he facilitates for his escape; he watches parts of the past parade in front of him and finally realizes that he is nothing but another link in the long chain of the victims of the room.

Andrew Cooper in Gothic Realities argues that any ‘true’ ghost story that does not wish to be marginalized is presented in such a way, as to distance itself from its fictional counterparts (2010, 123). While the adaptors of 1408 have no purpose of shooting a film that merely imitates King’s short story, the attempt of the protagonist to keep sane by talking to his recorder provides the audience with a non-reliable guide to the incidents that will follow. It is no accident that the paintings on the room walls are used in the film in order to amplify the horror effect. The crooked painting of the ship generates a feeling of uncanniness, as the causes of its present state are unclear, while at the same time it fulfills its intermedial role by transferring effectively the doubt of the spectacle in the audience. Enslin, both in the story and the movie, feels nauseated when he approaches to fix the painting, and that feeling is better mediated in the movie adaptation. The sound of the rustling sea moves in the background is slowly getting stronger, while the writer exhibits signs of sea sickness and dizziness as he attempts to convince himself that what he sees is ‘real, but not real enough’ so as to react as he does.

The room itself is not limited to torturing Enslin with a few crooked paintings and chocolates on his pillow. Its arsenal contains a thermostat capable of extreme temperatures, the ghosts of former inhabitants of the room, an alarm/radio that functions without electrical power, doppelgängers, extreme shape-shifting abilities, and all sorts of hallucinations to its victims. While in the short story there are hints that what inhibits the room could be an ancient alien feeding off the inhabitants, the movie provides no such explanation, making the experience Enslin undergoes nonsensical (King 2002, 56).\(^7\)

---

\(^5\) The phrase comes from Hannah Arendt’s book Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil, and refers to Eichmann’s deportment at a trial described in the book, displaying neither guilt nor hatred, claiming he bore no responsibility because he was simply ‘doing his job’.

\(^6\) The lyrics come from the song We’ve Only Just Begun performed by the Carpenters. It would be useful to mention at this point that the awareness of the audience towards the genre of the cinema they would be watching is taken for granted, taking into consideration the marketing policy of the distribution company, as well as the cover of the DVD edition of the movie.

\(^7\) In the story there is no explicit description of the apparition in the room. Enslin says in the last page of the book that ‘it was never human’ (King 2009, 56) while earlier on remarks about the apparition in the room that ‘It’s hungry. And you’re [Enslin] dinner’ (King 2009, 46).
The main intermedial horror device facilitated by the director is that of metalepsis, a technique that differentiates the film narrative from the story narrative (Pethő 2011, 128-29). In 1408 metalepsis is a device for the horrific, as neither the protagonist nor the audience can understand whether what they see is a memory flashback or an event that occurs at that particular moment. As the alarm clock/radio counts down, the director throughout the film strategically chooses film shots from different angles to emphasize on its property as an uncanny point of reference, autonomous from any event that takes place inside and outside of the room. Reality is deconstructed into temporal and spatial frames, each operating under different rules and terms, and coming together only by the ultimate goal of driving Enslin crazy and consequently horrifying the audience by making it doubt the linear representation of a conventional movie.

In the printed version of 1408 the readers learn that all the narrated events lasted seventy minutes, while in the movie version the audience is repeatedly reminded that nobody lasted in 1408 for over an hour (King 2009, 29). Therefore the motif of the alarm/radio is fundamental in the creation of an intermedial horrific atmosphere of the film 1408. The director chooses after each horrifying event that occurs to focus on the alarm, giving the audience the temporal frame in an attempt to transfer the feeling of helplessness and entrapment that the protagonist undergoes. It is characteristic of that entrapment that Enslin’s first attempt to ask for help is through his communication with a tenant from the building right across the street, only to discover that the latter is in fact his own doppelganger, an illusion trick that the room plays on Enslin, right before the startling appearance of what appears to be a serial killer. As Pethő undeniably supports that cinema is ‘a window to the world’, it is in the sequence where Enslin unsuccessfully asks for help through the window that the audience can perceive of the uncanny allegory presentation of 1408 as a medium with its own rules and limitations (2011, 57). In that sense, the room does not allow for any interaction until the very end of the movie between the subject trapped in it and the world outside; even when it does, it only occurs under the restrictions and limitations it imposes on the communication pattern to be followed.

The temporal trap Enslin is found in is also expressed visually by the apparition of ghosts. However, contrary to several myths, the ghosts of 1408 do not return from the dead to torture and guide the living. The ghosts in 1408 appear as memories of cinematic texture, achieving an intermedial uncanniness by their visual representation, which very much resembles black and white films as if creating a nested filmic narrative of a supernatural retro film style. Contrary to the mummified corpse, which uncannily resembles the first victim of the room, they have no material existence, nor attempt to harm Enslin, functioning as filmic memories of the suicides that have taken place in the room. The room itself transforms on a number of occasions, creating a hostile atmosphere for Enslin, by either changing both its layout and its form, as the director facilitates more implicative intertextual and intermedial techniques so as to enhance the claustrophobic atmosphere he is trying to convey. The room exploits the memories of the writer, projecting them in a distorted yet ghostly manner. At first Enslin attempts to escape 1408 by walking on the outer parapet of the hotel wall eventually reaching the window of the room next door, only to discover that all windows are in fact extinct, and even after re-entering the room the layout of both the hotel and the room is changed. Enslin then starts doubting his own mind, after hearing himself in the recorder confirm the new re-arrangement as the default of the room. The depiction of his memories is not visually placed solely in the past. Instead, they are treated in a spatiotemporal manner, as if the whole room is part of a nested narrative in 1408, with Enslin observing past events of his life as if he was a simple bystander.

The horrific effect the director attempts to convey to the audience is very carefully designed, as some of the apparitions are either unaware of their current state, as the scene where the bathroom is temporarily transformed to a nursing home hosting Enslin’s long dead abusive father, who warns him that, ‘As you are I was, as I am you will be’, or the living room that is later re-imagined as the examine room where his daughter (dead long ago) was diagnosed with cancer, or even his fights with his ex-wife.

8 King writes in “1408” that Enslin’s stay in the room ‘lasted about seventy minutes’ (2009, 29).
after their child died. Julia Kristeva notes that the taboo aspects of the body, be that malfunction or sickness or bodily emission, serves as evidence of humankind’s perpetual decay (1982). In horror films this motif of the ‘return of the repressed’ as in the case of his dead daughter and his dead father is a reminder of the ‘collapse of the illusory and seemingly valueless “self”’ (Wells 2000, 16). The uncanny is, as Freud argues, ‘which is secretly familiar, which has undergone repression and then returned from it, and that everything that is uncanny fulfills this condition’ (Freud 1919). His observation is confirmed by Enslin’s character, who refuses to accept hiding from his past, with the room obviously taking advantage of his weakness, by subjecting him to continuous visions of the past without allowing him to escape in any way from it (Wells 2000, 16).

Yet towards the end of the film, the room seemingly collapses, and for a few minutes the audience observes as Enslin is shown to be waking up from his near death experience that almost resembles a dream experience. In this transition, the paintings in the room play a central role, as they break the medial borders, changing their form to horrific depictions of slaughter and destruction, while the voices of the subjects of the paintings are clearly heard screaming according to the tortments the paintings depicted. The most impressive of all remains the ship painting as it breaks all the medial boundaries and floods the room, leading the protagonist back to one of the first scenes of the movie. Pethő calls the site where cinema and painting interact as ‘tableau vivant’ (2011, 44), while Brigitte Peucker confirms the importance of ‘tableaux vivants’ in cinema as the previous signify ‘extremely charged instances of intermediality in which [... the bodily sensation is accentuated, animating the otherwise more abstract image and eliciting a direct... emotional response from the viewer’ (qtd. in Pethő 2011, 45). The director aims at just that horrific effect of the pictorial coming to life and invading the realm of reality, hoping into transferring the agony of the protagonist to the audience, as the latter watches are aspects of reality breaking down and resembling a dream sequence. The horror is invading through all the realms possible, and the static images and casual furnishings of a random hotel room are in fact all devastated by the abject breaking down of anything that both the audience and the protagonist take for granted.

Yet the intermedial horror is not limited to the crossing of spatiotemporal and medial boundaries, but to the realization of both the audience and the protagonist that such a thing is impossible even for a supernatural tormentor such as the room 1408. Through continuous hints that Enslin stubbornly rejects, the audience is reminded of what has occurred in the room and is ultimately prepared for another deconstruction of the spatiotemporal frame in the site where it all began, when Mike Enslin first received the card that urged him not to visit the Dolphin Hotel and room 1408 in specific. The audience is set to understand long before the second spatiotemporal collapse occurs in the post office with Enslin never having left his room, and the intermedial horror also entails a tragic irony that the writer fails to grasp until it is too late. The intermedial collapse creates a synthesizing experience in the sense that Enslin has lived through a series of horrific events in a room that cinematically draws on all Gothic motifs and then he decides to transfer this experience to a book, which is another medium. Pethő points towards the connection between intermediality and the sublime as the cinematic medium attempts in movies of the horror genre to figure the infigurable or even unspeakable (2011, 48), and Enslin understands the vanity of his attempt as he sees the post-office crumble around him only to find himself after a 360 degree camera shot in the same room he thought he had departed from that appears to be burnt down and destroyed. After the encounter with his daughter that dies once more in his hands and is decomposed right in front of him, the alarm resets, to indicate a new round of torturing, giving to the audience a sense of infinite loop, an intermedial, transcendental horror that could repeat potentially forever, or at least until the subject of torture gives up.

The memories of his lost daughter are exploited during all of Mike Enslin’s experiences in the room, from the first days she was born, until the day she died, while the room also attempts to manipulate Enslin’s visions so as to push him to suicide. The means that the room facilitates in order to project the memories are multimedial, including a fax that delivers a baby dress, the aforementioned apparition of the girl itself, home videos that are shown on the television and last but not least Enslin’s
daughter voice echoing in the room, especially in the beginning of Mike’s staying in the room, succeeding in creating an uncanny intermedial effect by dissociating the sound from the form of the girl that will appear later as a specter in front of the protagonist and the audience.

What strikes us most as regards to the function of the devices used to convey the horrific atmosphere that prevails in 1408 is the easiness with which the room adapts to any attempt made by Enslin to call for help with the most prominent example that of the use of technology. A characteristic example of the above statement would be the manipulation of the e-call that Enslin attempts to make to his ex-wife to send help for him, only to be interrupted and finally replaced in the e-call by his doppelganger who instead asks from Enslin’s wife to come to the room herself. Another device that operates well above its designated properties is that of the thermostat in the room, which initially raises the temperature so much that causes a mini heat wave, while later it drops the temperature so much that it causes snow or even rain in the living room, creating the impression of an intermedial room that can insert virtually anything in it and uncannily transmediate itself to its original condition once the alarm/radio resets.

One of the instances during which the writer comes in contact with its tormentor is through the phone, where he listens to a pleasant female voice informing him about either an order he never made, or about the ‘express checkout system’ that consisted of a suicide invitation. The room even proceeds in providing alternative rooms to accomplish such an act, such as the bathroom or the bedroom, and demonstrates through the mirror the effectiveness of the measure by actually showing him his doppelganger committing suicide. The voice is more human than its counterpart in the story which is described as:

not machine generated, but [...] [not] human voice, either. It was the voice of the room. The presence pouring out of the walls and the floor... speaking to him on the telephone, had nothing in common with any haunting or paranormal even he had ever read about. There was something alien here (King 2002, 46).

Nonetheless, the voice serves what Walter Ong calls the ‘psychodynamics of orality’ (2002, 31-77). The messages that Enslin receives are not mere threats; they are abstract, uncanny statements: ‘Five. This is five. Even if you leave this room, you can never leave this room’ and the disturbing effect of distortion of the next statement, ‘Eight, this is eight. We have killed your friends. Every friend is now dead.’ The horrifying effect of a voice that gently threatens and then distorts to monstrous proportions confirms the engaging of the protagonist in a ‘power play’ against the presence in 1408 that involves the ‘bodily implication’ of the speaker as in the case of the melting phone is found to be ‘important in the construction of meaning in relation with the moving images’ (Pethő 2011, 61). It is the voice that mediates the horror, as the absence of an explicit visual apparition that would horrify is substituted by a voice whose tone and uncanniness not only terrorizes Enslin, but also horrifies him by physically affecting the medium it is manifested in. The image of the melting phone while the distorted voice still speaks, only to appear completely unharmed a few moments later, unveils the influence of the presence in 1408 in its interaction with the material world.

The ending of the cinematic version of the movie was originally different, as the director was opting for a darker version, with Mike Enslin actually dying in the fire that he created, happy that the room was destroyed along with him. However the test audiences rejected this ending as it was very depressing.9 The director’s ending thus was consequently replaced by the original ending of the book that was enriched by the personal details that were added as part of the adaptation process that was discussed in the beginning of the essay. However, the DVD version of the movie provides the audience with the choice on ending. To underline the focus on elements of terror and horror, it would be also useful to mention the following anecdote about the theatrical release of 1408; King ‘pushed for a PG-

---

13’ rating as he mentions in the introduction of the story (2009, 2). The amounts of blood and gore, all sixty-two seconds of it, were thus kept low in purpose, working ‘on your nerves and not your gag reflex’ (Hantke 2010, 46; King 2009, 2).

Conclusion

It is noteworthy that there are several intertextual references from the movie that point directly to the tale, if a reader is careful enough to notice them. Those references have an intermedial quality of their own, as they operate on a secondary level of nods towards audiences with knowledge of trivia related to the King lore. Apart from the obvious lines that both the cinematic adaptation and the original tale share, there are some hints that are directed towards Stephen King’s loyal fans. First of all, the name of the first book Enslin wrote, The Long Road Home is the name of the comic book adaptation of another work by King, called The Dark Tower Series. Secondly the Dolphin hotel opened in 1910, the same year as Overlook Hotel in the Shining; the protagonists of the latter, Jack and Wendy Torrance had their honeymoon in Dolphin Hotel (prior to the Shining). What’s more, inside the file Olin provided Enslin before the latter entered 1408 there is a phrase in one of the pages that the audience can clearly read; it is written there that ‘My brother was eaten by wolves on the Connecticut Turnpike,’ a phrase that Enslin in the book kept wondering about how it came to his mind. Last but not least, the janitor that appears in the movie to fix the thermostat in 1408 after Enslin reported a problem is an uncanny appearance for those that remember the story well, as it was one of the latest victims of the room. He had been into 1408 three years before Enslin checked in to fix the same temperature problem, and then died the next day of ‘massive cerebral hemorrhage,’ making his appearance another vision from the past, even though Enslin never understood that: an implicit nod on behalf of the director towards King’s dedicated readers and audiences.

The case study of 1408 is pertinent to the study of the Gothic in the twenty-first century, and allows for an in-depth look into how horror operates in different media through the prism of adaptation. The intertwining of source and adapted material, unsettling plot twists, and unreliable narratives allows the audiences to experience a film that operates on different levels of terror and horror, without resorting to gory special effects, a default practice for many films of the genre. The different stages the story went through till it found its final form are depicted on the silver screen through layers of uncanny imagery that does not rely solely on jump scares, but finds in its intermedial elements ways to unsettle readers and audiences, while offering a cathartic effect that Gothic stories and horror films are known for. In the case of 1408, the challenge of extending a short story into a feature film is achieved with the director extending the time devoted to uncanny tropes (mysterious letters, paintings, ghosts, haunted rooms and buildings), while blurring the lines of mediated horror: a painting might drown Enslin, an e-call could be hijacked by an evil spirit, and hallucinations can last for months while time freezes. If no medium can be trusted, then the unsettling effects of the narrative produce a new form of unreliable narrator, one that is helpless as the wonders of a culture that converges information from different media to serve us becomes a torture device Enslin cannot escape from.

As King’s works continuously find their way in different media, the intermedial character of King’s works complicates questions of faithfulness to the source material. As this essay demonstrates, in order to successfully convey of the desired effects to desired audiences, a transmedia research is necessary in order to understand the techniques with which King’s works are transformed and adapted in order to produce the same or similar effects to those readers experience in the print medium.

---

10 I pushed for the PG-13 rating (which the film was eventually awarded), because there’s almost no blood or gore. Like one of Val Lewton films, this baby works on your nerves, not your gag-reflex’ (King 2009, 2).

11 For a further analysis of the concept of convergence culture see Convergence Culture (Jenkins, 2010).
References


Adapting Stephen King: Text, Context and the Case of *Cell* (2016)

Simon Brown

Kingston University

Abstract

The film adaptation of Stephen King’s 2006 novel *Cell* took ten years to reach the screen, only to be met with such negative reviews and poor box office that some were prompted to ask if this was one of the worst Stephen King adaptations of all. Adaptation studies has moved away from a comparison between the original text and its adaptation as a means of analysis, with scholars like Simone Murray (2012) suggesting an approach that takes into account the context of the mode of production. Drawing upon this approach and taking the negative response to *Cell* as a starting point, this article will explore the failure of the film from both a textual and a contextual perspective. It will examine the impact on the film of the 10-year development process, arguing that it robbed the film of much of the political relevance and technophobic prescience of the novel, while at the same time allowing the film to capitalise on the growth of the zombie genre across the cultural zeitgeist in the 2010s. In addition to placing the film within the context of the zombie horror genre, the article will also identify its place within the ebb and flow of the popularity of ‘The Stephen King Film’ as a cinematic brand. Ultimately the piece will argue that while the film came out during a revival of interest in adapting King for the big and small screen, the nature of those adaptations have changed, making *Cell* an anachronism both in terms of narrative structure and generic affiliations, something borne out in an analysis of the film itself, and in arguing this it will highlight what could be a more productive way forward for King projects in the future.

The film adaptation of Stephen King’s 2006 novel *Cell* was released in June 2016 on Video on Demand (VOD), followed by a limited theatrical engagement in July. The idea was that the VOD platforms would generate theatrical bookings, while the cinema run would garner reviews in the mainstream press which in turn might draw people either into cinemas or to their download platforms. The strategy was not successful, and the film had no theatrical screenings in the US, while in the UK it opened on only two screens and took the equivalent of $51 in its opening weekend.\(^1\) It was therefore a box-office flop. Equally it was a critical failure. The hoped-for reviews were mostly bad, leading initially to a 0% rating for the film on the review site Rotten Tomatoes.\(^2\) Peter Bradshaw in *The Guardian* described it as a ‘zombie satire [that] lacks a pulse’, (2016) while Owen Gleiberman’s *Variety* review declared ‘what makes this movie about a zombie attack different from any other? … nothing but its ineptitude’ (2016).

Such a negative response prompted Chris Eggertson to ask, ‘is *Cell* the worst Stephen King adaptation of all time?’ (2016) As Eggertson himself notes, this is not the right question, since the idea of


\(^2\) At the time of writing in September 2017 its rating has reached 10%.
arguing that a film is the very worst is subjective. But given the fact that over the forty years since Brian De Palma’s *Carrie* was released in 1976, so many adaptations of King’s work have been met with critical and often commercial indifference, the case of *Cell*’s particularly poor reception does offer the opportunity to reflect upon just what it is that makes King’s work so hard to translate to the screen, especially when other films, like *Carrie*, have managed to win critical plaudits and make money. What is therefore more interesting to ask is why *Cell* is bad enough, according to the combined critics on Rotten Tomatoes and to the cinema exhibitors that didn’t book it, to be considered to be among the worst Stephen King adaptations, especially given that it was based on a King bestseller and released during a surge in interest in King adaptations.

One way to consider this is of course to assess whether it is simply a badly made film. The user comments on the film’s IMDB page for example refer to CGI effects that ‘suck so bad’, poor camera work and sound, and barely passable acting, all of which could suggest an ineptly made film. However it is not the purpose of this article to review the film and besides, like the idea that it is the ‘worst’ King adaptation, such an assessment of quality contains within it a certain level of subjectivity.

An alternative approach would be to argue that *Cell* is a ‘poor’ adaptation of the novel, based upon the fact that the film makes considerable changes from the book, despite being adapted by King. Fidelity to the source text has been a consistent point of critical discussion and judgement for King adaptations, ever since Stanley Kubrick’s *The Shining* (1980). As is well known, Kubrick substantially reworked King’s source material leaving many fans at the time unsatisfied with the result, including King himself. Diverging from the source material led to *The Shining* being considered a ‘poor’ adaptation, although the film is now acknowledged to be a horror classic, which demonstrates that a lack of fidelity does not necessarily, in the long term at least, directly equate to a poor film. Indeed in contrast the film *Firestarter* (1984) set out to follow the book as closely as possible, even using much of King’s dialogue almost verbatim. As Bill Warren points out, the film ‘regards the original [novel] as a sacred text and follows it slavishly’ (1988, 128). But in response King was as critical of the faithful *Firestarter* as he was of the unfaithful *The Shining*. He said, the problem with the resulting film was that ‘there’s no Stephen King in Firestarter. And it’s very faithful to the book, but … I’m not in that movie at all, whatever it was that was in the book that people liked’ (Qtd in Collings 2006, 30). Unlike Kubrick’s film, which uses King’s novel as a starting point for something entirely its own, *Firestarter* ‘did’ the novel almost scene for scene, yet somehow missed some essential element of the book as spectacularly as Kubrick did and was equally dismissed by fans and critics upon release.

One could also consider if the failure of *Cell* might be genre-based in that it is specifically not a good horror film. Such a distinction implies firstly that it is possible to determine what a ‘good’ horror film is or does, and second that ‘a horror film’ is a single entity, when of course horror, like all genres, contains within it sub-genres and cycles that appeal to different types of fans. While it is possible to say that, generally, being a good horror film and being a good film go hand in hand – i.e. a film has to be well-made to be effective – in some cases within horror, such as Sam Raimi’s *The Evil Dead* (1981) or Wes Craven’s *Last House on the Left* (1971) the very rawness of the film style is part of the appeal, as imagination, striking visuals and enthusiasm take the place of technical mastery.

However, while *Cell* may well be a bad film, a bad adaptation, or a bad horror movie, or indeed all three, that does not necessarily entirely explain its critical and commercial failure and its nomination as one of the worst adaptations. While quality is, or at least can be, a factor, another important aspect that impacts upon a film’s success or otherwise is the context of the project, and it is this context that I wish to examine here. To give another example, *The Running Man* (1987) was arguably a poor adaptation, in that it was completely different to King’s story, yet it made $38m at the US box office. The reason of course is that *The Running Man* was reworked as a SF inflected action vehicle for Arnold Schwarzenegger and released the same year as *Predator*, which was at that point the biggest hit of his career. The fact that it opened to largely negative reviews and is dismissed by King fans for being nothing to do with the book does not actually matter when the resulting film is a macho action movie in the late 1980s, when
macho action movies were king. As a Schwarzenegger film in 1987, it was likely to make money regardless of any other factors, including its relation to King, its fidelity to the source text, or indeed whether or not it was any good as a movie. Context is therefore key to understanding its success.

Therefore I would argue that irrespective of whether it is a good film or not, the reasons why Cell flopped critically and commercially are, as with The Running Man, bound up in more than just the relative quality of the film itself and its relationship to the source. Consequently, while I do offer here some comparisons between the novel and the film, my analysis concentrates on the circumstances of the film’s production and its relationship to King, to horror, and to the zombie genre, the aim being to contextualise Cell’s ‘worst’ label beyond notions of quality and fidelity. In this respect I am drawing upon an argument made by Simone Murray, who suggests that in considering adaptations we should focus less upon the text and instead consider how ‘the mechanisms by which adaptations are produced influence the kind of adaptations released’ because ‘adapted texts may be interesting, in short, not so much for their intricate ideological encodings, but for the way they illuminate the contexts of their own production.’ (2012, 4, 5) In the case of Cell and Stephen King we can take this idea and consider what the production context of this particular adaptation illustrates about the wider context of the pitfalls of adapting King’s work. My desire therefore is not to offer any subjective consideration of Cell as a ‘poor’ film, but instead to look at the contextual factors that shaped its aesthetic and structure, and the extent to which these factors impacted upon Cell’s critical and box office reception.

An example of the importance of context can be found in the lack of a theatrical run. This is not unusual for a recent King project. In 2014 Mercy, Blumhouse Productions’ adaptation of King’s short story ‘Gramma’ was released direct to DVD, while A Good Marriage, based on the novella of the same name in King’s Full Dark No Stars (2010), had a very limited theatrical release before heading to DVD and VOD. It is tempting to see a direct-to-VOD release as an indicator of a film’s lack of quality, much as a straight-to-video (or DVD) release was seen in the 1980s and 1990s. Yet in the age of online streaming, bypassing cinemas no longer automatically implies a film is problematic, and instead has become a viable alternative releasing strategy. According to their mission statement, Cell’s distributor, Saban films, ‘tailor each release based on the unique characteristics of their films, ranging from day-and-date VOD releases to mid-scale traditional theatricals’, so the fact that Cell barely saw the inside of a cinema auditorium does not conclusively indicate a lack of confidence on behalf of the distributors.

However, the crucial difference between Cell and A Good Marriage/Mercy, is that it was, on paper, potentially a more high profile project. Firstly, it reteamed John Cusack and Samuel L. Jackson, stars of 2007’s 1408, which is one of the most successful King adaptations at the US and worldwide box office. Second, Cell was a New York Times number one bestseller, unlike A Good Marriage and Mercy, which were both based upon stories within a collection with a different title (and in the case of Mercy the film had an entirely original name). This meant that the title, Cell, had greater audience awareness potential through being on book covers and spines on bookstore shelves across the USA. Title awareness has played an important role in the King cinematic and televisual canons. On TV, where in the 1990s ABC’s King horror adaptations were drawing large audiences, cover titles like It (1990), The Tommyknockers (1992) and The Stand (1994) achieved higher viewing figures than stories that were either drawn from collections (The Langoliers, 1995 from Four Past Midnight, 1990) or original screenplays (Golden Years, 1991, Storm of the Century, 1999). Equally two of the most beloved King adaptations, Stand by Me (1986) and The Shawshank Redemption (1994) were not based on horror tales and did not mention King in their marketing in order to dissociate themselves from the concept of a Stephen King adaptation as being a horror film. They were able to do this partly because the titles on which they were based – “The Body” and “Rita Hayworth and Shawshank Redemption” – were both novellas included in Different Seasons (1982), and were thus less well known to mainstream audiences. Likewise the most financially successful of all the Stephen King adaptations, The Green Mile (1999) also did not emphasise King’s name in the publicity, and

---

3 http://www.sabanfilms.com/about/
was based on a book that was publishing experiment, released as a monthly series of small paperbacks in 1996, and not collected into a single novel until 2000, after the film came out. Instead *The Green Mile* capitalised on the drawing power of its star, Tom Hanks, and the fact that it shared a director, Frank Darabont, with *The Shawshank Redemption.*

*Cell* therefore represented a re-teaming of high profile stars (certainly in the case of Jackson) who had already scored a notable King-related hit, and it was a title with which general audiences were more likely to be familiar. The third reason for *Cell*'s higher profile potential was because although it primarily uses the word ‘phoners’ rather than ‘zombies’, the novel and the film’s depiction of mindless, cannibalistic shuffling hordes (caused by a mysterious ‘pulse’ sent through the cell network) connects to the zombie genre, which was on the ascendency when the novel was published in 2006, and which by 2016 had, in Stacey Abbott’s phrase ‘gone viral’ (2016, 81) across film, TV and culture in general. As an adaptation of a bestseller that reteamed the stars of a previous mainstream cinema success in a genre that was packing cinemas and sofas across the world, *Cell* should have been a hit, but wasn’t.

**Development Hell, Zombie Horror and *Cell***

The most significant context in considering the problems of *Cell* is its ten-year journey to the screen, which had significant consequences for the adaptation in terms of its thematic resonance, its relationship to the cinematic Stephen King brand and to the cinematic horror genre, and thus to the narrative and style of the film. When King’s novel was released in 2006, Bob and Harvey Weinstein acquired the rights for their Dimension Films label, which was at that point in production on *1408* as well as Darabont’s version of *The Mist* (2007). Soon after it was announced that horror enfant terrible Eli Roth – who was then finishing *Hostel II* (2005) – would direct and co-write the screenplay with the writers of *1408*, Scott Alexander and Larry Karaszewski. Roth described the book as ‘a balls out horror movie with a smart take on the zombie genre’ (Weinberg, 2006) and envisaged the film as a violent apocalyptic zombie film in the vein of Danny Boyle’s *28 Days Later* (2002) and Zack Snyder’s *Dawn of the Dead* (2004). Roth said he was particularly impressed with the book’s opening in which Boston descends into anarchy, but felt that after that the story’s momentum dissipated and the book became weaker. His take on the film adaptation was to:

> keep the tension of the opening 40 pages of the book and I want to introduce other elements because I think that book, for me where it loses tension, is where suddenly you don’t feel like the phone crazies are trying to kill them….I find that there should be other ways that you still feel the tension that any second they could get killed (Sciretta 2007).

Over the next year the project stalled and in 2009 Roth confirmed that he had ‘walked off *Cell* kind of quietly. There was a difference in opinion on how to make the film and what the story should be’ (Paur, 2008). Dimension dropped the project and former Dimension chief, and producer of *1408*, Richard Saperstein took it over, with a new script by King himself. The casting of John Cusack was announced in 2012, with Jackson’s involvement revealed in November 2013, along with director Tod Williams (*Paranormal Activity 2*, 2010). The film went into production in Atlanta in January 2014. Finally in March 2016 Saban films acquired US distribution the rights.

There are three notable elements in this extended development period. The first is that Roth intended *Cell* to be a ‘balls-out’ zombie horror film, and while the creative differences between Roth and the Weinsteins have not been made public, the box office success of the CGI and teen-friendly *1408* compared to *Hostel II* may have been a factor. Both films were aimed at a mainstream horror audience, in that they were targeted at the multiplexes rather than at the horror festivals and DVD labels catering more to specialist horror fans. In addition, both films had a summer release, but the crucial difference was that *1408* had a PG-13 certificate as opposed to *Hostel II*’s R, and the result was that *1408* made $71m at the US Box Office compared to *Hostel II*’s $17m. Along with *Saw* (2004) the original *Hostel* launched the ‘torture-porn’ sub-genre. While *Hostel* spawned two sequels, and *Saw* a further six films
before the franchises went into hiatus (in 2011 and 2010 respectively), by 2007 multiplex horror audiences’ enjoyment of the gross-out seemed to be on the wane, so much so that Starburst magazine could note that ‘Horror fans who over the last couple of years are growing tired of being served up … torture porn’… could well find 1408 a refreshing return to traditional horror in a modern day setting’ (Anon 2007, 100). 1408 positioned itself in direct opposition to Hostel II in its publicity, with producer Lorenzo di Bonaventura saying ‘I think what this movie does versus what Eli has done in those movies is two totally different experiences … this movie is trying to go beyond a call to the extreme … it’s going towards the subtle’ (Anon 2007, 100).

Another factor may well have been the lukewarm response from audiences to Frank Darabont’s adaptation of The Mist, also released in 2007. Like Cell the novel, Darabont’s R-rated take on King’s short story told of a group of survivors facing an apocalyptic event, in this case the unleashing of inter-dimensional monsters by the Army’s Arrowhead Project. With a deliberately bleak ending in which the central character kills his family moments before a potential rescue, this particular King-inspired vision of the end of the world fared poorly at the box office, grossing only $4m in its opening weekend. Roth’s strong take on the project was therefore out of step with a trend in mainstream horror in 2007 away from the bleakness of The Mist and the gory excesses of Hostel and Saw towards the CGI-led teen friendly horror of I am Legend (2007) and the jump-scare found footage suggestiveness of Paranormal Activity (2009). Released almost simultaneously in the autumn of 2009, Paranormal Activity took over $100m at the US box office, compared to just $27m for Saw VI.

Furthermore, the intervening period between Roth’s 2009 departure and the beginning of production in January 2014 saw the zombie genre not only develop cultural ubiquity, but also spread out to different audiences. By 2013 The Walking Dead (2010-) was established as a landmark TV series combining hitherto unforeseeable levels of television violence with a character focussed drama of broader appeal. Meanwhile, in cinemas, alongside R-rated titles like the Resident Evil franchise (2002-2017) and the independently produced StakeLand (2010) zombies were appearing in the PG rated ParaNorman (2012) and also in PG-13 films including the comedy-drama Warm Bodies and the blockbuster actioner World War Z (both 2013). Indeed the latter was, like 1408, a PG-13 rated CGI horror that made millions worldwide, demonstrating that teen audiences were embracing the zombie apocalypse and making a 1408 style zombie re-team up a potentially lucrative prospect. By 2014 Roth’s notion of a ‘balls-out’ zombie horror film was not only out of step with prevailing trends in horror, but also with the increasingly mainstream zombie sub-genre.

However, while the zombie genre had broadened to encompass the possibility of a PG-13 apocalypse in the period between Roth’s departure and the film’s production, it had also covered much of the ground that King had in his novel. In keeping with the critique of the film in Variety quoted above that declared the film to be the same as any other zombie movie, only worse, the consistent criticism of Cell on Rotten Tomatoes is that it is derivative, ‘outdated’, full of ‘known quantities’, and possessing a story that ‘bears the unmistakable patina of Danny Boyle’s 28 Days Later within ‘an entertainment landscape already lousy with zombies’ (Various, 2016). This contrasts with the reviews of the book when it was published in 2006. Dorman Shindler in The Seattle Times described it as ‘another milestone for King and one of the first novels – genre or otherwise – to truly capture the tenor, at least so far, of the 21st Century’ (2006), while Janet Maslin in The New York Times heralded Cell as a contemporary work that ‘invokes the events of Sept. 11, 2001…echoes the upheaval caused by…. Katrina (and) reflects the violent anarchy to be found in Iraq’ (2006).

Stacey Abbott suggests that the renaissance of the cinematic zombie genre at the start of the twenty-first century can partly be linked to the events of 9/11 and that Synder’s Dawn of the Dead is particularly evocative of that day, opening as it does with ‘the seemingly instantaneous disruption of normality by chaos.’ (2016, 68, 70) In the space of a few minutes the life of central character Anna (Sarah Polley) is changed when her quiet neighbourhood is ‘transformed into a warzone’ (Abbott 2016, 70). The rapid rendering as uncanny the normal places of life in Snyder’s film has echoes of the
transformation of the September streets of New York City from sunny, familiar landmarks to rubble strewn grey wastelands, and King’s novel attempts a similar treatment of the centre of Boston. As King’s hero, Clay Riddell, waits in line at an ice cream truck, the woman in front of him closes her cell phone after her call is interrupted, pauses, then lunges forward and grabs the ice cream seller, ‘the closed-off, well-bred, out-in-public look on her face … replaced by a convulsive snarl that shrank her eyes to slits and exposed both sets of teeth’ (King 2006, 7). Seconds later two girls in the queue also turn feral, one biting into the neck of the snarling women, the other bashing her own teeth out on a lamppost. Within seven pages the area next to Boston Common goes to hell; jumpers leap out of windows, a Duck Boat full of people flattens a Mister Softee truck, explosions and alarms ring out, and planes fall from the sky.

The inclusion of jumpers and falling planes highlights that the opening of Cell is referencing 9/11. Johan Hoglund goes so far as to suggest that the behaviour of the phoners in their initial aggressive stage is akin to that of a suicide bomber, in which ‘the stricken drive their cars into buildings and into oncoming traffic, they cut themselves up with knives while at the same time trying to kill the people around them’ (2015, 76-77). Yet alongside the references to 9/11, the second thematic strand of the book is the danger of cell phones, stemming from the fact that if this is a terror attack, then it is one that involves a corrupted cell signal pulse that ‘wipes’ the minds of those who hear it. As Dawn Keetley notes (2012), in the novel one of the alternative theories to the 9/11 model which suggests the events are the result of an organised terror attack is a technophobic one; that the pulse was created by ‘a couple of inspired nutcases working in a garage’ (King 2006, 253), which is a reference to the creation of the Apple computer by Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak. This makes King’s tale remarkably prescient given that four months after the book was published Jobs first demonstrated the iPhone, the product which more than any would give rise to the image of phone user as zombie.

The connection of 9/11 imagery, terrorism and the potential hazards of cell-phone usage (including the risk that cellphones caused cancer, which was a growing concern in the early twenty-first century) has the effect of positioning the phoners as both antagonists and victims, dangerous to those unaffected, but changed through no fault of their own. When hiding out in Tom McCourt’s suburban home, Clay sees the street outside filled with those affected by the pulse, noting ‘the vacant faces, the eyes that seemed to look beyond everything, the dirty, bloody dishevelled clothing … the occasional cry or jerky gesture’ (King 2006, 94). These are the same zombies who hours earlier were acting as terrorists, but a few pages later King’s description aligns them with victims of a terror attack, stumbling around dazed, helpless and dirty.

In the film the allusions to 9/11 are replaced. The opening no longer occurs on Boston Common but rather at Boston airport, and while the airline location does connect to 9/11, as does the plane crash with ends the sequence, the emphasis shifts away from the 9/11 resonance of the novel towards that second thematic strand of technophobia and the risks of cell phones. The film’s opening scene removes the potential reading of the phoners as suicide bombers by making it clear that people are having seizures due to a buzzing that comes through their handsets, headphones and Bluetooth devices. After general shots of seizing phoners, the violence begins as the camera focuses upon a suited young businessman tearing across the arrival hall and repeatedly punching a girl in the face. The friend of the girl hit by the businessman calls 911 and then bashes her head on a concrete post, a security guard eats his own dog, a cook from the restaurant stabs people before being shot by police, and people are thrown over the escalators.

The depiction of a black cook being shot by a white cop, of the businessman violently assaulting the girl, and of police shooting into the crowd indiscriminately suggest an urban riot rather than a terrorist attack, even to the extent of using hand-held cameras to give a sense of immediacy within the chaos.

The film’s opening is therefore less reminiscent of the post 9/11 destruction of society presented in Dawn of the Dead, but rather the riot-like chaos of the opening of World War Z, in which the streets of Philadelphia become a place of terror when a virus erupts out of nowhere, transforming the bitten
instantly into zombies. As Philadelphia descends into pandemonium, aerial shots make it impossible to
distinguish the infected from the fleeing crowds. By the time *World War Z* was released, the zombie
genre had moved on from its terrorist associations, and films like *Quarantine* (2008) and the on-going
*Resident Evil* franchise were foregrounding the viral subtext of *28 Days Later* and making ‘the relationship
between virology and the undead, a factor implicit within the contagion framework of all zombie films,
far more overt.’ (Abbott 2016, 81).

Yet while the metaphor behind *World War Z* is the fear of a global pandemic, the outbreak
follows an opening credit sequence that equates modern life with zombies, juxtaposing crowds in traffic
jams, on escalators and alighting from commuter trains with ants marching and birds flocking together.
A depiction of mindless *Jerry Springer* style TV shows alongside debates about global warming imply we
are sleepwalking into disaster. Complementing these images are shots of people walking along and
staring at their mobile phones, and so in addition to the theme of infection, *World War Z* also embraces
the notion of the cell phone turning people into techno-zombies, a concept that was, in 2013, becoming
increasingly ubiquitous and even normalised. Towards the end of 2015 the phrase ‘smartphone zombie’
or ‘smombie’ – referring to people who walk along, staring at their phones, oblivious to their
surroundings – entered the lexicon by being chosen as that year’s ‘German Youth Word’. Responding
to a report in *The Sunday Times* in February 2016 about the dangers of smombies, Douglas Robertson in
*The Independent* was already prepared to describe such a depiction of phone users as a tired cliché (2016).
Therefore while the novel *Cell* was, in 2006, one of the first books to capture the tenor of the twenty-
first century through its references to 9/11 and its premonition of the smart phone zombie, by the time
the film was released in 2016 9/11 was distant enough so that the allusions in the opening sequence were
changed to connect to images of urban riots, while the image of the cell phone user as zombie, while still
relevant, was also hackedneyed, leaving the film following where the novel once led and allowing Luke
Thompson, writing in the *Village Voice*, to describe the film as ‘Tod Williams decade-too-late adaptation’
(2016).

The production delays therefore presented an opportunity by bringing *Cell*, with its PG-13
associations drawn from *1408*, into line with the mainstreaming of the zombie genre. At the same time
however it simultaneously robbed the film of much of the novel’s 9/11-related thematic resonance by
being too distant from that original event, and undermined the technophobic prescience of King’s
original tale, partly because concerns over links between cellphone usage and cancer had largely abated,
and partly because the phone zombie had arguably become less a cultural fear than an everyday
annoyance.

**Cell** and ‘The Stephen King Film’ 2007-2016

The other impact of the delay, which again represented both an opportunity and a challenge, was the
relationship of the film to the cinematic Stephen King brand. When the film was first mooted by Roth in
2007, King adaptations were undergoing a slump in public and industry interest, but when the film came
out in 2016, the slump was over and a renaissance of interest in King had taken place. While it is likely
that *Cell* was finally released in order to capitalise on this revived interest, the fact that it was unable to
do so is also relevant to the film’s failure in two specific ways. The first is that as a straightforward
zombie horror movie *Cell* stood out from a pack of King films that were embracing more complex
forms of character drama, and the second is that it was a stripped-down 90 minute feature in an era
increasingly adopting longer narrative formats such as the multipart film and the serial drama.

A cycle of boom and bust has dogged King adaptations since *Carrie* (1976). The first downturn
occurred after lukewarm responses to *Cat’s Eye* and *Silver Bullet* (both 1985) and outright hostility
towards *Maximum Overdrive* (1986), resulted in a three-year period that saw only three adaptations of
King’s work, *Stand by Me*, *The Running Man* and *Creepshow 2* (1987). The success of *Pet Sematary* (1989) and
*Misery* (1990) launched another wave of cinematic adaptations that also went into decline after the poor
box office performances of *The Dark Half* (1993) and *Needful Things* (1993). The same period saw King’s
name take a prominent position on TV with ABC’s mini-series adaptations of *It* (1990), *The Tommyknockers* (1992) and *The Stand* (1994), but this ended in 2006 after the badly received *Desperation*.

2007’s *1408* and *The Mist* were followed by a similar fallow period in which only *Dolan’s Cadillac* (2009) and *Genesis* (2011, another entry in the *Children of the Corn* franchise) filled the gap, along with attempts by JJ Abrams and Ron Howard to get a *Dark Tower* project going, which had stalled by 2012. The result was that between 2007 and 2013 ‘a Stephen King adaptation’ was not the sound investment it had been, and one with a King-written script was arguably even less appealing. Cinematically, with the exception of *Creepshow* (1982) and *Pet Sematary*, King scripted films, like *Maximum Overdrive*, *Cat’s Eye*, *Silver Bullet* and *Sleepwalkers* (1992) tended to do badly, while on TV *The Stand* had been followed by a disappointingly received King written and produced remake of *The Shining* (1997) and then by the original screenplays of *Storm of the Century*, *Rose Red* (2002) and *Kingdom Hospital* (2004). As noted above, while *1408* was a huge hit in cinemas, *The Mist*, directed and written by Darabont was not, and it was the latter to which King most closely tied himself. He appeared with Darabont for interviews to promote the film, but remained largely silent on the subject of *1408*.

A resurgence in the popularity of King adaptions was heralded in 2013 with the release of a new cinema adaptation of *Carrie*, and the revival gained momentum over the next two years. On TV, 2013 also saw the broadcast of the first season of the serial adaptation of King’s 2009 novel *Under the Dome*, which was a big summer success for CBS (see Brown 2017), and then 2014 saw the release of *Merry*, *A Good Marriage* and the Lifetime produced TV movie *Big Driver*. Around this time came the announcement that Abrams was adapting *11.22.63* (2011) for Hulu, and the rumours began once more that *The Dark Tower* was going ahead. While *Under the Dome* was off the air by 2016 due to declining ratings, that same year Abrams’ series was a critical success and the King floodgates had opened, with *The Dark Tower* in production along with a new two-part theatrical adaptation of *It*, and for TV *Mr Mercedes* and *The Mist*. Meanwhile Netflix were producing an adaptation of *Gerald’s Game* (1992) and the novella *1922* (from *Full Dark No Stars*), and had also funded the King-inspired horror series *Stranger Things* (2016–). 2016 therefore was the year that saw King’s name back in the forefront of cinema and TV adaptions after almost ten years in the wilderness, ostensibly making it the perfect time to finally release *Cell*.

Yet as noted above, *Cell* stands out from the majority of these other King projects in development in a number of key ways. First, it is one of the few films in the contemporary cycle of adaptions that is principally a horror film. While both *The Mist* and *It* are clearly marked as horror (although they focus more on character drama than the supernatural), *The Dark Tower* is a fantasy epic, while *Under the Dome* is science fiction, as is *11.22.63* with its central time travel narrative. *Mr Mercedes*, while hinting at some form of supernatural presence in and around killer Brady Hartsfield, is a police procedural drama, and *A Good Marriage*, *Big Driver*, *Gerald’s Game* and *1922* are thrillers rather than horror tales, a fact that connects them more to *Misery* and *Dolores Claiborne* (1995) than *Pet Sematary* or *The Dead Zone* (1983).

Such diversity actually reflects King’s literary output. While he has been traditionally branded a horror author, much of his work does not fall comfortably into the category of what Peter Straub has described as ‘easily classifiable horror fiction’ (2000, ix) and this is more and more evident as his career has progressed. Straub argues that since as far back as *The Dead Zone* (1979) King’s work ‘has bounced from genre to genre’ but has still been labelled as horror ‘because that’s what reviewers are like, they think in terms of categories and straight lines’ (2000, ix). The horror writer label still sticks to King, even though since *Desperation* (1996) he has published arguably only three novels that clearly draw upon horror tropes for the main thrust of their story, the ghost story *Duma Key* (2008), the zombie tale *Cell* and the sequel to *The Shining*, *Doctor Sleep* (2013). The current cycle of adaptions is drawing primarily upon his later works, and reflects this diversity. While his label as the master of the macabre endures owing the continued circulation of his classic horror back catalogue, increasingly in cinematic, television and literary terms, ‘Stephen King’ is coming to mean something different. The result is that both in book and film form, *Cell* represents something of an anachronism for King in the twenty-first century. Not only is it
obviously a horror film, because of its zombie associations, it is also, unlike *Mercy*, a horror film intended for mainstream audiences. The only other two horror films in the contemporary cycle specifically aimed at the multiplexes are *Carrie* and *It*, both of which are remakes of classic King horror films (or readaptations of classic King horror stories) which again separates *Cell* from the current cycle as the only horror film aimed at mainstream audiences to be based on a new King text.

*Cell* also stands out by being almost the only single feature based on a novel. With the exception of *Carrie*, which is drawn from one of the shortest of King’s books, all the other single-film adaptations adapt either short stories or novellas. In the current cycle King’s longer works are being made into multipart films (*It*), or series (*Under the Dome*, 11/22/63). In the audio commentary on the DVD of his version of *The Shining*, King notes that while working with a major TV network presents problems in terms of the amount of violence that can be shown, what it offers in lieu is time for the situation and the characters to develop and for the audiences to get to know them, and it is notable that the most successful King adaptations tend to be based on short novels (*The Green Mile*, 1999), novellas (*Stand by Me*, *Shawshank*) and short stories (1408). In an interview with Tony Magistrale King described the root of the problem with adapting his longer works as being ‘you are working with too much material’ (2003, 8).

As I have discussed in relation to *Under the Dome* (Brown 2017), the new cycle (with the exception of *The Dark Tower*), appears to be taking advantage of the new forms of cinematic and televsional storytelling offered by the multipart film, the 8-12 episode short season series and the event series, to explore new ways of ‘capturing’ King’s texts in audio-visual form, emphasising character over action.

This is significant because diverse King scholars such as Michael Collings (2006, 92) and Jonathan Davis have focussed upon the importance of character to King’s popularity. Davis argues that ‘King writes about ordinary individuals with whom his readers can identify’ (1994, 23) while Collings suggest that ‘King’s power depends on his ability to put ordinary people into extraordinary situations’ (2006, 92). Samuel Schumann agrees, citing as a key strength King’s ‘ability to create characters at once unique and universal, and who therefore interest and engage us’ (1987, 109). King himself explains why in *Danse Macabre*, writing ‘if … the audience has come to like and understand – or even just to appreciate – the characters they are watching as real people, if some artistic link has been formed there, blood can fly everywhere and the audience cannot remain unimpressed’ (1981, 219). In 1991 King argued that ‘it’s tough to break the gap between the warmth in the novel that makes the characters seem worth loving and caring about, set off against the horror. When they make the movie they concentrate on the moment when the monster comes out and starts waiving his claws. I don’t think that’s what the people are interested in.’ (quoted in Wood, 1991, 51). As a one-off 90 minute cinema adaptation of a novel almost twice the length of *Carrie*, *Cell* evidences precisely the problem that King identifies in terms of focussing on the monster. *Cell* is therefore anachronistic in terms of its relationship to the current King adaptations, which are taking their time and embracing generic diversity by focussing more on character.

---

### The Story of *Cell*: Narrative and Character

Narratively the novel *Cell* is tied most closely to *The Stand*, not only in its apocalyptic vision, but also because after the initial scene is set the remainder of the story involves characters on a journey. In *The Stand* it is to Boulder or Las Vegas, in *Cell* it is Kashwak, Maine. The use of a travelling group who pick up extra characters and have dramatic encounters along the way is one to which King returns often, notably in “The Body”, *The Talisman* (1984) and *The Dark Tower* (1982-2012). In *Cell* Clay meets Tom McCourt by Boston Common, and the two of them shelter at Clay’s hotel, where they meet teenager Alice Maxwell. They trek north towards Maine to find Clay’s family, stopping at Gaiten Academy boys’ school, home to Headmaster Charles Ardai and his one remaining pupil, Jordan. Ardai dies and Jordan joins the group, and eventually the phoners force them towards Kashwak, an area with no phone signal.

---

5 The only other single feature, *The Dark Tower*, is a continuation of the story of Roland Deschain, rather than an adaptation of the books.
Ostensibly steered there for their safety, Clay and the others (minus Alice, who is killed) are actually to be sacrificed, because at Gaiten they burn a football field full of resting phoners. The story is therefore a trip north punctuated by extended stops at the hotel, McCourt’s house, Gaiten, and finally Kashwak. Other, smaller encounters also break the journey. Some depict the direction the human world is taking, such as two men fighting over a keg of beer, a religious woman who harasses Alice, or a couple pushing their child in a shopping cart who pull guns when Clay tries to help. Others have more narrative significance, including meeting Gunner, a road-racer who kill Alice, and later Denise, Ray and Dan, who have also massacred phoners, and who explain to Clay and the others the impact of what they have done.

Bound up with the trip are the gradual reveal of what the phoners are, and Clay’s emotional journey towards understanding. It is at Tom’s house that Alice notices phoners flock like birds, and then later she spots that they are getting smarter. At Gaiten they learn the phoners sleep en masse, and that they are a telepathic hive mind. Jordan then suggests that the phoners are like computers, their brains wiped by the pulse like a hard drive by a magnet, and that when they rest they are rebooting. The final part of the phoner puzzle is Jordan’s suggestion that the pulse is still broadcasting but is corrupted. So as the phoners organise behind the leader-like figure that Clay refers to as The Raggedy Man, their unity begins to break down because of this corrupted signal. The book ends when Clay, having found that his son is a phoner, holds a cell phone to his son’s ear, in the hope that, as Jordan suggests, it will wipe the phoner programme and that ‘the old programming may eventually reboot’ (King 2006, 342).

Thematically King’s explanation for the phoners is a mixture of evolutionary and technological influences. Mary Findley argues that mankind has been, ‘knocked down the evolutionary ladder to their base state, one of aggression and instinct’ (2014, 59), but the fact that the phoners’ behaviour is specifically described in avian terms as ‘flocking’ rather than as a more bestial ‘pack mentality’ sits uncomfortably with this idea of falling back into a primal past, since birds were not man’s ancestor. It is technology that bridges these two elements, the flocking coming less from birds and more from the idea that the rebooted phoners share a hive mind that involves them ‘relinquishing of control to the networked environment.’ (Keetley 2012, u.p) As the book progresses, the good/evil divide between the phoners and survivors is increasingly blurred. Although they are violent at the outset, the end of the novel weighs up the execution of Clay and his companions by the phoners for setting fire to their kind while sleeping, against the companions’ decision to blow up eight thousand phoners. Rather like Robert Neville in Richard Matheson’s I am Legend (1954), by the end the humans are the monsters.

After the slaughter at Kashwak, Clay remembers Jordan saying ‘the Pulse had acted on human brains like an EMP. Nothing left but the core … and the core was murder’ (King 2006, 341). While Jordan is referring to the phoners, this statement is equally applicable to King’s vision of humanity. With most of America turned, Clay’s group represents a core of humanity, and murder is their legacy. This balance is tipped in the novel gradually. As Niclas Green remarks, The Raggedy Man points at each of Clay’s group and declares them, in Latin, ‘insana’ marking them as ‘the crazy ones … the divergent type of people,’ forcing the reader to ask who they should support (2015, 6). After the opening sequence few of the main characters are killed by phoners without a good reason. Ardai is forced into suicide because of the same act of murder that warrants Clay’s execution. The most random death in the latter part of the story is that of Alice, killed not by a phoner but by Gunner, a human. Like Clay and his friends are to be, Gunner is punished for his crime by The Raggedy Man, crucified with a sign around his neck saying ‘Justice is Served’ (King 2006, 256). King’s tale is therefore more morally complex than much of his other work. Burton Hatlen argues that ‘good in King’s world is represented only by such small groups of people who (barely) cling together in the face of encroaching darkness rather than any supernatural power which can serve to counter-balance the forces of destruction’ (qtd in Davis 1994, 103). Cell however presents a world in which this morality is turned upside down and in which the small group of survivors become the monster.
Typically of King the reader experiences this complex morality through Clay as the main protagonist, and like most of King’s main characters, Clay is a regular blue-collar guy, what Deborah Notkin refers to as ‘reasonably honest, caring and upright and can be relied upon in most circumstances’ (1990, 132). As Mark Jancovich points out, the reason why readers identify so closely with King’s protagonists is not just their decency, but the fact that he writes the narrative from their point of view, resulting in ‘highly personal and interior novels in which we watch his characters’ thought processes. The drama of the novels takes place as much within these thought processes as within the moments of action and violence’ (1992, 99). Thus while there are moments of body horror within the book, notably at the opening, as Eli Roth had noted, very quickly such imagery dies down and the story focuses on Clay’s concern for his own wife and child, his growing bond with Tom, Alice and Jordan, and his increasing sense that somehow or other in fighting the phoners he is in the wrong.

In this sense the book may begin as Roth’s ‘balls-out’ horror tale, but it becomes a meditation on guilt, responsibility and moral complexity in the face of the demise of society. By the end the phoners, while still antagonists trying to assimilate the non-affected, are equally the victims of both a corrupted pulse and a massacre, which leave them dazed and confused, bereft of the hive mind that gave them purpose. As Clay wanders with his son, trying to decide whether to expose him to the pulse once more, the phoners pose no discernible threat, and the society that they were creating has been destroyed just as violently as the one they replaced, this time by Clay and his friends.

In the film much of the book’s moral exploration is removed by the necessary externalisation of the novel’s largely interiorised narration. With the exception of the ending, the film follows King’s narrative, making significant adjustments along the way. The main events of the story are there, including the visit to Gaiten, the destruction of the flock, the meeting with Ray and Denise, and the forced trip to Kashwak, but Alice is in her early 20s rather than 15, and while Clay is still traveling to find his family, he is estranged from both his wife and son and living in the city.

In the film there is a scene where Clay tells Alice that he worked in a dead end job, desperate to be a graphic novelist, and hated his wife for loving him while he was mired in self-loathing, until he finally left and moved to Boston, but without access to Clay’s internal monologue, much of the detailed character development in the novel is lost. We learn little more about Clay and less about his companions. Tom is a Vietnam veteran who, in his own words, lost all his money ‘in the great crash of ‘08’, while ‘the great divorce of ’09’ robbed him of ‘his emotional stability’. We discover virtually nothing about Alice, except that she killed her mother on the day of the pulse. By making her older she lacks the vulnerability of King’s 15-year-old girl, not for example having the tiny sneaker that she carries with her and holds as an emotional crutch.

Instead of allowing the inner life of the characters to develop through the journey, the film offers only a glimpse, turning them instead largely into ciphers, whose role it is to find Clay’s family. Much of the dialogue that passes between them concentrates on this single narrative purpose. In Clay’s apartment, watching out of the window, Alice notes that the phoners are like birds. Clay responds by saying ‘Whatever it is, I got to get to Kent Pond’, the film effectively supressing discussion of the wider issues in favour of Clay’s needs. When Clay, Tom and Alice do discuss the phoners, they seem to know instinctively what’s happening. After they are chased and hide under an upturned boat at sunset, the phoners let out a cry that sounds like the pulse, and then walk away in unison. Immediately Clay notes, ‘They all did it together, like it was an automated response or something’ and he suggests they are telepathic, to which Alice responds ‘like a hive mind’. This is confirmed by Jordan and Ardai, the latter telling them ‘they appear to be u-social, like bees or ants’ and that they act for the common good, making them possibly the next stage of human evolution. Jordan then suggests that their brains have been wiped and are rebooting, and once these basic tenets are established, there is little further development. The one additional moment comes in a scene in a bar where Clay and the others meet a handful of strangers. While they sleep, one of the strangers awakens, and Clay realises she has been turned into a phoner when she transmits the pulse through her voice. After this encounter Tom notes
that they attacked at night, whereas previously they attacked only in the daytime, and that they are transmitting the pulse via their voices in order to recruit.

This is the only further evolution of the phoners in the film. There is no sign of the disoriented phoners impacted by the corrupted signal from the book, nor of them regaining rudimentary language skills, nor of them becoming less aggressive. When Clay sees his wife at their home, she, having evidently been turned on the day of the pulse, attacks him immediately and violently, whereas in the novel, by the time Clay and the others reach Gaiten, the phoners only murder people as punishment for crimes against them. Therefore in the film, as in the novel, the phoners cease to be an object of narrative interest, since they don’t change. King’s depiction of both the inner and outer world of an apocalypse is reduced to a sequence of narrative events the purpose of which is to drive the characters through the world that the story creates. Writing about King’s narrative style, Alain Silver and James Ursini argue that ‘King’s antagonists are merely … narrative irritants which impel his protagonists to action’ (1994, 163) and certainly this is the case in the film version of *Cell*, where the prime purpose of the phoners appears to be to make sure that Clay gets to the spot where the film ends.

Yet precious little of the world itself is presented. King’s novel is replete with encounters with normal people on the road. In the film, between the major set piece locations, Clay and his companions travel in virtual silence, meeting no one except for the narrative-purposed characters of the group in the bar, Ardai and Jordan, and Ray and Denise. Ardai’s role is to dispense information about the phoners and encourage the football field massacre, while Ray and Denise bring the bomb to Kashwak. The movie world of *Cell* is largely empty and already populated almost exclusively by phoners, thus removing the depiction of the shattered human world. With the exception of a few car-strewn streets on the walk out of Boston, the world of the film is neat and quiet, and seems more like it takes place early on a peaceful Sunday morning than in the midst of an apocalypse.

With little insight in the human characters, the phoners, and the apocalypse, what the film seems mainly to offer is horror, in the form of the attacks of the phoners themselves, and while the opening is both uncanny and violent, it is followed by only four further attack scenes in the film; one when two motorcyclists are jumped in Boston; one when Clay, Tom and Alice hide under the boat; one when they are attacked in the bar; and finally when Clay is assaulted by his wife. Each uses close ups, fast editing and the screeching pulse sound to create a sense of tension and violence, but there is little by way of gore or threat in these scenes, and because Clay and his group are isolated, the attacks are small and individual and carry none of the apocalyptic chaos of for example the scene in Israel in *World War Z* where the zombies form a tower and breach the defences.

Finally, for all that King’s model of the phoners as part computer-like, part bird-like and part zombie-like is confusing, the film introduces random elements that don’t seem to connect to King’s concept. The Raggedy Man of the novel becomes ‘The King of the Internet’, and rather than being simply a leader of the phoners, he is first seen in one of Clay’s sketches on the wall of his apartment. The meaning of this connection is not explained and neither is the ending in which we see Clay blow up the phoners in Kashwak and head to Canada with his son, but then it appears that in fact he hasn’t done so, as we see him running in a circle with them. The implication is that Clay has in fact been a phoner all along, and the narrative of the film is some kind of Matrix-style dream. King’s novel ends with the unresolved question of whether Clay’s son will return to normal, which in turn will offer hope for the reversal of the entire process, but the film’s ending is far bleaker. The fact that Clay gives up his humanity is more influenced by the image of Donald Sutherland at the end of Philip Kaufman’s *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1978), and indeed the gawping open mouths of the phoners emitting an unearthly sound is also drawing upon that final, shocking moment from Kaufman’s film, as is the fact that Ray refuses to go to sleep in order not to let the telepathic phoners into his mind. However, in borrowing this imagery *Cell* by default connects its depiction of the phoners to that of Jack Finney’s alien invaders, and while this is visually arresting, it does not correspond narratively with the theme of the hive mind, bird like behaviour, the rebooting minds or the zombie-like appearance. While King’s vision of the
phoners is a collage of influences held together by a technological thread, the film offers a much broader collection of borrowed ideas that do not fully cohere, leaving little sense of what the phoners actually are beyond being ‘Other’.

**Conclusion**

Stripped of the interiorised characterisation of the novel and the broader depiction both of a human world in chaos and a phoner world being built and then destroyed, the film *Cell* becomes therefore a story about people the audience don’t get to know going from Boston to Maine. During the first half of the journey they learn what the phoners are. Then they are given the means to blow them up. The film depicts a quiet apocalypse, in which three or four people can walk across multiple states and meet virtually no one – phoner or human – unless they have something important to impart. Whereas King’s book explores the morality of both the imploding human society and the developing phoner world, the film concentrates on narrative events and information that principally serve to get Clay get from Boston to Kashwak.

The film therefore struggles on a narrative and a thematic level, but at least partly this derives from the context of its production. Thanks to the ten-year development process, King’s story is stripped of its thematic innovation, leaving it derivative of proliferating zombie tropes and clichéd concepts of the dead-eyed stares of the smart-phone obsessed. Narratively the film takes only the major horror events of the novel and puts them on screen in 90 minutes in the hope that the depiction of horror, the ‘monster waving its claws’ rather than how the characters experience it, constitutes what makes the book interesting, which in King’s work is rarely the case. The events contribute to the overall efficacy of his tales, but what draws the reader in are the characters, something that King adaptations appear to be learning in the twenty-first century.

This is not to say they have not before. The ABC mini-series of the 1990s such as *It* and *The Stand* took the time to develop fully rounded characters alongside presenting the scares, but with the 8-part *11.22.63*, the three seasons of *Under the Dome* and the serial adaptation of *The Mist* and *Mr Mercedes*, the idea of a Stephen King novel being turned into a 90 minute feature is increasingly anachronistic, as is the notion of King as purely a horror writer, except in relation to a nostalgia for past hits like *It* and *Carrie*.

So why does this make *Cell* among the very worst King adaptations? As I have argued here, it is not necessarily simply that the film is ‘poor,’ but rather because the changes that have taken place in King adaptations since the revival in 2013 (the increasing focus on character combined with a corresponding rise in the length of the adaptations) mean that as a film *Cell* comes across as anachronistic in a way that makes it seem perfunctory, exacerbated by the straight to VOD and DVD release. As a zombie film it features few substantial moments of either action or scares, so it has little of interest to add to the on-going development of the zombie genre, and as a twenty-first century King adaptation it does not provide the kind of well-rounded and identifiable characters offered by other projects like *11.22.63* and *Mr Mercedes*. In this respect *Cell* is similar to *The Dark Tower* (2017), which although it represents a sequel to the novels rather than an adaptation, equally boils King’s complex saga into a 90 minute action film at the expense not only of depicting the richness of the world that King creates, but also the depth of the central characters of Roland Deschain and Jake Chambers.

Ultimately I would argue that *Cell*, and indeed *The Dark Tower*, represent an older form of King adaptation, harking back to films like *Christine* (1983) and *Needful Things* that attempt to wrestle the contents of long novels into a manageable, under-two-hour feature with broad mainstream appeal. But the essential aspect of King’s mainstream literary success is his character development and the worlds he creates, rather than the monsters. As Michael Collings states, ‘the situations bring the readers into the text, while the realistically drawn characters keep the readers there’ (2006, 92). By focussing on narrative events at the expense of character, there is far less in *Cell* to hold the audience interest. While the new
cycle of King adaptations may well wither as previous ones have done, what *Cell* does demonstrate is that by standing out in the context of contemporary King adaptations with their new found emphasis on character, it is clear that regardless of on-going success, our understanding of what is meant by ‘A Stephen King Adaptation’ is undergoing a process of change.

References


Anon. 2007. “Room Service.” *Starburst* 353, August; 96-100.


Brown, Simon. 2017. “Alternate Versions of the Same Reality”. *Science Fiction Film and Television* 10 (2); 267-83


Hoglund, Johan. 2015. “*Cell*, Stephen King and the Imperial Gothic.” *Gothic Studies* 17 (2); 69-87.


Various: https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/cell_2016


The *King Re-Read* is a podcast run by editors Alan Gregory and Dawn Stobbart. It’s quite a venture. The plan is to re-read, in chronological order, all of Stephen King’s works published to date. As we read through King’s expansive oeuvre, approximately once a month we sit down and talk about some of the key ideas and themes of King’s work.

Since last October, we’ve published podcasts on *Carrie*, *‘Salem’s Lot*, *The Shining*, *Rage*, *Night Shift*, *The Stand*, *The Long Walk*, *The Dead Zone*, and *Firestarter*.

We’ve been lucky enough to have some guests join us along the way, which novelist Jenn Ashworth and Dr Andrew Tate speaking with us about *The Stand*. Jenn Ashworth also popped in during our “Christmassy” podcast on *The Shining*.

If you would like to check out our podcasts to date—and those to come—you can listen to us via our website at:

https://pennywisedreadful.wordpress.com/king-re-read/

or via soundcloud at:

https://soundcloud.com/dawn-catherine

Feel free to read along with us, and if you’d like to join us for a conversation please do get in touch!
Laura Mee’s book-length study of *The Shining* reads the significant film as ‘part of popular horror cinema’ and gives it the extensive analytical treatment that it has not received in comprehensive studies of horror (13). In her introduction, Mee acknowledges the worth of theoretical frameworks that address *The Shining*’s faithfulness to Stephen King’s novel, its symbolic meanings, and Kubrick’s style but notes that such ways of reading the film must work alongside the film’s placement in the horror genre. A concise yet thorough overview of scholarly writing on horror reveals gaps in scholarship on the film as horror due to, she argues, *The Shining* resisting both conventional horror tropes and categorization as either American or British. Popular culture’s obsession with the film provides ‘endless possibilities for obsessive analysis’ by horror scholars yet pop culture’s perceived crassness and distance from academic discourse has caused writers to resist such scholarly conversations (13).

Chapter One, ‘Kubrick and Horror’, both addresses the arc of Kubrick’s work and unpacks *The Shining* using various theoretical lenses. The opening section of the chapter classifies the director as genre-fluid, his oeuvre artistic and conceptually dense. His work’s perceived distance from commercialization, however, bypasses a potentially fruitful avenue of analysis. Although Mee does not laud Kubrick for reshaping the conventions of the horror genre through *The Shining*, she does acknowledge his sly use of horror tropes in the film many initially thought was beneath his artistic integrity. Mee cogently contests the perception that Kubrick’s foray into horror was a one-off and that he was a horror amateur by citing the thread of horrific elements running through his work. Instead of seeing his films as separate genre-bending works, viewers and scholars can connect them through recurring motifs: ‘surrealism and spectacle, disorienting aesthetic, the suspenseful slow build, confusing storytelling which retains mystery and refuses to explain everything to an audience who are instead required to fill in the gaps with imagination or puzzle solving’, cold distance from characters, and black humor (20). Mee parses *The Shining* particularly through the lens of black humor in this chapter, analyzing the combination of laughter, terror, and the grotesque in key scenes, but her subsequent discussion of the Freudian uncanny in the film is also theoretically sound. A close reading of visual style in *The Shining* and its psychological impact on the viewer works to dispel the myth that Kubrick did not understand how to work in the horror genre and implies that the hallmarks of Kubrick’s style work to uncanny effect no matter the genre.

Chapter Two, ‘Adapting *The Shining*’, notes that adaptation is a constant of Kubrick’s work and analyzes the process of adapting Stephen King’s novel to argue that the film stands alongside, not behind, the novel. Mee outlines character backstory omissions in the film, justifying their deliberate absence as a contribution to the film’s elliptical style and ambiguous answer to the question of Jack Torrance’s violence. Kubrick’s exclusion of some supernatural scenes and explanations of supernatural figures is reasonably attributed to his desire to maintain an air of strangeness and confusion. The chapter references Stephen King’s dissatisfaction with Kubrick’s film but argues that adaptive changes, such as altering the initial behaviour of Jack Torrance, create the same narrative arc as in the novel but with the economy needed for film.

Chapter Three, ‘Genre and Themes’, expresses appreciation for various analyses of *The Shining*, even some of the more far-fetched readings, because they bring together horror fans, Kubrick fans, and cult classic fans. This chapter includes a close intertextual reading of the movie as inspired by and referencing classic horror novels, films, and figures, firmly placing it in the horror genre. Mee also posits
The Shining as thematically very much of its time; alongside its contemporaries, the movie indicated that monsters can be everyday humans; that the cornerstone of American stability, the family, was, in fact, under pressure and volatile; and that gender and generational tensions could erupt at any time. Also as a product of its time, The Shining’s horror partly stemmed from themes of racism, sexism, and classism as part of the past but consistently threatening to return. Overall, the film’s inclusion of horror tropes and contemporary social concerns provides rich avenues for seeing The Shining as context-bound.

Chapter Four, ‘Release, Reception, and Cultural Legacy’, examines initial and long-term reception of The Shining, using this information to explain the lack of scholarly attention given to the film as horror that Mee first mentioned in the introduction. Tension between the film being marketed for a mainstream audience and that audience’s skeptical and confused reception of the film gives insight into ongoing friction between commercialization and art in film emblemated by The Shining. Despite the film’s long journey to canonization, Mee argues, its influence can be felt in the cold Kubrickian style of several contemporary horror films and in the presence of the monstrous father figure in horror films spanning the past decades.

Ultimately, Mee’s work reconciles the popular and scholarly perceptions of The Shining in order to laud its particular appeal, best stated in the introduction: ‘avoiding gimmicks, its terror is instead largely found in strangeness, slow suspense and the lingering threat of violence and the supernatural, but punctuated with the odd sharp shock which hits like an axe to the chest’ (7). Writing as both a fan and a scholar, Mee reinforces The Shining's status as both an artistic achievement and a profound popular work.


Dawn Stobbart, Lancaster University

As anyone familiar with the films of Stephen King will attest, adapting his novels to cinema is a difficult task. Whilst The Shining (1980), Stand by Me (1987), and more recently Gerald’s Game and It (2017) showcase King’s storytelling in an audio-visual medium. The Dark Tower (2017), The Mangler (1995), and Maximum Overdrive (1986) highlight the less successful attempts at translating his stories across media. One film in particular stands out as a success, both as an adaptation of King’s writing, and as an example of great filmmaking: Frank Darabont’s adaptation of The Shawshank Redemption.

Released in 1994, The Shawshank Redemption is based on King’s novella “Rita Hayworth and the Shawshank Redemption”, contained in Different Seasons (1982), in addition to “Apt Pupil”, “The Body”, (subsequently released as Stand by Me), and “The Breathing Method”, (the only novella in Different Seasons not to be adapted for film. The Shawshank Redemption is one of my personal favourite films of all time, and I am not the only one. The novella, and Frank Darabont’s adaptation, follows the life of banker Andy Dufresne after he is wrongly convicted of the murder of his wife and her lover. 1994 was a good year for the film industry: Forrest Gump was a runaway success at the box office, The Lion King was the highest grossing animated film of the time and Pulp Fiction was released on October 14, the same day as The Shawshank Redemption. Both of these films have gone on to be considered as classic cinematic masterpieces, although only Pulp Fiction was considered a success, with Shawshank struggling to recoup its production costs.

Now, more than twenty years later, The Shawshank Redemption is a film that frequently appears on lists of the best films. According to Tony Magistrale and Maura Grady in their collaborative project, The Shawshank Experience: Tracking the History of the World's Favourite Movie (2016), it is possibly the best film of all time, with Magistrale suggesting that fans ‘drop whatever they are doing and watch the movie whenever it appears on cable television’ (Grady & Magistrale, 2016, p. 172). This book considers the film as an adaptation of King’s original text, but also looks at The Shawshank Redemption's wider influence, both in
terms of its status as a cultural artefact, and as a way of understanding the US penal system through an exploration of the film's setting, the Ohio State Reformatory. It also looks at the way the 'fandom' of *The Shawshank Redemption* has given the prison a new lease of life, and how visiting the sites of events in the film have breathed economic life into the local area.

Tony Magistrale is well placed to offer a critical work on *The Shawshank Redemption*; he is a professor at the University of Vermont, focusing on Gothic film and literature, and has written more than twenty books, including *Hollywood's Stephen King* (2003), where he considers the way that King's stories have been adapted for film – and considering the changes that are made in doing so. Maura Grady is also an English scholar, whose work ranges from film to fandom, including *The Maternal Hero in Tarantino's Kill Bill* (2014) and *Fan Pilgrimage and Student Service Learning* (2016), making her equally well placed to consider the cultural significance of the film.

Magistrale and Grady's critical work is well researched and well written, answering questions on the film I didn't realise I had, and making me think more about the film in a critical context than I ever have before – and I study media! The chapter focussing on the Ohio State Reformatory (OSR) is eye opening in its portrayal of how prisoners were treated in the past, and how the OSR changed from being a reformatory, with a focus on rehabilitation to a maximum security penitentiary whose conditions were so bad that the inmates were involved in a federal trial that considered the treatment of its prisoners was inhumane, before it closed. Linking this historic fact to the Shawshank prison brings about an understanding of the conditions that the characters might have existed in, and adds an extra level of pathos to the film.

The chapter that focusses on the film and conducts a critical reading of it also brings about a detailed understanding of the themes of the film. For example, the discussion of Dufresne as a feminized character is almost obvious, but the nuanced reading that Magistrale and Grady bring to it allows a deeper understanding into the message that Darabont is coding into the film. The book also examines why it has become such a beloved film, what we as the viewer get from it. The book, in keeping with Magistrale's talent for looking at how and why changes are made in adapting King's fiction, is especially impressive when considering the way that the narration and the point-of-view change in the film and what this does to both the story and the viewers reaction to it.

If you are a fan of *The Shawshank Redemption*, this book will be a delight and will make you want to watch the film again (as if an excuse is needed), to pick out the details that Magistrale and Grady focus on, to examine, as they do, the changes that occur in the transition from novella to film, and to learn more about the world's favourite movie.


Andrew Elliot, *The Penrith Tea Rooms Corner*

Earlier in the year, Tom Cruise was to star in *The Mummy*, a huge reboot of the Universal Pictures property that would start a cinematic universe under the banner DARK UNIVERSE. I work for an Independent Cinema and sadly our boss is more interested in the business side of things rather than appreciating cinema as an art form, therefore odd mistakes will occur as a part of this (some films will come late, while others will not be screened at all). The week before *The Mummy* came out it had been advertised as a 12A certified film, but it was in fact a 15 certificate; changes were made, but in this case it would not have made a difference to audience who didn’t bother to come and see it anyway.

In August, the height of the Summer Holidays, and the release date for *The Dark Tower* was fast approaching, swamped in the sludge that was a poor trailer that looked like a TV spot and a very generic poster (a better poster was available but was perhaps too arty for the general public sadly). Early reviews of *The Dark Tower* were not favourable and the news that this movie would later be accompanied by a
TV show that was a prequel just added to the negative feeling I had towards it at this point, then we got word from the boss that it was a 12A certificate! Obviously, this must be a mistake as I could not think of any Stephen King adaption with a certificate lower than a 15. It is The Mummy all over again or at least that is what I believed but the boss was correct, it was indeed a 12A.

Now you may think that it’s the Summer Holidays and why would anybody want to release anything 15 or even 18 when the market is clearly aimed at kids during that time but this Summer has seen many films aimed at adults such as Atomic Blonde, Girls Trip, Detroit, Baby Driver, The Hitman’s Bodyguard and Annabelle: Creation. All these films mentioned have done quite well, certainly better than The Dark Tower anyway.

So the film in question finally arrived, and to be fair I was keeping my expectations low, expect nothing then get something was the plan. Before I go into detail I have read many of Stephen King’s works and seen almost all the adapations of his work. Although I am a fan I have never read The Dark Tower books so my anticipation is built around the notorious and acclaimed nature of these books rather than actually having sat down and invested my time reading them. That, and my excitement to see any King adaption appear on the big screen rather than being straight to home entertainment. So with all this in mind, I am able to simply judge The Dark Tower as a film rather than an adaption and as a film it is very poor. This film is struggling to make sense of its story and the film makers use two very over used story structures to aid them. The first structure is a young person living in the normal world who is being bullied because he is different, but once he realises that his gifts are appreciated in an entirely different world or reality, he goes on a magical adventure in that different world. Examples of this are Harry Potter, Percy Jackson, Pan, The Pagemaster, Twilight, to some extent, and many others. The second structure is a hero from another world comes to the normal world and does not understand our ways and customs largely for comic effect. Examples of this include Thor, Masters of the Universe, Last Action Hero, and Suburban Commando among others. Now, I am not saying that these ideas do not work as many of the films listed are very successful, but The Dark Tower uses them in order to make sense of bunch of novels that are in some cases as thick as old phone books. It is lazy and clearly an attempted simple fix but this film has far too many problems to be fixed simply.

At a running time of just over 90 minutes The Dark Tower finishes before it really gets going resulting in a conclusion that is little more than two men firing special effects at each other, a finale that is far too common these days I am sorry to say. Will The Dark Tower film feel grander once we have the TV series to plonk in front of it? Not that the TV series is fully being developed as a TV show and nothing else, starting with book one and moving forward from that logical point. The casting choices have been quite frowned upon in other reviews, especially Matthew McConaughey as Walter, but I felt he was quite good but left rather neutered by the 12A certificate. Idris Elba is also a good choice for Roland but is not a strong enough or interesting enough to hold a messy story like this together. Some of the action is exciting and when Roland reloads his gun it is certainly cool, but once again it is not enough and only serves to give you brief moments of false belief that the film is going to get better from these moments onwards. For a short time, I felt like I understood the choices made in order to appeal to a younger audience, but once I left the screening and started to think more and more about it, I was just left empty. This film has no back bone and no vision. It also fails to pay homage to the spaghetti western and The Lord of the Rings, both key influences on King’s writing of the novels.

Stephen King has suffered through some awful adptions of his work, The Langoliers, Sleepwalkers, The Lawnmower Man, The Mangler to shame but a few. But The Dark Tower should not have been one of them. It is sad that I now would place The Dark Tower on the same lot as The Mangler. If The Dark Tower does get a series I hope that this film is scrapped and we move ahead with a fresh attempt at the material.
Though it may come as a surprise, given a relatively solid and successful year for filmic adaptations of Stephen King’s works, television channel, Spike’s adaptation of King’s novella *The Mist* is a middle-of-the-road, bland effort which unfortunately lacks any real substance. Unlike recent television and film successes such as Andy Muschietti’s *It* (2017) and Bridget Carpenter’s *11.22.63* (2016), Spike’s attempt simply feels average. It is a shame that this adaptation fails given the fantastic source material it draws from. King’s novella is a tale of human nature; the trapped small town of Bridgton acting as a microcosm of human tendencies when placed under extreme situations. However, this uninspired adaptation follows the trend of other underwhelming King adaptations, such as *Maximum Overdrive* (1986) and *Cell* (2016), to name just a couple. King adaptations are usually fantastic or simply disappointing. Spike’s attempt, unfortunately, falls into the latter category. Indeed, Frank Darabont’s 2007 filmic version, *The Mist*, is a more successful take on King’s novella. It is easy to say the series loses itself along the way, but one wonders if it had ever found itself at all to begin with. Having been cancelled by Spike after just one season, there are plenty of reasons to consider for its failure. The occasional bright sparks the series offers are ultimately extinguished by a murky and mundane production.

*The Mist* premiered on Spike on 22 June 2017 and faced cancellation as soon as just September 2017. Showrunner Christian Torpe was accompanied by cast members such as Morgan Spector as Kevin Copeland, the failed patriarch of the Copeland family in the eyes of his peers, Alyssa Sutherland as Eve Copeland, wife and victim of constant mistreatment by her community, and Darren Pettie as Connor Heisel, the no-nonsense turned nonsensical town sheriff. At the time of writing, the production has received an overwhelming majority of negative reviews. Writing for the *New York Times*, Neil Genzlinger stated: ‘If you’ve made a horror series, you probably don’t want to see it described in a review as comfort food’ (2017). Peter Crawley, writing for the *Irish Times*, does not inspire hope within the prospective viewer for the show, writing that the audience must fulfil the task of ‘[spotting] the anxiety amid the ham-fisted tosh’. Despite the rare somewhat positive review *The Mist* has essentially been deemed a failure by critics and viewers alike. There are multiple problems and issues with this show. The following will analyse the most pertinent.

A considerably important aspect of Spike’s production is its lack of adherence to the novella as source material. Indeed, showrunner Torpe has himself asserted the production can be considered more of a ‘reimagination’ of the tale than anything else (qtd. in Gennis 2017). While the decision to attempt to maintain a sense of originality from the original source material is understandable, this was ultimately a poor choice for the production. There’s no shame in a straight adaptation from the source material. Frankly, the series lacks any real cohesion with the tale it attempts to tell. The potential of creating a highly commendable series certainly stills exists, although, the desire to stray from source material is understandable given the relative success of the 2007 filmic version. The premise remains broadly similar, with a mysterious mist enveloping a small, conservative American small town. However, the story the series relates is fraught with issues. Be it the problematic character arc of Sheriff Heisel, who goes from loving-father to being brainwashed into forcing his son, innocent of the accusations of rape, into the mist to his untimely death, to his final realisation of his mistake and falling into an abyss of regret. The plot-benefitting sewer that leads Heisel and Nathalie, who believes she is ‘nature’s messenger’, to the other group of survivors in the town mall also feels a little too convenient to allow the viewer to submit to giving the tale any credence. Furthermore, the acting performances remain rather bland throughout, but it could be argued that the performances suffer from a flawed script. Indeed, the special effects are also lacking in quality, with the mist’s creatures underwhelming and not particularly frightening. Suffice it to say, the basic mechanics of the show, from the script, effects, and the performances are subpar.
Stephen King tales are so effective due to their ability to build tension. For adaptations of his work to succeed, this tension must be translated to the screen. The recently released Gerald’s Game (2017), directed by Mike Flanagan, is a perfect example of the successful translation of tension and suspense from a King tale to film. Where Flanagan’s production succeeds, The Mist fails. From the onset of the series, the viewer is introduced to violence that is almost too blatant and too fierce. In the Pilot episode, directed by Adam Bernstein, the viewer barely gets to know the townspeople before Officer Pundik, portrayed by Kevin O’Grady, meets his fate in the mist. The execution of this scene leaves much to be desire. As the mist rolls into town, Pundik takes out his phone and tells Kevin and Heisel he wants to ‘get a photo for the missus.’ He proceeds to make some rather cringeworthy poses as ominous music rises. He is then swarmed by cockroach-like insects and struggles to free himself, and ultimately meets his untimely demise. The failure of this scene epitomises the general failure of the entire series with regards to tension and suspense. Pundik’s death is too immediate, and is precluded by some rather cringeworthy action. Tension relies on subtle and indirect action. There is one notable scene in the series which succeeds at this. In episode 8, entitled, “The Law of Nature”, Heisel, Nathalie and others decide to leave the church for the mall. As they exit, they barricade the door shut, and set the church alight. The viewer only hears the screams of those trapped inside as they realise what’s happened. The violence of this scene is not as blatant as the violence that has come before it. As they scream for help, Nick Cave’s “Into My Arms” is the poignant music of choice as Nathalie asserts that ‘every act of destruction is an act of creation’. Had the show dealt with moments of tension and suspense in a subtler way, akin to this scene, throughout the show, it could have been a more effective and memorable series.

Perhaps the show’s saving grace is its interrogation of the issue of othering in society. The series attempts to portray the Copelands as societal others in the town of Bridgeville. For instance, from the onset of the series Eve Copeland’s reputation of sexual impropriety in the town is clear. The town resents her, and she is placed on administrative leave for teaching the children of the local school sexual education. However, this othering of the Copelands culminates in the final episode, entitled “The Tenth Meal”. Kevin finds Alex and Eve on the brink of expulsion from the mall. The mall’s manager, Gus, exclaims that ‘there’s no place in here for people like you,’ and asserts that the Copeland family is ‘not much of a family’. Having learned that Kevin is not Alex’s biological father, the Copelands are ostracised further from the group because they do not fit the mould of societal expectations regarding the idea of family that exists in the small town. As argued by Mary Douglas, there is a societal need to differentiate between acceptable and unacceptable. Consideration of her ‘pollution behaviour’ theory provides a useful lens through which the viewer can understand the town’s ostracization of the Copelands. Mary Douglas argues that ‘dirt’ is anything that is ‘rejected from our normal scheme of classifications’ (1966, 45). The Copelands represent Bridgeville’s understanding of ‘dirt’ because they do not fit the understanding and ‘classifications’ or an acceptable mould of family in the community. This creates a tension and resentment towards them, which culminates in their expulsion from the mall and into the mist. The series portrays this othering successfully. Its interrogation here provides the viewer with some interesting food for thought on the idea of othering in communities and the dangers faced if one does not fit the mould of societal acceptance and expectations.

Despite the interesting portrayal of othering in communities such as Bridgeville, Spike’s The Mist remains an underwhelming and disappointing adaptation of one of King’s finest tales. From the blandness of its execution, to the glaring lack of true and palpable tension and suspense, the production leaves a lot to be desired. The potential the show possessed remains evident, as demonstrated by the fleeting bright sparks. However, it simply is unsurprising that Spike have cancelled the series before it gets a second season. In a year of rather successful and commendable King adaptations, The Mist television series remains a disappointment.

References


In *Stephen King’s Gothic* (2011) John Sears asserts that rereading King represents ‘an exercise in the extension of repetition, in the act of rereading an oeuvre already deeply structured … by its own engagement in the Gothic habit of rereading … To reread King would be to enter … and perhaps to become lost within, a labyrinth of intra- and intertextual relations, an immense and complex textual space’ (2). Sears’s framing of King’s writing is a critical response to David Punter’s question about the susceptibility of King’s writing to rereading (1996).

Proposals are invited for the second issue of *Pennywise Dreadful*, concerning the intertextuality that permeates King’s fiction, and the variant ways in which King’s work is both haunted by his literary and cultural heritage, and haunts contemporary configurations of Gothic and horror. This issue of the journal will extend some of the critical dialogues initiated at *Rereading Stephen King: Navigating the Intertextual Labyrinth*, open other prospective avenues of scholarly enquiry, and continue the process of addressing the lack of scholarship recognising King’s contribution to American letters. Topics which may be explored by contributors could include, but are not limited to:

- King and Genre (Horror, Gothic, Science Fiction, Western, Crime)
- King’s Influences (Bradbury, Lovecraft, Matheson, Poe et al.)
- King’s Influence (on Clive Barker, Poppy Z. Brite, Joe Hill et al).
- King’s Short Fiction
- King on Screen
- King’s Recurrent Places/Spaces (Castle Rock, Maine, Shawshank)

Articles of 6,000-8,000 words, complete with an abstract of 200-300 words and a short biography of 50-100 words should be submitted via e-mail to the journal’s editors Alan Gregory and Dawn Stobbart at pennywisedreadful@gmail.com no later than Monday 30\textsuperscript{th} April 2018.

Prospective contributors are welcome to contact us at the above address if they have any questions.