

Sleeping with half open eyes:  
dreams and realities in

## *The Cry of the Owl*



On various occasions between August 2005 and June 2008 I had the opportunity of observing different aspects of the production of a feature film, from the development of the script through to the final mix. The film was *The Cry of the Owl* (2009), adapted from the novel by Patricia Highsmith and directed by Jamie Thraves, an international co-production between BBC Films, Sienna Films, Studio Hamburg, Myriad Pictures and MACT Productions. My aim was to use this extended access to trace, through the complexities of the production process, the ways in which key creative decisions were taken, and to analyse how they shaped the film: a case study of decision-making from the inside, as it were, but an investigation led by the priorities which would emerge from a detailed critical analysis of the completed work.

As it turned out, the vagaries of film distribution and exhibition have made it very difficult to see *The Cry of the Owl* in the cinema, or even to know of its existence. The film has had a limited theatrical release in France and the United States and two commercial screenings in the UK, as part of the Raindance Film Festival 2009. It has recently become available on DVD and on iTunes in the UK, with a very misleading, straight-to-video cover; it was released on DVD and by video-on-demand in the US in early June and is available in a number of other territories (DVD and Blu-Ray editions are available in Germany, under the translated title, *Der Schrei der Eule*, in Brazil it is known as *O Voo da Coruja*). In itself this is not an unusual story, but it gives what follows a polemical edge that I had not anticipated when the project began. *The Cry of the Owl* seems to me a film of great distinction that deserves to be widely seen and discussed. Whether my privileged access to its production has distorted my response will be for others to judge, but the aim of the detailed account of the film's achievement which

follows is to initiate a critical debate in the hope that *The Cry of the Owl* will find the audience it deserves.

The article restricts its observations to what can be understood by the viewer of the film, without drawing on a comparison with Highsmith's novel or on evidence derived from knowledge of the film's production; it will be followed by an article in a subsequent issue of *Movie* which explores the processes by which the film's significant decisions came to be made, drawing on the critical investigation advanced here to identify the most profitable lines of enquiry.

### **Robert at night**

Our relationship to Robert Forrester (Paddy Considine) is one of the most important, and most challenging, aspects of the film and is central to its organisation. We spend a lot of the movie in his company, yet from his introduction he is, at least, an ambivalent figure. More precisely, the film gives Robert two introductions: to the prowler in the darkness and to the aeronautic engineer in the daytime.

The sound of the wind, and the brittle rustle of leaves fade in on the soundtrack before the film's first image appears. When it does, the camera is at the side of a country road at night, two or three feet from the ground. The road stretches to a vanishing point toward the right of the frame, and runs past us out of frame left. The surface of the road has a cold, bluish hue, and the tarmac is striated with cracks; we can see the branches of some of the trees near the camera move in the breeze. A light appears in the distance, distinguishing itself as two headlights after a time. As the car comes clearly into view, the camera begins to pan, and we watch a black sedan pass, and disappear around a bend. The fluting echo of the wind combines with the bruising noise of the car on the road, and passing through the air. As we again look at an empty scene, a high, piercing note

introduces the score.

In the second shot the camera is positioned lower, again anticipating the car's approach. It drops lower still as the vehicle crosses the asphalt towards us and comes to a halt just in front of the camera. The chord on the soundtrack intensifies, to be joined by a base orchestral throb and the guttural noise of the engine as it idles.



The camera is in midair in shot three, looking down at a T-junction, at which the car is now revealed to be standing. The car is positioned near the centre of the frame, with the road travelled disappearing into the darkness away from the camera, and the roads that might be turned down extending frame right and frame left. There is a brief pause, then, without indicating, the car turns right and leaves frame left. We stay looking at the junction for a beat or two.

This is a menacing opening: the black car, with no driver visible, progressing through the rural dark. The car noises and night sounds, plausible in terms of setting and action but inflected toward the disturbing, do nothing to contradict the sense of threat, nor does the score. The low camera position in shot two and the proximity of the car at its end combine to allow the car to loom over us, making for an imposing image.

The camera knows what is going to happen, precise enough in this knowledge to position itself without getting run over in the second shot. In the third, it takes an advantageous position in the air, indicating a perspective which is not constrained by what is possible for a human, and one



which posits the action as an interpretable image: the car waits at a cross roads, and then takes one path rather than the other. As the film progresses, this set-up returns, incorporating the first into a pattern which, drawing on our subsequent knowledge of what lies to the car's right, dramatises a pause, a hesitation on behalf of the driver, the making of a conscious decision. In the fourth shot the car passes through a level crossing, the visual detail underlined by sound effect, coming through context and later repetition, to articulate a sense of the driver crossing boundaries.

The sequence is marked by a withholding of information – both the narration and the driver know more about what is taking place here than we (not unusual for the opening of a film, but here markedly the case); at the same time, it presents perspectives on the actions of whoever is driving the car which both indicate a distance from that driver and allow us interpretative insight. We might also suggest that a

melodramatic register has been introduced: as far as we know, this car might be traveling to the nearest gas station, the driver consulting a map, but the film is inflecting its sounds and images to draw out their emotive, and portentous, potential.

The fourth shot is a long take during which the names of the actors appear on the screen, followed by the film's title.



Now we are in the car, journeying with the character we will come to know as Robert. Our access to him is still very limited, however, because our view is restricted to a single point in the middle of the back seat. We may be able to recognise Paddy Considine, part of whose face we can see in  $\frac{3}{4}$  profile in the rearview mirror, but predominantly performer and character are withheld from us.

After a time, the camera pans slowly to the right, giving us a view out of the rear, side window on the passenger's side. We pass two houses in the darkness and, between them, the title of the film bleeds onto the screen. Bleeds is the right verb: both in the sense of how the letters are formed on the screen, welling up liquidly from shapes and forms, and in the colour – the first names of the leading actors had been shaded green, but as successive players have been credited the green has faded to be replaced by a red of increasing intensity. The surnames of the actors in each case were white, but the film's title is entirely red; the liquid effect, too, is reserved for these words. The final shot of the sequence positions us behind the car, travelling through space. The sedan accelerates and we watch it pull away from us. The music grows, reaching a crescendo in the first frames of the next sequence, before dropping away.

The music has become distinctly more threatening by this stage, invoking traditions of scoring which go back to Bernard Herrmann, at least. The title design adds to the sense of menace. The views of the passing houses, little oases of brightness in the dark, feel threatened by the vehicle, especially as the camera turns to picture them rushing past. Our position in the car, and particularly the movement to look out of the window which isn't motivated by any discernible action of the character, also extend the independence of our perspective from Robert's, an independence which will be developed in different ways through the movie, in relation to Robert and to other characters.

A cut takes us to the car parked at the side of a woodland road; a telegraph pole indicates that we are not entirely removed from human activity. Lights and engine are off and there is a layer of condensation on the topmost surfaces. Robert gets out, the car giving a warning noise while the driver's door is open, and opens the hood, the camera tracking round to the left with his movement, placing itself in a position to view what happens next: rather than examine the engine, he walks away from car and camera into the woods.

Our first close view of Robert follows: a tracking shot of his head and shoulders as he picks his way through undergrowth. However, the darkness means our access remains circumscribed. His face and hands appear a grey blue-green in the gloaming. Robert's attention is on his progress, which



is cautious. As well as the crunch of his footfall through the leaf-litter we can hear the wider forest, and the occasional bird call.



The film cuts on this movement to a stationary long shot of a house. Its walls are white, though in this light they too appear bluish-green, its roof steeply gabled with high, decorative eaves. The sash windows have shutters, though they are not closed, and light emanates from four windows on the ground floor and three upstairs. We can see a porch or veranda, also illuminated, with a couple of wicker chairs on either side of a table, a bench and two green doors, one fronted with a screen door. To the left of our view is a mature willow tree, taller than the house and extending out of the frame, to the right, a stand of smaller trees. In the second downstairs window from the left, a young woman is standing, attending to some dishes at the sink in front of her.

We move now to a close-up of Robert, looking out from behind the trunk of a tree. Light, which we understand to come from the house, falls across his face which we see clearly for the first time; it remains difficult to make out his clothing, apart from a dark jacket. Only the tree closest to Robert is also in focus, but we can make out others in the background. He looks beyond the camera, off frame-right, slightly below the axis from which we view him, the sense that this is a reverse-field cut is confirmed by the shot which follows, which again shows the house, this time in a closer view of the woman in the window.



The shot of Robert lasts for 11 or 12 seconds. He looks blankly, his face is relaxed except for slightly pinched eyebrows. He looks tired, certainly not excited. He blinks twice, lifts his head up slightly, blinks again, then looks down and turns his head to the left, turning away, half shaking his head. His head comes back to the middle without looking up again, and he holds it down for long moment, tightening his brow further. Then, still without looking back at the house, he turns his head to the right, positively looking away, our view of his face now obscured by the trees. He then looks back, his face as it was at the beginning of the shot, and we cut to a close-up of the young woman.

The woman (Julia Stiles) is steadily drying a pyrex plate with a green and white dish cloth. She looks closely at the plate as she dries it, smiling inwardly at the beginning of the shot. We can just hear the towel stuttering on the surface of the glass, and the noise when she puts the plate down on a

surface. She is wearing a green and white check shirt, almost exactly the same colours as the towel, and her blonde, shoulder-length hair is pinned back so it curls down on ei-



ther side of her face. She has leather laces wound around her wrists in the form of bracelets, an additional silver chain on her left arm; a couple of strands of thin leather also form a necklace. The room she stands in is warmly illuminated, partly by a table lamp we can see in the background. There are some objects resting on the transom of the sash window: a small potted plant, a figurine, a shiny wooden pear. The glass of the window is not perfectly clean, and we can see smudges or fingerprints on its surface. Behind her, we can make out a white enamel refrigerator, on which sit a table lamp and a portable stereo. Tiny flakes of snow fall in the space between us and the window.

We return to Robert who, after a moment more, shifts on his feet slightly, continuing to look off-screen in the direction of the window. In shifting his weight a twig snaps, and he throws his head and torso forwards, the camera tilting rapidly to catch the movement. At the same time we can hear the clatter of a bird's wings moving from left to right (and from front to back, in the cinema). Robert exhales audibly. Holding a slender trunk in each hand, he looks up again tentatively, still from a half bent position. We return to the shot of the window, where the young woman continues drying up, apparently unperturbed. She puts a mug down on the draining board, dries her hands on the towel, and walks out of that part of the kitchen we can see through the window. We cut back to Robert, still rooted to the spot. He clenches his eyes shut, holding them closed for several seconds, and exhales deeply through his nose. When he looks up again, the film cuts back to the kitchen window. On the far wall we can see wallpaper in a delicate floral print, a clock, a print of a small white house surrounded by wind-blown trees. We hear the sound of an electric switch as the light disappears, leaving visible only the window frame and the red glow the digital display of the stereo.<sup>1</sup> The next shot gives us Robert leaning against the hood of the car, hanging his head for a moment, before closing it and getting back into the driver's seat. The car starts and drives off, leaving a small puff of exhaust.

In the film's eighth shot, then, we find ourselves sharing the optical point of view of a prowler. While we may look with Robert, his behaviour is undoubtedly disturbing, and the woman's ignorance of his presence is powerfully affective. She appears to be alone in the house, and her illumination contrasts strongly with the shadows that surround Robert, leaving her powerless to see the interloper, her emphatic visibility increasing our awareness of her vulnerability.

As prowlers go, however, this one does not look especially predatory. After all the dark energy of the opening, Robert appears reluctant. In the first shot he seems half-hearted, looking away first as if to shake his head and then in disbelief at his actions. The only time he is animated is when he thinks he may have revealed his presence. After

this fear has been allayed, he cringes, disbelief now replaced by disgust, still in the crouching posture which dramatises his guilt. Robert's gestures are consistently clumsy and awkward. All things considered, it makes for an undignified introduction to a protagonist.



While it is important not to underplay the disturbing nature of Robert's actions, our judgements are immediately complicated, and perhaps softened, by the detail of Robert's behaviour. It's worth observing, too, that as this is the film's male lead peering out of the bushes at the female star, our understanding is inflected by expectations that they will, at least, interact. While the sequence aligns us, in spatial terms, with Robert, we spend significantly more frames looking at than with him: the film invites us to consider the disengagement of the prowler from his activity. And though we share this man's space and viewpoint, one of the main feelings he both experiences and invites is embarrassment.

In referring to the character we will come to know to be Jenny, we should note what a limited perspective the film provides on her in this scene. Aurally as well as visually, our experience is firmly aligned with Robert, and the shallowness of this perspective is evident from the structure of the sequence; Jenny's departure from the frame within the frame when she has finished in the kitchen, emphasises the boundary of Robert's, and our, access. But in this fragment of a view, Jenny has a quiet, self-confident air, absorbed in thought or in the activities which she executes. She seems calm, content; we can see the traces of an amusing or pleasing thought play across her face. That she is happy to wander around her house with the lights on and the curtains and shutters open may tell us something about the assurance of the character.

Our restricted access to the person may lead us to pay extra notice to the context in which we see her: the journey through the trees, the house, the window, the close attention to the domestic task in a painterly frame. The house has traditional charm, with its decorative eaves, veranda adorned with wicker chairs, vintage wallpaper and period casements. The willow and the saplings which frame the setting only enhance its pictorial charms. Encountered after the journey through the trees, the house looks like an enchanted cottage in the woods – a gingerbread house, I heard it described by one member of the audience at the UK premiere.

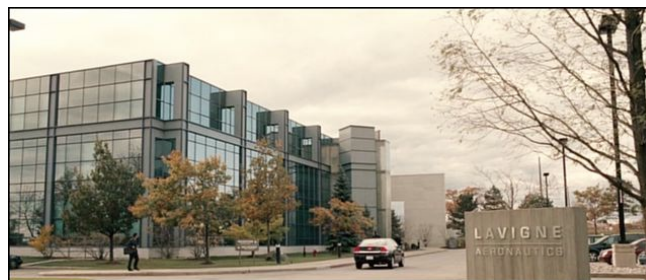
We might come to another aspect of the image's resonance by reflecting on the woman's appearance, and foregrounding the American context over an old-world one. Jenny's clothes can be read as modern American causal with an indie twist. Equally, though, the getup of check shirt, leather necklace and jeans – her basic look in the three prowling scenes, replayed with slight variation – could also be understood, in a context which foregrounds heritage charm and domesticity, as evoking the settled woman, the farmer's daughter of western tradition. Is what is evoked here less fairy tale and more John Ford? There is no rocking

chair, though porch looks a companionable place to rest up.

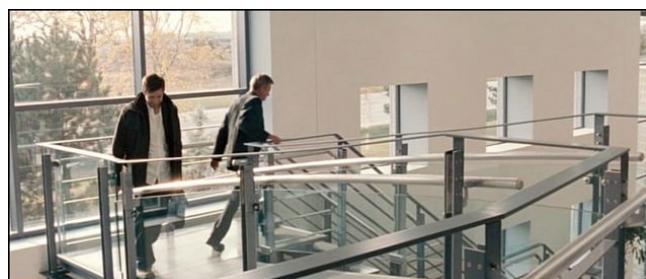
The film presents the image which draws Robert here – something so compelling that it outweighs his evident shame. Our independence may encourage further reflection which Robert may not be able to muster, for all his discomforted awareness of his behaviour. A young woman engaged in kitchen chores is not a typical subject of interest to a voyeur, and yet each of the film's prowling sequences feature Jenny at work in this window. Is it the combination of rural life, folkloric fantasy, antiquated picturesque and devoted homemaking which attracts Robert? We soon learn that he is in flight from the city and, particularly, his marriage to Nickie Grace (Caroline Dhavernas), who is characterised in opposition to this image, being sophisticated, womanly, urban (if not urbane), sharply witty, dissatisfied and dangerous. Yet the film suggests that Robert's attraction is shaped not just by a desire for the opposite of an unhappy experience but also by potent images and ideals. And the marked restriction of viewpoint in this sequence should give us pause from the outset, as to the reality of the vision which Robert contemplates.

### Robert in the daytime

Come daylight hours, four minutes into the film, we are introduced to Robert for a second time. The car again precedes our encounter with the driver, appearing on the far side of a suspension bridge, its direction of movement consistent with the car's departure from the last shot the night-time sequence immediately before. A series of further views, including one the main street of a small town, get Robert to his desk at Lavigne Aeronautics.



Robert's workplace is pictured in ways that foreground the geometric and ordered regularity of the location. The spaces are organised around right angles and rectangles, movement of camera and characters foreground perspective lines and compartmentalised space.



This structured orderliness is also apparent in the appearance of Robert's desk, neatly arranged and carefully organised, our first introduction to a meticulous or even fastidious dimension to his character. The technical drawings on display indicate that Robert works in a highly skilled field, which combines design ability with complex technical knowledge. As the scene develops it becomes



clear that he is very good at his job, being shown off to visiting dignitaries by his boss Mr Jaffe (Karl Pruner), as somebody poached from a market leader.

The only thing which cuts against this structured daytime world is the physical presence of Robert himself. He is unshaven, and his clothes – casual, predominately dark and slightly crumpled – contrast with the suits which seem to be the choice of many of the other employees. His accident at the water cooler and the embarrassing encounter which follows carry over some of the clumsiness and awkwardness of the night before, developing the portrait of a character who is not fully in control of his body, or the effect he has in his interactions with others.



The episode begins with a long shot, long take which shows us Robert's accident with the cup of water and then gives us a good view of the approach of Jaffe and his party: we are privileged over the visitors in that we have seen how Robert came to spill water on himself, and over Robert in that we can see the group's arrival while he's still flapping at the damp patch on his trousers.

When asked by one of the party why he was motivated to leave his previous company, Robert replies: 'I really had to get out of the city: the guns, the drugs, the prostitution. It's a lot of fun, but after a while it gets a little boring!' Robert finds this rather amusing, and bobs up and down grinning, after the punchline, to indicate that it is a joke. His audience are merely bemused.

For the film, this is a clever gag because it turns on Robert playing at having a dark side, backfiring for Robert when his audience doesn't burst into laughter, and because it draws on attitudes toward the city and the small town which help to develop one of the film's opening oppositions. Our individual response to Robert's sense of humour is also important. If we appreciate the joke we may find ourselves on his side on this exchange, helping to develop the more likeable side of his ambivalent character. Or we may simply find this an excruciating encounter, part of the film's focus on Robert's social ineptness. Either way, we can recognise the experience of the joke which has played badly; such miscommunications among the kinds of accident that seem to befall Robert, one way in which the rest of the world reveals itself to be on a different wavelength.

Robert's social awkwardness makes for uneasy viewing across much of the early part of the film. He is uncomfortable in life: physically, in his relationships and in a succession of personal failures of tone, which in turn impact on our experience of the broader film. Gradually, humour becomes established as one of the film's strategies but the uneasiness never goes away. A number of later scenes are darkly funny, and increasingly position us on Robert's side of the dividing line his sense of humour creates but, at the same time, they can't dispel the awkwardness which is coming to characterise the man both by night and day.

*The Cry of the Owl* is a film which never quite lets one settle, even as some of its patterns begin to emerge. It

doesn't permit a predictable relationship to its material or its central character. The first four shots of the film seemed to place us in a certain kind of generic territory, yet the prowling scene didn't comply to expectations generated. There was no hint of eroticism in the encounter: we were offered washing up instead of undressing; the kitchen light was switched off and we were left with Robert, crouched and clenched in the darkness. The first daylight scene leaves us still searching for familiar patterns of response.

This uneasiness is most acutely felt around Robert. What kind of protagonist is this? Is this what the film wants? Cumulatively, we can begin to see how the film's edginess relates to its portrait of a socially dysfunctional man who finds it difficult to reach for the right register. The uneasiness of tone around the character, one of a number of ways in which expectations are disturbed, may begin to explain why the film's qualities haven't been more swiftly recognised.

### Back into the woods

There follow two brief scenes which take us from the daytime of the office to the house in the woods at night. Firstly, a scene outside Lavigne Aeronautics at the end of the working day, which is unlikely to leave us any more comfortable as a result of Jack's (Gordon Rand) behaviour and, especially, Robert's hesitant response. Secondly, a brief scene where Robert returns to an empty and gloomy house. We then cut to:



1. A steadicam shot passing between winter trees, over snow. We can hear twigs breaking underfoot, as well as the sounds of the forest. After a time, Robert enters frame right and the camera and he converge, before we fall in behind him as he walks. At the beginning of the shot, the musical accompaniment from the previous scene carries over, to be replaced by a distant, muffled song: 'Real Life' by Joan as Policewoman.



2. A view of the house: long shot. Lights are on upstairs, the veranda is well lit, the willow tree prominent. The set-up is identical to the view of the house in the first prowling scene. Jenny is not in the window when the shot begins, but after a couple of seconds she appears. On the cut, the volume and placing of the song changes, implying that the music is coming from the house.



3. A medium shot of Jenny from inside the kitchen, the camera about 45 degrees to the wall with the windows and sink. She has her back to us, and is preparing vegetables on the surface next to the sink. A pan simmers on a gas cooker in the foreground. We can also see some of the room's decor which is eclectic, and busy, with traditional furnishings and modern framed photographs. The kitchen units are old fashioned – 1950s, perhaps. The song is louder again, accompanied by the sounds emanating from the cooker, suggesting its source is located in the room with Jenny.



4. A shot of Jenny's reflection in the pane of glass in front of her. The camera is to the left of her shoulder, which dominates the right of the frame, out of focus, and must be at a lower than normal height and tilted upwards to give us this image. The transom and mullion of the sash window are also prominent, creating a frame within the frame and obscuring parts of the reflection. Behind Jenny's reflected image we can also see elements of the wall behind her – the light, the wallpaper, a clock. Someone coughs. The sound makes Jenny look up and out of the window; in the reflection her gaze, searching a little, looks close to where we are.

The first of these shots gives us the physical sensation of moving through the forest which bears a relationship to Robert's experience – we might initially imagine the shot to provide his optical point of view, before he appears frame right. At the same time, the shot again insists on our independence from Robert, even while we follow him. The second shows us Jenny's house from the standpoint of the woods, again evoking the image that brings Robert here. The trip through the trees – while it has the pragmatic function of disguising his approach – takes on a ritualistic quality: the snow upon the ground or in the air, and the picturesque house at the journey's end, achieving a transition into a transfigured space; this viewer, anyway, is reminded of C.S. Lewis and pushing through trees after pushing through fur coats.

The third shot, however, embodies a significant break from the views of the previous scene. The camera is now inside the house. We are physically much closer to Jenny, and we can see aspects of the room and its decor which are invisible from Robert's vantage point. At the same time, our view remains restricted in relation to Jenny herself: her back is to us and we cannot see her face.

In quick succession, the film presents the image which draws Robert compulsively to look at Jenny and a view markedly outside of his point of view. This new perspective shows us Jenny in the surroundings she has chosen to inhabit, but it also indicates the limits of what we can see and know. We are not able to determine much from her back, covered in a substantial woollen cardigan. It's an obtuse angle.

The fourth shot provides a much closer view of Jenny, the camera again within the house, but it is a complicated perspective. Rather than Jenny herself, we are chiefly looking at a reflection (the only part of her we can see directly is an out-of-focus shoulder). The shot retains an element of continuity with Robert's viewpoint in its limitations: an image rather than a real person, the bars of the window reminding us of what we shared with him on the previous occasion. At the same time, however, the position of the camera emphatically registers the independence of our perspective from Robert's. Most importantly, we are close enough to register directly her alarm on hearing the cough outside.



The reflection continues the presentation of Jenny's image explicitly as an image, but the shot opens a tension between the portrait of Jenny and the real woman. In addition, when Jenny looks searchingly out of the window in the reflection her gaze is in our direction: the unacknowledged looking in which we had joined is uncomfortably brought home to us, as well as to Robert, by this challenging and pained look.

The soundtrack adds a further perspective: the phrase, 'Cause I'm real life' is sung across shot three, the last word sustained by the vocalist for most of shot four, concluding just before the cough; the following line 'And you're real life' then takes us from shot four to five, before the song is driven from the soundtrack by the advance of the score's response to the new tension of the scene and the camera's movement along the outside of the house to the front door. Just as the film begins to show us Jenny outside of Robert's conception of her, the soundtrack offers, in the developing context, a timely juxtaposition.

After evoking Robert's image of Jenny, the film begins to explore the reality of Jenny's person, life and experience. It troubles the process of Robert's image-making (and the forms of objectification which that involves) by making us keenly aware – as the first prowling scene did not – of Jenny's fear at the prospect of an intruder.

In the shots of Jenny through the screen door (5 and 7) we can closely observe and readily understand Jenny's anxiety, as she stands, knife in hand, looking into the dark. These shots are the opening and closing brackets of a point of view figure; the point of view shot itself – Jenny's view of the dark, rustling forest, the camera for the first time showing the view from the house back towards the trees – also articulates the threatening and discomfiting aspects of the situation for its victim. At the same time, in the shots of





*Jenny (Julia Stiles) looks into the night from the threshold.*

Jenny the light catches the mosquito netting in front of her and its texture gives the space enclosed within the border of the door frame the impression of the surface of a painting on canvas. This effect makes for a very beautiful image, but another in which an analytical dimension is embodied: we are presented with an image of Jenny which articulates the romanticised vision in which Robert trades, while we are also able to see how genuinely fearful she is. If a portrait could register discomfort at being viewed, this would be what it looked like.

The deployment of the screen door, including the delicate effect of the light upon its surface, recurs in a key scene for the conflict between Robert's conception of Jenny and her reality: when Jenny discovers Robert outside the house, she retreats into the doorway again, and stands there watching him guardedly. In both scenes, the screen door has a role of foregrounding the threshold of her home by illuminating that plane of the image. Neither is this the only occasion when such boundaries are made visible or textured: in the first prowling scene, my description noted the smudged fingerprints on the glass; Shot 3 of this sequence gave us Jenny's face reflected in the glass; a pane of that same window is destroyed a little later in the movie. In all four of these instances the film foregrounds the boundary between the inside and outside of the house while at the same time tying that boundary to questions of image and perception.

The fairy tale cottage in the woods has a more prosaic dimension when we get inside. It's a traditional house, with ageing decor. In later sequences we learn about the cupboard door which is falling off its hinges and, at a crucial point in the film, we can see that the paper is peeling off the ceiling. The room is cluttered, not because its present occupant is messy but as a result of an accumulation of pictures, lamps, kitchen implements and decorative objects – the clutter of generations. It seems unlikely that Jenny has brought all of these into the house – I think we imagine that she has chosen to rent the house with much of this decor intact. (Or, at a first viewing, that she is in her family's house – her mum's house, someone suggested to me.) The film has begun to show us a little bit more of Jenny independently of Robert: not only her experience of being prowled and the acute discomfort that involves, but also the slightly quixotic personality of someone in her twenties who chooses to live in a large, isolated, somewhat dilapidated

family home. The process of getting to know Jenny will continue rapidly the next time we see her, when Robert crosses the threshold.

Jenny's fearful scrutiny of the trees is interrupted by the off-screen approach of a motor vehicle. Startled, she is forced to shy away from the headlights. A wide view of the house registers the car's arrival between the house and the camera's vantage point. We can see Jenny step onto the veranda, relieved. She recognises, and has been expecting, the driver: Greg (James Gilbert), or 'Mr Wyncoop!', as she playfully, formally greets him. Greg's response, is playful but not formal: 'Hey, Rabbit'. He then makes a bit of a show of presenting her with the sunflowers he has brought, pivoting on one foot as he swings himself onto the veranda. Greg is given to demonstrative and energetic movement, as we see again in a moment when, after she accepts the flowers with a kiss and they both go inside, he storms out again knife in hand.

Greg's arrival breaks the tension: for Jenny, as we can see, for Robert, as we can imagine, and for us – who may feel some anxiety on behalf of both. The wide shot of the car's arrival also shatters the traditional aspects of the image of Jenny's home, which is pictured in a view from Robert's quarter. Into the foreground comes the great hulk of Greg's truck: brash, heavy, very different from the Plymouth Sundance that Jenny drives, or Robert's dark car.

Whether Greg's arrival provides a welcome distraction for Robert or a rude intrusion into the pleasures of the image, it is eclipsed by Greg's thrusting, threatening advance



at which he only narrowly avoids discovery. The shot of Greg's back and the woods beyond evokes both mystery – the cold blue-green of the snow, the leafless trees, the rustle

of the forest – and the extent to which Greg is an idiot: there is something faintly ridiculous in Greg being confronted by the empty trees, after all of that bluster, and the film pointedly shows us what he faces without inviting us to share his optical point of view. As Greg stomps back to the house he mutters: ‘You gotta get a dog, Jenny. A Doberman – something mean and nasty’. Jenny replies, ‘Oh great, so it can attack me first?’.

We have a snapshot here of Jenny and Greg’s relationship. Greg calling Jenny ‘Rabbit’ reveals a diminutive dimension to his way of viewing her, especially when contrasted with her ‘Mr Wyncoop’. In his next scene we can see his desire to take care of Jenny, wanting to repair the cupboard door which she wishes to leave as it is, and keen for her to live somewhere less remote. Greg clearly envisages traditional roles for their relationship, though not a future in this setting. The exchange over the dog provides a further example, Greg storming out of the house in a vigorous display of masculine territorial behaviour. Greg is always in motion, as we can also note in his greeting to Jenny, often impetuously and increasingly destructively so.<sup>2</sup> The dialogue connects Greg’s world view to a wider kind of logic, which in the US leads to widespread gun ownership. You’ve got to defend yourself and your property with something mean and nasty, overlooking the counter-argument, of the kind voiced in Jenny’s point about the dangers of the dog for the owner. Greg has a very conservative frame of mind, and his aggressive defence of what he believes to be his territory later comes back to bite him.

As a rather deflated Greg marches back to the house, the camera tracks to the left and reveals Robert flattening himself to the far side of the chicken shed. When Robert returns to his car he again pauses with his hands on the open trunk of the car, and this time swears at himself in the darkness.

### Synopsis

We are only nine minutes into the film, but a number of key patterns have been introduced. From here, the article is going to work in a different way, moving more selectively across the film, identifying motifs and discussing moments across its length. To make this more appreciable, I am going to sketch in the shape of the film, in the form of a summary of the narrative’s subsequent events.

The next morning Robert has a brief, and unsuccessful, conversation with his landlord Kolbe (R.D. Reid). The scene cuts from the empty small town street to a busy junction in the city, where Robert has gone to sign divorce papers with Nickie (Caroline Davhernas). On his return, he attends a party at Jack’s house. Jack introduces Robert to Elaine (Krista Bridges) with humorous and embarrassing directness. Elaine appears to be interested in Robert, but he complains of a headache and makes his excuses. From here we cut again to the junction: Robert’s car hesitates, then turns left before returning and heading in the direction of Jenny’s house. He approaches closer than previously, and is discovered when Jenny comes outside to burn some papers in incinerator. Jenny retreats to the house and lets Robert attempt to explain himself; he begins to walk away but she stops him, responding to something he has said about depression; rather than phoning the police, she invites him indoors. There, Jenny tells Robert about a man whose visit to her childhood home she understands as presaging the death of her brother, and states her conviction that they were ‘meant to have this conversation’.

The next scene takes place in a storage unit, where Robert keeps most of his belongings; Nickie has asked him to meet her there to see if her passport has been accidentally

mixed in with his things. After some sparring, she produces the passport, though the film doesn’t confirm whether it was in one of the neatly ordered boxes. A shot of Robert’s car driving at night is followed by a scene at Jenny’s house, in which we see her and Greg spending the evening together: Jenny appears to be on a different wavelength from Greg.

Jenny surprises Robert outside work, keen to ‘talk some more’. We cut to find them in a plush restaurant where she interrogates Robert as to his motives; outside she reveals that she has broken up with Greg. Robert’s sleep is interrupted by a phone call from Nickie. In the morning he is dismayed to see Jenny’s car outside; she encourages him to go walking with her and some friends. On the walk we witness the suspicion with which Jenny’s friend Susie (Jennifer Kydd) views Robert. That evening, back at her house, Jenny is about to kiss Robert when Greg throws a rock through the window, before angrily remonstrating with them on the porch. The ominous mood that accompanies Robert’s departure pervades a brief montage of him making a presentation at work (apparently very successfully), and is in turn shattered by the clatter of the pins as Robert scores a strike, out bowling with Jack. Jack and Robert’s conversation about Robert’s promotion (which would involve moving to Philadelphia) is interrupted by the appearance of Jenny; outside, she tells him that Greg has been telling friends that she met Robert because he was prowling outside her house.

There then follows a pair of scenes where Robert avoids Jenny, the second involving him hiding from her outside his house, and sleeping in the car, from which he is woken by Kolbe in the morning. She catches up with him in a supermarket parking lot, and they go to a diner where Robert tells her he doesn’t ‘think they should see each other anymore’, trying to frighten her off with stories of his mental instability; Jenny’s protestations of love are met with harsh words and the news about the move to Philadelphia.

Robert is pulled over by an angry Greg. Ignoring Robert’s attempt to talk, Greg charges at him and the two end up in a fistfight, tumbling over the crash barrier by a bridge and down the bank. Robert lands a strong punch on Greg, who tumbles into the river. After a moment or two, Robert wades in and drags him out, leaving his adversary slumped on the bank. As he climbs back toward the road we hear Greg cough, and Robert turns and looks darkly in his direction. The scene ends with views of the river flowing under the bridge, and Greg’s truck, door open, lights on, engine running.

Robert is cleaning himself up at home when Jenny knocks on the door. Later, Jenny asks to stay the night. Robert is reluctant but she ends up with the couch. Later in the night she climbs into his bed and kisses him; Robert resists, to an extent. In the morning she is cooking blueberry pancakes in the kitchen when he appears downstairs; she initiates a conversation about ‘death row’ meals and songs – favourites, which you would request if you knew these were your last hours. Robert attends the final element of the divorce proceedings in the city. His buoyant mood at being a ‘free man’ is short lived – Jenny phones with the news that Greg has disappeared. Robert and Jenny are interviewed together by the local police. Robert insists that he left Greg on the bank; the police suggest suicide as an explanation, which is strongly rejected by Jenny.

In the next section of the film, suspicions about Robert’s involvement in Greg’s disappearance mount. Jenny and Robert bump into Susie and her boyfriend in town; it becomes clear that they haven’t been invited to Susie’s birthday party. At work, Robert is interviewed by detectives from out of town, Anderson (Arnold Pinnock) and Lippenholtz



(Bruce McFee). The local paper picks up the story. Susie visits Jenny and they argue about Robert. Anderson and Lippenholtz interview Robert and Jenny individually at the police station – the detectives have been talking to Nickie and heard some unsavoury allegations about Robert's previous behaviour and claims about his mental health. In the car on the return from the station Jenny tells Robert that Greg had been in touch with Nickie shortly before the fight; Robert furiously phones Nickie.

The next day Kolbe tells Robert he wants him to move out. Jenny, meanwhile, visits Nickie at her apartment. We then see the end of a conversation between Robert and Mr Jaffe, in which Robert is informed that the promotion is no longer on the table and that he has been suspended from Lavigne. He storms into the washroom and a concerned Jack ventures in after him, but refuses to accompany Robert for a drink on the grounds that his child has 'croup'.

Robert and Jenny are leaving the restaurant where they had their first meal together when they encounter Greg's father, Jed (Nicholas Campbell). Jed attacks Robert outside, Robert becoming caught up in the fight and punching Jed fiercely. Jenny is horrified; Jed curses at her when she tries to help him up, Robert clutches his head in his hands. The detectives visit Robert's house to reveal that a body which might belong to Greg has been found in the river: dental records will be needed for confirmation.

In the night Jenny gets up and drives to her house. She prepares blueberry pancakes, and eats them while listening to her 'death row' song. She then goes out into the snow and slits her wrists under the willow tree. Robert is told the news by the detectives, who read him her suicide note. This shock is followed by a revelation for the audience, though not for Robert or the detectives: we see that Greg is alive and well, lying low with the financial assistance of Nickie.

Robert returns to his car after visiting a Chinese restaurant and is shot at – at least, that's what he believes: the police suggest it's a car backfiring. Returning to the house he used to rent, he is frightened by a cough outside; he steals up to a corner of the house, poker in hand, only to discover the next-door neighbour Sam (Peter MacNeill) and his dog. Sam befriends Robert and invites him to stay with him. The next evening they are playing chess when Robert knocks over his bottle of beer; standing up he catches sight of a hooded figure outside pointing a gun. Following his gaze Sam stands and gets the worst of two shots which are fired through the window.

At the hospital Robert's superficial injuries are tended to by a distant Elaine. Sam is much more seriously hurt and has not regained consciousness. Robert is met by the detectives, who attribute the violence to one of Greg's family or friends, and remain sceptical of Robert's conviction that Greg is still alive.

Assigned police protection, Robert is now staying in a motel. Waking in the night he finds the officers no longer at their post; he ventures outside with a revolver which he had taken from Sam's house. A shadowy figure with a gun appears but as Robert levels his weapon at this adversary he is disarmed by a police officer, who doesn't recognise him and ignores his protestations. The next morning the same officer wakes him with some good news.

Greg has been arrested trying to board a bus and is in custody. Robert watches Nickie being brought into the station. We witness a little of Greg being interviewed. Robert is greeted by Jack at the motel, who congratulates him and brings news that Mr Jaffe is looking forward to his return to Lavigne. Robert responds by saying he is not coming back and is leaving town for the city that evening. Greg is freed

on bail by an angry Jed.

Robert settles his bill at the motel and sets off in his car. It pauses again at the junction. Robert stands outside Jenny's house, now dark and empty. His contemplation of the scene is interrupted by the arrival of Nickie and a drunken Greg, who proceeds to punch Robert. Inside, Nickie attends to Robert's cut lip while Greg paces. Robert refuses to attempt to exonerate Nickie; Greg receives the news on his cellphone that Sam has died, meaning that he is now liable for a much more serious charge. He attacks Robert with a kitchen knife; Nickie tries to intervene and is stabbed in the neck. The fight ends with Greg unconscious and Nickie bleeding to death. Robert is drawn to the incriminating knife, but is distracted from picking it up by the sound of a bird taking flight. The film ends with him looking at his reflection in the kitchen window.

With the narrative so presented, we can immediately recognise its key turning points: the moment when Jenny catches Robert and invites him into her home; the fight between Robert and Greg by the river; Jenny's death. We can note the enigmatic ellipsis concerning the events after the fight, and how this shapes character behaviour and our response. We can register the extent to which we are privileged over all of the characters for a time, at the point of the revelation of Greg's rude health. We can observe how short scenes come fast and furiously in the later stages of the film. We can reflect on Robert's extreme passivity as a protagonist, and as a person: after being apprehended by Jenny we only ever see him reacting to circumstances rather than initiating action. From the point at which he crosses the threshold, moreover, the previously fragmented parts of his life begin to achieve a horrible coherence. This process starts gradually but accelerates through the film, especially from the point of the fight by the river. The next section of the article is going to explore the ways in which film's key patterns and imagery are articulated through, and with, the structure of the narrative.

### Fantasies

Fancies and fantasies, their distorting relationship to reality, and the ways in which such compelling notions can shape lives in detrimental ways are major concerns of the film. Two distinct expressions of such ideas are dramatised in relation to Robert and Jenny; these are developed and re-phrased as the two interact.

The film opens to give us Robert and his commitment to the image of a woman at her window in the woods; subsequently it develops this to present a view of Robert as someone who has chosen to take up a job in a small town as a deliberate attempt to re-shape his life after an unsuccessful marriage in the city: in this light, his interest in this image, with its rural simplicity and isolation gains deeper resonance.

When Jenny takes the disconcerting decision to invite him into her life, suspicions we may have already begun to form about Robert's preference for two-dimensional fantasy above the complexities of human life and actual relationships are confirmed. As soon as he gets to know something about Jenny, he seems to lose interest, his discomfort at their interaction not something that can be explained solely by embarrassment at the context in which she discovered him. And Jenny is very keen to assert her reality: the way she shouts out her name to the retreating prowler reminds me of Judy's attempts to establish her identity, in contrast to the ephemeral image of Madeline, when Scottie discovers her in *Vertigo* (Hitchcock, 1958). Robert is surprised and sceptical, too, to discover that Jenny is knowl-

edgeable about depression, which doesn't fit with the reasons he lists for watching her, in those awkward silences when Jenny doesn't reply and lets him talk into the void: 'I just watch you in the kitchen, doing stuff. Listening to music, cooking, cleaning. Nothing else. I know that sounds really bad but it's innocent, I swear to you. You looked so happy. You made me feel happy. Lately, I felt so lonely and depressed'.

Jenny's actions continue to be surprising: she seems not only *not* fearful of Robert but interested in his health and wellbeing, and even attracted to him. Robert gets rather more than he'd bargained for, quite beyond the homemade cookie he is offered on departure. He spends much of the rest of the film wishing to extract himself from the situation which attracted him earlier on.

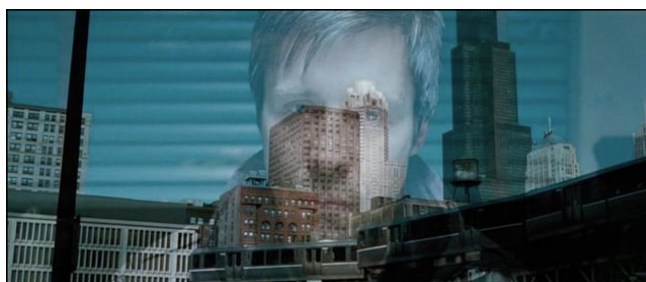
Jenny's behaviour may be explained, however, by her commitment to a set of values which are not compatible with reality either, and which are revealed to be as destructive a set of fantasies. From the outset she is convinced that 'meeting' Robert was 'meant' to happen. Unfortunately, Robert has increasingly cold feet, and her commitment to her sense of the rightness of a relationship between the two of them conflicts with his increasingly distant behaviour. This lack of reciprocity combined with the strength of her conviction exposes her commitment to him, and before long she is playing stalker to his prowler. This is a further element of the film's dark humour but not to the extent that it dulls the potential for dismay at the way Jenny's independence has been replaced by abjection. A character who was open and straightforward, who knew her own mind and was ready to venture something, personal and positive, becomes increasingly diminished.

In these reduced circumstances, and with her feelings for Robert undermined by what Greg's disappearance brings out in Robert and the other characters, she begins to change her sense of the particular role she sees Robert as having in her life. Disenchanted by the relationship, such as it is, and increasingly suspicious of Robert's capacity for violence, she reorganises the evidence of a pre-ordained meeting – the 'signs' that have been all over the place – to produce Robert as the harbinger of her death. She eventually reasserts her independence by returning to her own house, and by killing herself, though we may regard what she sees as something taking 'courage' to be a surrender to implacable forces, albeit ones she has made up. In the second of the two articles, I intend to present a detailed account of how the film presents her death, and explore some of the elements of its construction. In the meantime, consider the lyrics of her 'death row' song, Louis Armstrong's rendition of Kalmar, Ruby & Hammerstein's 'A Kiss to Build a Dream On', how precisely they articulate the idea of building a romantic fantasy on the slightest of foundations, and how well this speaks not only to Jenny but also to Robert. The two build parallel but incompatible dreams on each other's appearance.

The city – or, at least, the daytime city – comes to evoke something like reality in contrast to the small town fantasy, both when that fantasy represented an escape for Robert and when it becomes increasingly complicated. Nickie is consistently presented in relation to the city. A cityscape is always in the background of the shots of her at the lawyers and at home on the phone; she takes up her favourite spot on the sofa again during Jenny's visit. This not only identifies Nickie in relationship to generic tradition, giving the film an apparent opposition between the two women – or explaining one in Robert's head, at least – but also reminds us that for Robert, these days, Nickie is the antithesis of romance, and she continually teases him about his relationships past and

present, providing the film with a valuable commentary on aspects of Robert's behaviour.<sup>3</sup>

Later still, one of only two dissolves in the film takes us from the police cell where Robert hears Anderson read Jenny's last words to the revelation that Greg is alive and well. The dissolve moves us from nighttime in the blue-green interview room to sunshine and clear skies above the



streets of Chicago. By its rarity, and by articulating this dramatic movement away from Robert's consciousness, the dissolve becomes a larger break than a cut. And through the juxtaposition with Jenny's wish that Robert be able to find his way back to the real world, if that's where he wants to be, this transition is made a significant element in a wider web of imagery, patterns of daytime and nighttime, sleeping and waking, dream and reality.



I have picked out one of the film's central images in the title of the article. That Robert sleeps with his eyes half open gives him a disturbing countenance when, with Jenny, we watch him sleep (as so often balanced with humour – 'it's attractive, huh?', he dryly observes when she asks him about it). More importantly, it's a telling physical trait for someone who has difficulty distinguishing fantasy from real life, and who doesn't have precise control over his actions. It provides the film with an image of a protagonist suspended between dreaming and being awake; a man whose blundering progress through his waking hours is shaped by his capacity to confuse dreams with reality.

Robert's shining but sightless eyes form part of a wider motif around sleeping and waking. We see him waking up several times, twice with a start. Jenny wakes up to an owl, and on other occasions gets up in the middle of the night both to enter Robert's bed and to leave it to return to her house to kill herself. Anderson tells Robert to 'wake up', in relation to the evidence, as he maintains his belief that the missing Greg is the person responsible for the shootings.

Robert's relationship to Greg, is another important dimension of the movie and reflecting across its length provides evidence of a related pattern: all Greg's appearances in the film, excepting the ones where Robert isn't present, answer Robert's actions or desires, or both.

Is this a doubling in the full psychological sense, as Highsmith's first novel and most famous screen adaptation might lead us to expect? An argument can be made in which



Greg embodies Robert's aggressive and destructive potential, a major instance being Nickie's death: Greg kills Nickie, by accident, soon after Robert refuses to help her, analysing the demise of their relationship in a way which seems definitive. The weapon itself is a paring knife, which links this action to those taken to defend Jenny against Robert's presence in the second prowling scene, and to Jenny's death by a similar blade. The stabbing also echoes the off-screen story in which Robert is alleged to have threatened to kill Nickie when they were married, which also featured a knife that was being used to prepare vegetables. Nickie's death provides a grim conclusion to the bitterness engendered by the marriage and its breakdown.



Greg kills Sam, too. The moment when Sam is shot gives us the most explicit image of a double, where Robert looks at the window, and is confronted not by his reflection but by the hooded Greg. This is more difficult to understand in terms of Robert's unacknowledged intentions, but not in terms of the destructive forces that his earlier behaviour has unleashed, and over which he no longer has control – the quiet respite that Sam offers (so comforting that you can almost feel it) is only a momentary interruption to Robert's destructive trajectory. It is a moment that integrates smoothly into a developing motif, as the pane of glass shattered by the bullets evokes the rock breaking Jenny's window earlier in the film. Sam, too, is the film's one successful exponent of a romantic relationship, and the shooting might be said to fulfil his own desires in that he has talked of his surprise at not dying shortly after his wife.

Greg's other appearances in the film also cohere with the pattern. A shadowy Greg appears again outside the motel in a dreamlike sequence when Robert wakes in the cold of night, finds the officers detailed to protect him no longer in their car, and heads out of his room with a revolver, summoning his adversary out of the shadows. The gunshot / car backfiring happens after Robert has eaten Chinese, his own 'death row' meal.

### Plunging into the movie

Then there is the fight by the river. This moment merits further consideration, central, as it is, to the film's structure and design. Occurring at its midpoint, the fight takes the film into different terrain. It is from here that Robert is fully immersed into the nighttime, nightmare world that his actions have called into existence, and which makes up the most of the rest of the film. Another way of phrasing this observation, to invoke a concurrent metaphor, would be to say that the dream Robert topples into takes the form of a movie.

Heralded by the growl of Greg's engine, which sounds quite different from the traffic noises of earlier in the film, and much more like something from *Death Proof* (Tarantino, 2007) Robert is soon standing off against Greg outside their vehicles, and 'fighting in the middle of the road like something out of a fucking cowboy movie'. From then on he is accosted by gun-wielding assassins, pursued by a good

cop / bad cop pair of detectives as characterful as any in an American movie, caught in a tightening spiral of violence and destruction.



The handling of the fight works to involve us in its rhythms, energy and intensity: the camera is in constant movement – tracking to accompany Greg's initial rush at Robert, then panning, tilting adjusting with the struggle – and places itself on a level with the action on the roadway, and descending the bank. However, just at the point at which the pair tumble over the crash barrier toward the river, the camera takes a step back from the close quarters of



the rest of the sequence and views the action from the interior of Robert's car. The film's fourth shot, – the title sequence long take – gave us a similar view; the difference there was that Robert was in the foreground of the shot, not in the depth of the image. Robert is now heavily involved where he previously viewed from a distance, he has been drawn into the frame. It's a highly appropriate way of underscoring the point at which Robert finds himself tumbling into a genre picture.

To recast the metaphor again, Robert falls into a melodramatic world. It's not to say that melodramatic elements haven't already been present in the film (the register is very clearly at work in a number of the nighttime sequences) but from this point on, daytime scenes are far and few between, those that do appear providing a brief interlude before the next gloomy confrontation, and melodrama becomes the dominant mode.

The film uses these conventions but simultaneously achieves a productive generic and formal distance. The well-honed forms dramatise the situations of the characters, but in such a way that permit a double vision for the audience, allowing us to be involved by the dramatic construction but also to register some of the underlying values embodied in the conventions, and to recognise their effect on the distorted and disastrous lives we see unfold.

Greg is a character who can only dramatise internal emotion through action and this now proves increasingly dangerous. Jenny reveals herself to be invested in Romance to such an extent that she perceives 'a world totally predetermined and pervaded by 'meaning' and interpretable signs', as Elsaesser writes of the visual and psychological forms of domestic melodrama, a protagonist who turns her agonies inwards rather than externally (1972: 13). Robert

invests in certain images of femininity, to the point where it prevents him from having a functioning relationship with an actual person. Nickie, too, is a character who is trying to live a certain kind of image of life – to live up to a certain sense of herself – and failing.<sup>4</sup> Even Sam, the most sane character in the film, has a ‘romantic notion’ that leaves him surprised that he didn’t die immediately after his wife.

### Poetic Logic

The concern with the dynamics of fantasy permeates the film with a searching poetic logic in which desires and actions are answered by later, or in some cases, immediate events. Twenty-six minutes into the film, Robert and Jack are leaving work together. We pan with them in long shot while hearing Jack encouraging Robert to see Elaine, the woman he was introduced to at the party, offering to set them up on a date. Robert demurs, ‘I don’t know Jack. What with the divorce and everything, I’m just not interested at the moment, I guess’. At that moment an off-screen voice shouts ‘Robert!’. Robert and then Jack turn and look in the direction of the voice; Jenny enters from behind the camera. We follow her as she walks toward them, leading to an amusingly awkward introduction. Jenny, no longer a figure of Robert’s imagination, is here in the parking lot, initiating a process by which the boundaries of the different parts of Robert’s existence are erased, not to mention the neat compartmentalisation which he seeks to achieve at work. The timing of these events is a coincidence, at one level, but one where the lie in Robert’s denial is immediately revealed.



A repeated structure of the film is one where Robert thinks he has extracted himself from a situation, only for some new hell to arrive at that moment. As he walks down the city street after his divorce is finalised, his mobile rings: ‘I’m a free man! I can’t believe it!’, he happily tells Jenny before her news about Greg’s disappearance brings him to halt. In the scene in the diner he announces to Jenny that he doesn’t think they ought to ‘see each other’ any more, telling her that he liked to watch her happy with *someone else*, and speaking of his fragile mental state – ‘I thought that I was gonna ... kill my wife’. (We may think these things are said, or at least exaggerated, to strengthen his case for splitting up: there’s no evidence he liked seeing her with Greg; he later tells Jenny that he only told her that he was worried he might kill his wife to frighten her off, and downplays the tale while talking to the detectives, although those takes on the story are also contingent on particular circumstances.) Having revealed that he is moving to Philadelphia in any case, and left her sitting in the diner, moments of screen time later Robert is in his car, an energetic track by *The Great Lake Swimmers* which has broken onto the soundtrack accompanying him as he drives. On this occasion, too, his ‘freedom’ is short-lived: Greg’s truck forces him to pull over, and soon the two are exchanging punches as they tumble toward the river. Greg’s attack is not only fuelled by jealousy but also, as we later discover, by hearing the same story about Robert’s alleged attempt to kill Nickie, this time

from Ms Grace herself. Compounding the situation is the irony for the ex-boyfriend in the timing of his attack – he pulls Robert over just as he is attempting to leave Jenny and the neighbourhood behind. The results of Greg’s actions are the precise opposite of his intention, throwing Robert and Jenny back together and cancelling Robert’s promotion to Philadelphia. Such play with juxtaposition and coincidence places the narrative in the best melodramatic tradition, and aids the film’s characterisation of the nightmarish experience into which Robert is pitched.

In many instances the film’s answering structure is articulated through motifs, aural as well as visual. The spectator, and Robert himself, may recall the bird startled by the twig snapping under Robert’s boot in the first prowling scene at the point in the film’s final moments when the clatter of a bird’s wing startles him, breaking his attention as he is reaching toward to the knife. The pinging sound emitted Robert’s car when he opens the driver’s door on setting out and returning from the first prowl is answered by the equivalent noise from Greg’s truck during the opening stages of the fight, when it is prominent on the soundtrack, and when we return to the view of the truck, door open, engine still running, an undisclosed time later.

As Robert lies on the backseat of his car, covering from what he believes to be (and what may indeed be) a gunshot, we might remember the time he slept in the same position in order to hide from Jenny. The foregrounding of the complex consequences of desire through an ironic structure of repetition applies to other characters as well. Elaine, who was so keen to touch Robert at Jack’s party, is the doctor called on to inspect his injuries after the shooting. As Greg falls in the fight in the final scene, he grabs onto a cupboard door to break his fall; it turns out to be the one he’d wanted to fix, the significance of which to Jenny he’d not been able to understand: it provides no support, the house getting the last word on the argument as it clatters to the floor just before his head.

The most distinctive expression of the film’s poetic logic is a rigorous system of blocking and the handling of space. In the second prowling scene a pair of tracking shots move with Jenny, and later Greg, from the kitchen window to the door. The repetition invites comparison, with Jenny’s careful hesitation on the threshold contrasted with Greg’s aggressive and impetuous rush out of doorway and frame. Moreover, the two camera movements closely parallel one in a later scene, following Robert and Jenny to the door when Greg interrupts their kiss by throwing a rock through the kitchen window. The three characters’ relationships have been completely reorganised by that point, and the camera movement helps to point this up. At the same time, the comparison implied by the parallel movement and the emphasis on the window as a source of threat, bear witness to the consequences of Robert’s earlier behaviour.

The moment with the broken window develops the film’s patterning of interior and exterior space at Jenny’s house in relation to romantic images and their obfuscating relationship to real people. Before the interruption, the two have been speaking of their feelings: Jenny of how since she stopped seeing Greg, everything has seemed more alive ‘more colorful, more real’. Robert, meanwhile, replies by maintaining the opposite, we may suspect because he is trying to dampen Jenny’s enthusiasm: ‘I walk around in a daze sometimes, you know, like I’m still asleep. It’s like I’m in a bubble or something. It’d be nice to get back to the real world’. Jenny’s line, as she advances to kiss Robert, is ‘Well, bubbles can burst’, and, in a moment or two, the intimacy of the moment is punctured.





*Still: Bubbles can burst*

This particular play with the borders of the house doesn't represent the substitution of fantasy for reality that Robert experiences, between the image of Jenny he has constructed and her reality, but rather the parallel gap between Jenny's feelings and their reluctant object in Robert. The moment with the broken window further offers Greg's action as an extension of Robert's desires: his rock and subsequent intrusion shatter the romantic charge of the evening more effectively than anything Robert has been able to achieve consciously.

An extended example is provided by the deployment of the chair on which Robert sits when Jenny invites him into her house after she has found him lurking outside. Once seated, on that initial occasion, he sits straight, legs bent at the knee, his feet directly in front of him. His hands are on his lap and though he fidgets a little they remain clasped together; his shoulders are slightly hunched and he sits forward as a result, with his head tilted marginally towards us. When possible, he avoids looking at Jenny, though the openness of her conversation once she gets onto the topic of fate, and the questions directed toward him, mean that he meets her eye more and more. He pays little attention to the coffee he has been given.



Robert's posture takes up as little space in Jenny's room as possible; his hands are placed where she can see them. His reluctance and the timidity of his posture are reminiscent of an admonished child outside the headteacher's office. As Jenny introduces explanations of the evening's events he looks, if possible, increasingly uncomfortable.



'Do you think things happen for a reason?' she enquires, seriously. He cocks his head slightly, 'What, you mean like ... fate?', jabbing out the last word, and then jutting his chin forward. 'Yes. Us meeting like this,' she replies, off-screen, allowing us to scrutinise Robert. We can hear how dry his





mouth is as he moves his tongue. ‘I don’t really but ..., uh, ... I don’t know’, he backtracks, looking forward and nodding his head slightly, as if thinking it over, though his eyes flit uncomfortably. He is compelled to cede the point because, as he says a moment later, ‘I’m not in a position to call anyone crazy’.

The next time we are in the house, in the scene between Jenny and Greg, Jenny is sitting in the chair, legs crossed, reading a substantial paperback. This is the scene where Greg expresses his dissatisfaction at Jenny’s surroundings and, in a dramatic moment, tries to root her to the spot, saying that he’s never going to let her go, and suggesting they could eat each other when they run out of food. That Jenny is reading when she might be talking to her boyfriend may indicate that Jenny is losing interest in Greg; the difference in wavelengths implied by Greg’s failure to recognise what the cupboard door means to her may indicate reasons why this might be the case, but the fact that she’s sitting in ‘Robert’s’ chair, apparently unmoved since their meeting, suggests that their encounter has had an effect on her feelings. The scene also makes it clear that she hasn’t told Greg about meeting Robert.

The chair returns during Jenny’s last meal, a sequence which demonstrates a number of these answering structures. When she drives back to her house, the camera adopts the same position by the side of the road as it had for Robert’s car in the first shot of the film, the repeated location and repeated set-up inviting the connection.

At the end of the sequence that follows, of blueberry pancakes being prepared, Jenny is sitting in the chair again, to eat her ‘death row’ meal – her exact location at the table is initially withheld, partly by the use of a view of the room we haven’t seen before, and it is not until the final shot that the more familiar set-up makes the seating arrangement clear. Again, Robert’s interaction with her life is evoked.



into the frame for the first time the chicken shed, behind which Robert hid from Greg. This background gives weight to Susie’s accusation, and activates the prowling associations of the space outside the house which hadn’t been prominent in our experience of the scene, given the daylight and the view of the setting, until this point at right angles to the shots and counter-shots of the nighttime encounters.



Light and colour illuminate the major patterns under discussion. The film’s key colours are introduced in two important contexts: firstly, the scenes at Jenny’s house, where the colours of the night contrast strongly with the warmer lights of home; secondly, the views of the exterior of Robert’s house contrasted with Sam’s next door, the former is grubby blue-green, the latter is a warm yellow, the colour scheme continuing when we approach and enter Robert’s house.

Subsequent scenes at Jenny’s develop this axis, with these colours reinforcing the differences between the night outside and indoors where, as often as not, food is being prepared and pans are cooking on the stove. Robert, whose wardrobe tends toward dark colours (even when not prowling) suits the dark; Jenny, even when she stands on the porch looking out, is firmly in the homely colours of indoors, wearing a oatmeal cardigan.

In the scene when Jenny catches Robert, the contest of light and colour continues outside the house, with Jenny now venturing beyond the veranda but lighting a fire which means she continues to be warmly illuminated. In turn, the fire brightens the darkness and exposes Robert, turning the tables of their interaction in that instant. He steps forward to reassure her and after several shadowy steps is caught in the fall of light from one of the windows – ‘stop, right there’, Jenny commands. If one of the most disturbing things about



Equally, consider the location of her death, moments later, under the tree where she discovered Robert – it seems likely that Jenny herself made the connection, given the care she has devoted to getting everything just right. Here we are forcefully reminded about the relationship between Robert’s actions and subsequent events, as Robert must be when the police tell him about it moments of screen time later.

These repeated elements of setting, of blocking, of the soundtrack work to provide a texture of counterpoint to a whole range of actions in the film. In key locations, such as Jenny’s house, enormous scope for cumulative play is developed. In the scene where Susie comes to talk to Jenny, the setting works to create a precarious context for Jenny’s commitment to Robert. Jenny makes a strong declaration of her feelings for Robert: ‘I know you don’t like him. But I do. So I’d be really careful about what you say next’, she says looking directly at Susie. Jenny walks around her car, to get to the driver’s door, while Susie goes ahead and calls Robert a creep. As she says the word, the film cuts to a view which gives us Jenny’s look in response, and also brings





the earlier prowling scenes was how vulnerable being so well illuminated made Jenny; here she is able to exert some control over Robert by ensuring he is well lit. Later in the scene, at the moment when Jenny intervenes to stop the retreating Robert, the camera's movement to accommodate Robert brings the drum of burning paper into the foreground of the shot, between him and his return to the woods and the night, with the result that Robert is surrounded by the lights of home.

These colours also tussle in the scenes in Robert's house, at least when Jenny is around – a fire has even been lit on the hearth in one of her early visits – but while the interiors at Jenny's are warm, the lighter elements of Robert's home are always under threat from the murk.

On the occasion of Jenny's last meal, switching on the lights returns most of its warmth to her house – but before going out to the willow tree and lying down in the snow, she has turned them off again. The image isn't at its greenest here, more a cold blue-white-grey, but the absence of the lights falling on the snow make for a cold end to her life, and indicates the end of the pattern of her illumination of house and film.

Robert finds himself increasingly in a world of murky blue-greens. In the fight scene, and particularly those shots where Robert looks back down at Greg, before and after he pulls him from the drink, there is an illuminating contrast between the lighter colours of the autumn leaves in the



trees, lit by the headlights of the vehicles at the higher level of the road, and the blue-greens in of the space into which Robert has descended. The two scenes when law enforcement officers visit his house are marked by their use of blue-green shades, especially the second – on the night of Jenny's death, where she appears completely washed out at the end of the sequence.

Daytime and night inflect the colour scheme too: the police station has plenty of blue-green in its decor, but during the first interviews (and the last, when Greg has been apprehended) it is well lit, which moderates the effect. But in the scene that follows Jenny's suicide, the darkness lets the colour scheme dominate. Lavigne aeronautics has plenty of blue-green in its corporate colour scheme, which also reads differently in the darker scenes which take place there.

When Robert eats his own 'death row' meal, not long after receiving the news of Jenny's death, light from the neon signs in the window of the Chinese restaurant washes



his face, almost as strikingly as the deathly colour scheme in *Vertigo*.

Shortly afterwards Robert is under siege in his house, terrorised by real and perceived threats. The house at its most gloomy, he is alarmed by a cough outside, a moment which echoes Jenny's fear at his cough earlier in the film. Robert edges out of the back door to encounter his assailant: when he lunges round the corner of his house, poker in hand, the camera executes a whip pan, and both are brought up short by encountering Sam in a bright yellow raincoat.



The change in colour temperature lifts the scene, complementing character and audience's relief on realising that this is not an assailant; Sam's positive intervention in Robert's decline heralds a range of other colours, including the decor of his and his late wife's home, as his hospitality provides a moment's refuge. After the shooting, Robert goes back to the blue-greens in the hospital, particularly in the scene with Elaine. Sam's room, in contrast, is white.



Vertical forms in a variety of the film's decors, articulate the distance between Robert and the other characters. At the Jack's party, the form of the stone chimney breast consistently demarcates the space between Robert and Elaine, whose interest and advances fail to intrigue Robert. A critical moment in the pattern occurs in the scene in the washrooms, when Jack declines to come for a drink with Robert.



This scene also makes effective play with the washroom mirrors to foreground Jack's wariness of Robert, and to articulate Robert's doubled self, as his daytime world is increasingly contaminated by the action of the rest of the film.

On the walk in the woods, Robert's distance from Jenny's absorption in the setting sun is indicated by a number of forms of separation. In the long shot, the other walk-

ers sit on a fallen trunk to take in the view, or in Susie's case, lean backwards against it, while Robert stands behind it. When the film cuts to a two shot of Jenny and Robert, Jenny looking enchantedly above and beyond the camera,



he leans forward on the trunk, the camera tilting with this movement, removing Jenny's rosy face from the frame. Robert's movement also puts him on a level with Susie, who we next see looking across in his direction in a single,



before returning to see Robert looking warily back; this signals both their disjunction from the moment, and from Jenny and Susie's boyfriend Bill (Dru Viergever), who are oblivious to the exchange, as they were to the conversation of a few moments before in which Susie had strongly expressed her distrust of Robert, and voiced her concerns about Jenny being 'a dumb romantic', which their mutual wariness keeps to the forefront of our minds. By a variety of barriers – height, frame, tree trunk – Jenny's exalted experience is distinguished from the much more sceptical exchange that plays out below her perspective.

### The last scene

The film's final scene brings together a number of the strategies under discussion. It also turns on one of the film's informing decisions – moving the climax of the story from Robert's house, its setting in the novel, to Jenny's.

Robert has checked out of his hotel. One last time, we see him cross the railway tracks and reach the T-junction. We cut from the car's pause to a close-up of his face, looking at Jenny's silent house. At last he is in the open, as he looks at the house, which is shown to us in a reverse-field cut, the tree prominent in the foreground of the shot, the lights in the house off. A fresh fall of snow covers the remains of Jenny's last moments, and unbeknown to Robert,



this is the same set up which showed us the dark house as Jenny walked outside – the moment before her suicide is preserved, frozen.

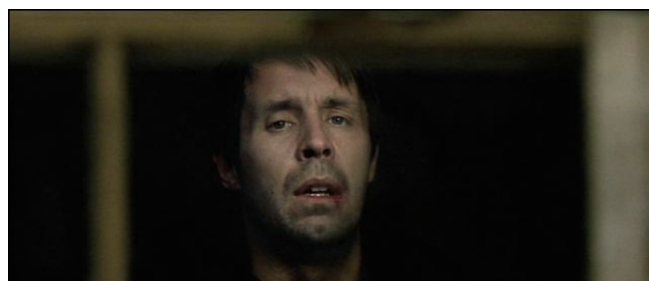
This time Robert, rather than Jenny, is momentarily blinded by the lights of Greg's truck. After a memorable exchange, where the humour is pointedly appropriate, Greg wheeling about after punching Robert, we cut to a close-up of Robert in the chair, his injuries being tended to by Nickie.

Robert's more relaxed self is apparent in the way he sits, now slumped, with an elbow on the kitchen table. It is from



'Robert's chair' that he delivers a crucial line: '... the first time I saw you Nickie, I fell for you straight away. You were standing so still in that gallery you looked like a statue, looking at that awful painting. And then you moved. And I guess it was fuckin' downhill from then on'. This could be an epigraph for the whole movie but the setting helps to achieve the full extent of its resonance, giving us an insight not just into his relationship with Nickie but also the obsessions which led him to his previous visit to the chair – a fascination for image over reality, a fixation on perfect appearance rather than an acceptance of the human complications of life or personality – and recalling the rapidity with which such illusions can unravel; after all, as soon as Jenny began to talk to him, he began to lose interest, wandering reluctantly through the rest of their relationship, until its disastrous conclusion.

The window, perhaps the most important of all these motifs, appears prominently in the film's final three shots. The flapping of a bird's wings has broken the trance in which Robert reached toward the incriminating knife, and we have seen him snap upright in long shot, looking in the direction of the window. The camera tracks in to a close-up of Robert's face as he looks out of frame right, beyond the camera. The film cuts to a reverse: Robert's reflection sus-



ended in the kitchen window, pallid, surrounded by darkness. He has a dead look in his eyes, but their reflection is so close to the line of the camera that if this is not a point of view shot then it is a very close evocation of what Robert himself sees. Then there is a dissolve which reverses the axis again, and also takes us outside the window – Robert's face is perfectly framed by the bottom left pane of the kitchen window; the camera slowly zooms out to a long





shot, until the camera's position is revealed to be by or in the line of trees on the far side of the grass; Robert is still standing in the window. The score, which included a flourish of intense violins in the track in to close-up, becomes progressively quieter across the three shots, until it is superseded by the sounds and atmosphere of the woods as the camera zooms backwards; the piano opening to 'Real Life', Robert's 'death row' song, accompanies the credits.

In the second of these shots Robert's head is pictured like that of a criminal in a rogue's gallery; it is the same pane of glass in which we saw Jenny reflected when she looked up at the noise Robert made, and her reflection also looked toward the camera, though on that occasion the wallpaper behind her was reflected too, making for a warmer image: the blood on Robert's hands is only one way in which the action of this concluding scene suggests his guilt. In the final shot Robert has also replaced Jenny in the window. From the outside, it doesn't look untoward – the house is still picturesque – it's only on the inside that one can see the blood, the bodies, the human factor.

The shot of Robert's reflection is one in which he can read the decor for himself, in the manner Laura Mulvey describes the characters of melodrama doing, but also there are perspectives that are only available to us (1977/8: 55). A rare dissolve takes us outside, and leaves Robert in the house. This transition carries with it the weight of the only other dissolve in the film, which combined a major movement away from Robert's consciousness with the idea of returning to the real world. This time, we are removed to the outside again, with Robert left in the house, sealed into the fantasy he sought. But things have changed: the cutlery now blood stained, the floor and ceiling tatty, the cupboard door off its hinges, Jenny long gone and his ex-wife dead on the floor. The enclosing frame which previously restricted Jenny to an image in his mind, now serves to constrain him. We may have got back to the real world, but he remains caught in the looking glass. The night sounds leave us with a chill.



Rarely do films manage endings which are so spatially, emotionally and thematically conclusive.

John Gibbs

My thanks to Rebecca Deren, Lucy Fife Donaldson, Tom Brown and Douglas Pye for sharing their responses to the film, and to Lucy and Doug for perspectives on the article.

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[Movie: A Journal of Film Criticism](#), 1.

John Gibbs is Senior Lecturer in the Department of Film, Theatre & Television at the University of Reading; he is the author of *Mise-en-scène: Film Style and Interpretation* and co-editor of *Style and Meaning: Studies in the Detailed Analysis of Film*, of the annual series *Close-Up*, and of the first issue of *Movie: A Journal of Film Criticism*.

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<sup>1</sup> Close attention reveals that the view of the room in this last shot is actually quite different from the preceding one: the camera position has changed, the objects on top of the fridge are differently arranged, and include items not seen before, such as the flowers, and the window is a different shape. This is because this shot comes from a different version of the original scene in which the lower half of the window was open — hence the impression of a different shape. It took me several viewings before I noticed this, partly because the final shot is only on screen for a moment before the light goes off — we are unlikely to perceive the difference in the course of ordinary viewing.

<sup>2</sup> In the film we don't learn his occupation, but the character in the novel is a traveling salesman, as in *Rear Window* (Hitchcock, 1954), a reduced form of the wandering hero.

<sup>3</sup> While the film's internal use of space is very precise, and its evocation of small town and city is clear in iconographical and symbolic terms, it seems deliberately vague in its approach to geography. We have little sense of where Humbert and Crystal Falls might be. We learn of a cottage in 'North Bay', which is a drive away, but this is a common name. The local police wear 'Municipal Police' on their badges, which is correct and non-specific at the same time. And where is the city, exactly? Most dialogue references are unspecific, as though to imply a dominant city not too far away — 'We caught him trying to get on a bus to the city', as Lippenholtz says of the incarcerated Greg. The first scene at the lawyers includes a reference to New York State Law, which goes some way to connecting Robert and Nickie's marriage or residence to state; the cityscape views are non-specific. This is also true of the other establishing shots of the city, except the one prior to the scene in which Greg's hideout is revealed: in this case the location is recognisably Chicago, with an El train and the Sears building in view. It's quite possible that Greg has been hiding out in Chicago even if we imagine the rest of the action taking place further to the east, there could be an advantage in crossing state lines. (In the novel the city is New York and the rest of the action of the book takes place in Delaware — the river is the Delaware river; Highsmith is precise in where the film is vague.) However, this collective lack of specificity helps to make the city a state of mind, as much as anything else. The city is where Nickie is, where the detectives are based, where Robert is escaping from.

<sup>4</sup> For further discussion of Nickie, who has become a misleadingly marginal figure in this article, follow [this link](#).