Anglo Argento: A critical reassessment of the films of Norman J. Warren (Adam Locks)

When it comes to discussing British horror cinema in the 1970s, certain directors are often cited, namely: Pete Walker (*House of Whipcord*, 1974), Roy Ward Baker (*The Vampire Lovers* 1970), Freddie Francis (*Dr Terror's House of Horrors,* 1964), Anthony Balch (*Horror Hospital,* 1973), Alan Gibson (*Dracula AD 1972,* 1972), Peter Sykes (*To the Devil a Daughter,* 1976), and Norman J Warren. Nevertheless, unlike his contemporaries, Warren is often curiously absent from many film histories of this period. From amongst his contemporaries of the time – especially Pete Walker - Warren frequently comes out the most bruised and battered from the barbed words of film critics and academics or, as is more often the case, the pernicious lack of any comment at all.

Throughout the 1970s, British cinema was unceremoniously propped up by two frowned-upon genres – sexploitation and horror. Both genres were perceived as so crude and puerile that, to use an indelicate metaphor, they were viewed as the pimple on the backside of the British film industry. And yet British sex films made considerable sums of money since they offered the one thing still not readily available on television: sex. As David McGillivray, who wrote screenplays for numerous British sex comedies and also two of Norman Warren's films, states: "You'd have to have been an imbecile not to make money from sex films in those days. You shot it, released it and started counting the profits immediately. It was so easy".[1]

Norman J. Warren established his name in British cinema by directing the first British sex film, the profitable *Her Private Hell* (1967). After directing another successful sexploitation movie entitled *Loving Feeling* (1968), he declined the offer to work on the follow-up, *Wife Swappers,* instead deciding to make the switch to the horror genre. As he comments: "Obviously I appreciated having done those first two films – they gave me a great learning curve and I didn't even mind working for no money; but, quite honestly, I did find them quite boring. There really was nothing in them. There was hardly any story".[2] His horror repertoire rests on four films: *Satan's Slave* (1976), *Prey* (1978), *Terror* (1979), and I*nseminoid* (1981).[3]

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[1] Simon Sheridan, *Keeping The British End Up: Four Decades of Saucy Cinema* (Richmond: Reynolds & Hearn, 2001), p.29.

[2] Norman J. Warren interview with the author (22.04.08).

[3] Warren made two more productions in the 1980s, *Gunpowder* and *Bloody New Year* (both 1987).

This paper's genesis stems from a recent interview with Norman. His films were made on a shoe-string budget by very young film-makers who were working quickly and cheaply. Warren was one of the 'New Wave' of British horror directors working in the 1970s, but he wouldn't see this label as a badge of serious artistry. In spite of this, I want to take Warren's films seriously. There is nothing new or startling about horror directors offering up a warped and surreal view of the world. Yet such a theme offers up some interesting readings because of the time in which these films were made and because of the cinematic history to which they belong. The title of this paper points to the importance of Warren as a British director and the way that, like Dario Argento, he too used the language of cinema as an outlet for some distinctly British surrealism. Argento was a key influence on Warren in the latter part of the 1970s, encouraging him to make anti-narrative horror that supports the analogy between cinema and dreams.

Warren's films were made when Jim Callaghan's Labour Government presided over a country in economic melt-down. By 1978, the 'winter of discontent' had begun with wide spread strikes which even included grave diggers (very apt for a paper on horror cinema). It is in such a socio-economic context that Warren's films operate. I would suggest that these movies work against Leon Hunt's comment that "there is a danger of over determining these films on the basis of setting".[4] I suggest that they offer up a psychogeography – a theoretical tool that has been used by various writers to make the modern urban world more interesting while simultaneously unmasking ideological deception; Warren's uses bucolic imagery to combat the more unpalatable, dull and depressing aspects of 1970s Britain. It is widely agreed that psychogeography has become something of a buzzword in recent years, moving away from its origins in 1950s and 1960s Paris to – at worse – a vague label to do with walking in a city exemplified by Will Self's titular column, 'PsychoGeography', in *The Independent*. Indeed, Ian Sinclair calls psychogeography "a new form of tourism" which exemplifies Self's questionable approach.[5]

Satan's Slave inverts Hammer's tired and maladaptive gothic horror of the time, and liberates these well-worn narrative codes in a presciently postmodern way. The story focuses on Catherine Yorke (played by Candace Glendenning from Pete Walker's*The Flesh and Blood* Show, 1972) who, near the beginning of the film, we see with her parents as they drive out to her Uncle Alexander's house in the countryside. She's never met this mysterious uncle, and her father hasn't seen him since they were children. In an early sequence in the film, we watch as Catherine and her parents drive through suburbia; then the camera cuts to their passing through a village; then a country lane; and finally an off-road surrounded by forest. This journey operates as a kind of neural pathway which the film uses to re-program the audience with memories and associations disconnected from the modern and the urban. Even the family car – an old Rover – is decidedly antiquated.[6] It's rather like seeing images of 1950s American classic cars in Cuba; hence, it is has a time-machine effect like the journey itself (As an aside and, again in relation to psychogeography and the relationship between the individual and space, there is the clichéd, yet interesting, idea of the road leading to nowhere. Catherine's father gets temporarily lost, perhaps unsurprising as this is a generic feature of many horror films.)

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[4] Leon Hunt, *British Low Culture: From Safari Suits to Sexploitation* (London: Routledge, 1998), p.154. To be fair to Hunt, he provides one of the few scholarly readings into Warren's film *Prey* which he does so with his usual perspicacity and wit (see pp.154-159).

[5] See Tim Chapman's interview with Ian Sinclair, 'When in doubt, quote Ballard: An interview with Ian Sinclair' at the Ballardian website, http://www.ballardian.com/iain-sinclair-when-in-doubt-quote-ballard (20.06.08).

[6] According to Warren, the Rover was so old that it took several minutes to reach 40 mph. Interview with the author (22.04.08).

Horror is invariably reducible to a set of geographical icons – the haunted house, the forest, the country lane/road and so on – and many of these icons are, what could be termed, 'nowhere places'. Horror is a genre that takes great pleasure in representing this sense of being lost which often reflects the characters' mental state in the environment itself.

Arriving at the house, the father suddenly gets a pain in his head forcing him to lose control of the car which then crashes into a tree. Catherine gets out for help, but as she staggers away, it explodes with the parents still inside. The uncle, his psychotic son Steven (played convincingly by Martin Potter) and his secretary Frances (Barbara Kellerman) offer to look after Catherine. It's soon learnt that she is the direct descendant of an evil witch whom the uncle is attempting to reincarnate, and that only her blood, spilt on her 20th birthday, will suffice.

Uncle Alexander, performed by horror stalwart Michael Gough (and star of the earlier mentioned *Horror Hospital*), is the linchpin of the film, a sartorial gentleman who wears a jacket and tie and lives in a Tudor mansion full of antiques. Yet Catherine is told by his son, Stephen, that the family no longer have the money they once had; his father is helped by friends and other sources. His father's 1965-model Rolls-Royce and the historic looking property with its acres of woodland suggest better times in the past.

Uncle Alexander is a nostalgically fossilised version of English masculinity. Before it is revealed that he is a sociopathic Satanist, he functions as an atavistic amalgamation of various icons of British gentlemen: particularly the eccentric British aristocrat, the kindly family doctor, and the chivalrous knight where, to quote Ruth P. Rubinstein in her book *Dress Codes,* "[t]he code of chivalry, the[] rules of conduct, included a pledge to protect women".[7] In *Satan's Slave* this code of chivalry is inverted by the need for Alexander to sacrifice his niece (and earlier in the film he is seen sacrificing his wife).

In *Satan's Slave* – as with *Prey* and *Terror* - Warren's mis-en-scene has strong echoes of the sixties TV series *The Avengers* (1961-69, and a series that Gough was to star in three times). The world of The Avengers is set in a location referred to in fandom circles as 'Avengerland'[8] – a site that in reality took place in an area within about three miles of the series' production studios, the Associated British Elstree Studios in Borehamwood, Hertfordshire, but within the show's narrative, took place within an iconic England that was 'Olde Englande'; in other words, a place that no longer existed and, for the most part, never had.

The Avengers depicted England as a mythic space construed as a psychogeography. The producer, writer and main creative instigator behind the series in the mid-to-late 1960s was Brian Clemens who commented on the ideology behind this imaginary England "was to set the stories against a tongue-in-cheek panorama of the picture postcard Britain illustrated in tourist brochures".[9]

These two sides of British life, namely the modern (and hence industrial) and the rural (and hence utopian) provide the underlying, and conflicting, drivers of the show. Nearly all the episodes take place in rural communities where the camera lingers over country houses, villages and village greens, pubs, red telephone boxes and meandering country lanes. Warren's films strongly echo this trait and, equally, follow certain patterns of Surrealist art in the way that outdoor locations are often empty. As with *The Avengers*, these locations are deserted – or at best populated by a handful of actors – and in terms of production, this was due to budgetary restraints.

Warren's films – as with *The Avengers* - always have some underlying disquiet about their locations and English familiarity is transformed and warped. Behind the façade of mundane England, threatening figures or forces – be they crooks in *The Avengers*, or

[7] Ruth P. Rubinstein, *Dress Codes: Meanings and Messages in American Culture* (Boulder, San Francisco, Oxford: Westview, 1995), p.89.

[8] See 'A Guide to Avengerland' at http://www.geocities.com/Hollywood/Film/8165/index.html (17.05.08).

[9] *The Avengers: The Official Souvenir Magazine* (Titan Magazines, 1998), p.35.

Satanists in *Satan's Slave*, or aliens in *Prey* – plan to disrupt the everyday world. To continue, Andrew Graham Dixon writes:

> Pop in [Richard] Hamilton's sense of the word, never truly came to pass in art, only in popular music. Certain forms of visual self-expression – convulsive, violent, hallucinogenic, and subversive – could not flourish in the world of fine art in Britain so they took the form of rock music instead. Britain did not produce Dadaism, but The Sex Pistols.[10]

One could add that Britain did not produce a Giorgio De Chirico, but did produce a more popular visual equivalent with *The Avengers* and 70s horror, exemplified by Norman Warren's oeuvre. As with a film such as *Satan's Slave*, De Chirico's art was all about fragmenting space by presenting empty areas cut up and spliced by shadows and atypical angles. His vision of Italy transformed the subject matter into what Sarane Alexandrian calls, "unknown worlds".[11]

The rural settings in Warren's films create an introverted view of England that is utopian, romantic and, most significantly, static in the sense of negating industrial changes brought about by modernity. And yet in accordance with the (un)reasoning of Surrealism, it is a deeply irrational view of England, preferring to depict the country as a kind of dreamscape imbuing everyday objects of Englishness – the pub, the telephone box, the bus, the village, even the local milkman - with the kind of mythicism perpetuated by the tourist brochures mentioned earlier by Brian Clemens.

This procedure follows a similar pattern to de Chirico who would re-use again and again images of the tower, the arcade, the piazza, statues, mannequins and shadows, to bring about a new sense of awareness, but also, alienation from the modern environment. Another artist who continued this theme was Edward Hopper whose work was all about alienation and anxiety.

In such a respect and for all their horror, Warren's films offer a deeply romantic view of England, which is similarly held by many for an America of the pre-1960s with its drive-ins, diners and jukeboxes which no longer exist. To go back to the mis-en-scene of *Satan's Slave*, this is the heritage England which became so strongly embraced from the 1980s with popular television programmes such as *Brideshead Revisited* (1981).

There is an earlier scene in *Satan's Slave* where the uncle answers the phone in the sitting room and, oddly, it's kept behind a large red curtain. As Warren comments: "[I]t's always amazed me what you can get away with in films. For some unknown reason, Michael Gough's character keeps a telephone behind the red curtain. The whole reason for that was that we needed the bit where Catherine finds Stephen's body – that was the primary reason why the phone had to be kept behind the curtain".[12] Nevertheless, the curtain also functions as an irrational way of hiding and negating technology. The house has no visible popular appliances: we never see a television set or a radio or anything which suggests the modern world.

In *Prey*, the narrative focuses on two lesbians – Josephine (performed by a splendidly barmy Sally Faulker who had previously been seen in *The Vampyres,* 1974) and Jessica (Glory Annen). They live in a huge country house and, as with *Satan's Slave,* there are similar echoes of a mythic English past. Besides the radio in the kitchen, it's another film that plays down the impingement of technology. The interruption of their bucolic existence is caused by the arrival of a young man – 'Anderson' – who is actually an alien called Kator who has come to test the suitability of humans as a source of food for his race.

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[10] Andrew Graham-Dixon, *A History of British Art* (London: BBC Books, 1996), p.226.

[11] Sarane Alexandrian, *Surrealist Art* (Spain, Thames and Hudson, 1985), p.54.

[12] Norman J. Warren interview with the author (22.04.08).

The house – in real life a building on the back lot of Shepperton Studios – is isolated like the female characters. They have been ostracised by the local community because of their sexual relationship. This is another locale that suggests a break-away from the modern industrial world. When Jessica expresses her desire to go away to the city, Josephine replies, “You’d get screwed up”. The long camera pans of their walks through the garden and forest and the gentle love theme played on a piano, suggest a disavowal of the modern.

This tranquillity is shattered by a scene where Anderson/Kator nearly drowns in a lake. Jo and Jessica go to his rescue and for a few minutes, we watch the three in slow motion as they writhe about in the stagnant black water. Over this scene, the film’s composer – Ivor Stanley – plays a brutal and fierce synth line which is dark and brooding while the piano becomes stuttered and panicked. For all Kator’s primitivism, he is also modern – after all, he arrived in a (unseen) spacecraft.[13] It’s a moment that reveals a deep anxiety over technological and economic expansion since the 1960s and the scene operates as a hysterical reaction to the intrusiveness of modern cultural change.

Prey and *Terror* also continue that surrealist tradition begun by Lewis Caroll in his *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) and *Through the Looking Glass and What Alice Found There* (1871). In discussion of *The Avengers* relation to an especially English slant on Surrealism related to Lewis Carroll, Grant Morrison writes:

> As is well documented, the original Surrealist Movement of the 1920s picked up and developed a number of ideas which emerged out of the work of the pre-war Futurists and Dadaists. One of the most important of these ideas involved the transformation of ordinary objects by placing them in extraordinary settings… English surrealism was distinguished by an element of dark whimsy which can probably be traced back to Lewis and Carroll. What was more unusual and, indeed, more radical was the fact that here was surrealism taken out of the galleries and placed in the living rooms of millions of television viewers. In *The Avengers*, supremely mundane elements of British life and culture, which had been taken for granted for years, suddenly assumed a new and sinister significance. Undertakes in top hats and frock coats; bus stops and country inns; train stations and toy shops; all were viewed through the magic looking glass of *The Avengers* and transformed…It was as though someone had lifted the lid off the drably cozy familiarity of post-war Britain and revealed a world of vivid delights seething underneath.[14]

In this respect, Warren’s films could also be seen as part of avant-gardism in British cinema typified by directors of the surreal such as Lindsey Anderson. Lindsay Anderson’s films, such as *If* (1968) and *O Lucky Man!* (1973), to quote Michael Bracewell, showed “England’s traditions and institutions…as delinquent, corrupt or mad, and the landscape surrounding them as Alice-like in its sudden shift of purpose”[15] which shows certain similarities with Warren’s extraneous shift on “reality”. Many horror films have a narrative logic which, examined even a little closely, falls a part very quickly. Certain directors have not worried about narrative, instead they have privileged the spectacle of violence and death – Argento is an obvious case in point. In *Suspiria* (1977), for example, the character of Suzy (Jessica Harper) arrives in Germany to go to a ballet academy. In the taxi from the

[13] Since this is a low-budget movie, we never see Anderson/Kator’s spacecraft although the ‘landing lights’ bathe Jessica’s bedroom in 70s-disco colour as it makes a thunderous descent; later in the woods, the ship’s presence is signalled by glowing lights which reflect off the trees and bushes.

[14] Grant Morrison, ‘A World of Miraculous Transformations,’ in Carraze and Putheaud (eds.), *The Avengers Companion* (London: Titan Books, 1997), p. 21.

[15] Michael Bracewell, *England is Mine: Pop Life in Albion from Wilde to Goldie* (London: Flamingo, 1997), p.84.

airport, she sees a girl running through the woods. It's just one of a number of sequences which are both surreal and fairytale like. Similarly, in *Terror*, the audience is presented with horror set pieces that are a homage to Argento. Warren was heavily influenced by him who he saw as liberating the spectacle of killing from any meaningful narrative. As he states: "It was always a bit unfair when people used to say that *Terror* was a copy of *Suspiria* because *Terror* was never intended to be a copy. It was just liberating in so much that you could suddenly get away with doing whatever you liked".[16]

In one sequence, a character Catherine travels on the underground. In the next scene, she is running through a wood towards 'the house'. This jump from tube to forest is noticeably dreamlike although the station from where she alights – Barnes tube station – really does lead straight out to Barnes Common which is close to the centre of London.

But the speed of Warren's editing distorts this 'fact' and makes the narrative events precede quickly and disjointedly like a dream. The tube station is like a small island of civilisation in the middle of untamed nature: the reverse of psycho-geographer Ian Sinclair's description of London encased by the modernity of the M25 motorway.[17] *Terror's* locale makes a strong contrast to Argento's Tenebrae. The locations used in Rome for Tenebrae are of highly modern buildings and spaces. There seems to be a fetishisation of technology and distancing techniques from notions of 'Italian-ness' or, to use a (Roland) Barthes-ism, 'Italianicity'.[18]

Concrete and glass buildings place global over national culture in a way that emulates the ideological stance of the International Style of architecture during the first half of the twentieth century. Icons of Italian culture are usurped by minimalist functionalism exemplified by a sequence where John Saxon's character – Bullmer - sits in a piazza which almost resembles Harlow Town centre in Essex in its (un)aesthetic rush to modernity. Argento has often commented that, for the film, he dreamed of an "imaginary city";[19] with Warren, it is an imaginary British countryside that, unlike Argento, hypes up 'Englishness'.

Conclusion

Norman J Warren made some of the most innovative and interesting British horror films of the 1970s. He shared with Pete Walker a fascination for making productions that were deeply pessimistic; most of Warren's films end with the heroine or hero's demise and, as with Walker, he presents, to paraphrase Steve Chibnall, "a world without reassurance".[20] And yet unlike Walker, Norman Warren's movies also often have a strong supernatural element. Most significantly, as Walker used horror to critique the injustices of the English class system, so Warren celebrates and laments 'Old Englande' and continues a tradition of the surreal and absurd and that would became better known through art house cinema. Near the end of *Satan's Slave,* we are presented one of the biggest twists in British horror; Catherine, panic-stricken and stumbling through the forest while in pursuit by her uncle and his acolytes, bumps into her supposedly dead father. Discussing the scene, Norman observes: "I've always hated movies where you find out that it was all a dream – it's such a cop out. But our twist was that we actually cheated the audience at that time because it's not a bad dream; the big twist is that it's her father who is the real villain. Michael Gough is not the leader of the coven".[21] Although I'm aware that I'm in danger of reading too much

[16] Norman J. Warren interview with the author (22.04.08).
[17] Ian Sinclair, 'When in doubt, quote Ballard: An interview with Ian Sinclair' at the Ballardian website, http://www.ballardian.com/iain-sinclair-when-in-doubt-quote-ballard (20.06.08).
[18] Roland Barthes, *Image/Music/Text* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), pp.33-7.
[19] For example, see Maitland McDonagh's *Broken Mirrors/Broken Minds: The Dark Dreams of Dario Argento* (London: Kensington Books, 1994).
[20] Steve Chibnall, *Making Mischief: The Cult Films of Pete Walker* (Guildford: FAB Press, 1998), p.15.
[21] Norman J. Warren interview with the author (22.04.08).

into the sequence, it could still be argued that the film becomes a rather curious, yet pleasurable, melange of images that point to other fictions that play with notions of reality; for example: Luis Bunuel's love of the inexplicable in cinema; the artist Paul Nash's fusing of the uncanny with the English landscape; Lewis Carole's kaleidoscopic play with the 'real'; and Argento's (con)fusion of reality with dreams.[22] It's a scene that hardly advocates any form of popular socialism, and yet it connects Warren to the surrealist tradition where the calamitous and mundane are transformed into the visually and giddily wondrous and extraordinary.

[22] It should be pointed out that for much of *Satan's Slave,* Catherine comments how unreal and dreamlike the events around are. Her uncle even convinces her that the sequence of grisly episodes that have befallen her (and which make up most of the film) are just part of a bad dream.