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## Beyond Bluebeard: feminist nostalgia and Top of the Lake (2013)

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### **Beyond *Bluebeard*: Feminist Nostalgia and *Top of the Lake* (2013)**

In Jane Campion's *In the Cut* (2003) Frannie, the film's protagonist, twice enters the 'terrible place' (Clover 1987), the dark interior space where male violence against women is repeatedly enacted. On the first occasion, half hidden in the doorway of the dimly lit basement of the Red Turtle bar, she gazes, fascinated, as Angela Sands gives a blow job to the man who will murder her. His features masked by the darkness, he returns Frannie's gaze. On the second occasion it is her sister's apartment that she enters, to find, in its innermost room, Pauline's severed head. Frannie, then, is the Gothic investigator, her investigation, to borrow from Mary Ann Doane, simultaneous with her own potential victimization (1987: 136), its object at once male power and her own sexual identity. What she confronts on the other side of the door is 'an aspect of herself' (ibid.: 137).

If *In the Cut* echoes the 'paranoid' woman's film described by Doane, it also invokes the slasher film, with its labyrinthine basements, unsafe interior rooms, and female victim-investigators whose 'dawning understanding, as they survey the visible evidence, of the human crimes and perversions that have transpired there' is traced by the films (Clover 1987: 197). Behind both generic narratives, however, lies a much older story, that of *Bluebeard*. In this archetypal tale, a young woman is married to a much older, powerful man. He gives her the castle's keys but forbids her from entering its smallest, most remote chamber. When, despite her husband's prohibition, she investigates, she finds there the bloody corpses of his previous wives. Unable to hide her transgression – the chamber's

key is irrevocably stained with blood – she, too, faces beheading, but is rescued, at least in part by her own resourcefulness. It is a narrative of transgressive female desire, of female resourcefulness in the face of oppressive male power, but also of women's complicity in what Maria Tatar calls 'the fatal repetition of patriarchal values' through the masochistic fantasy of romantic love (2004: 8-9). Its story, like those of the film genres that echo it, begins, writes Tatar, 'on the outside – in the realm of the familiar, common and quotidian' (ibid.: 2). When it moves 'to the inside', however, its world is dangerous, perverse and other; when you enter a house of Bluebeard you are filled with an 'uncanny sense of dread' (ibid.: 65). It is, argues Tatar, one of Western culture's foundational stories, though one 'we are in danger of repressing' (ibid.: 10).

The *Bluebeard* story is one on which Campion, in common with a number of feminist writers and artists<sup>1</sup>, has drawn repeatedly. If it is most pervasive in *In the Cut*, it is perhaps most visible in *The Piano* (1991)<sup>2</sup>, where we see the tale performed in shadow play, its dark vision of oppressive male power and a female investigator who is 'at once victim, trickster and survivor' (ibid.: 3) serving to undercut the Christian narrative of angels and shepherds that the performance follows. In *Top of the Lake*, Campion's 2013 New Zealand-set serial drama, in which Detective Robin Griffin investigates the disappearance of pregnant 12-year-old Tui Mitchum, the story returns. Here, in another generic re-working - this time of the 'Scandi-noir' detective serial with its dysfunctional, often female detective and brooding landscape setting - we find another female investigator of dark secret rooms guarded by powerful men. Like Frannie, Robin, its detective protagonist, enters the 'terrible place' and finds there a horrific mirroring of her

own victimization. Despite the continuities that this indicates, however, in what follows I want to argue that *Top of the Lake* also demonstrates a shift of concerns, one that can be tracked through a change in the serial's underpinning myth, and through the often distanced and ironic treatment of the generic template on which Campion draws.

### **Countering Oedipus**

The *Bluebeard* story, as Tatar points out (ibid.: 69), provides a female protagonist who in some ways counters the Oedipus myth, the 'classic and paradigmatic story of individual development in Western civilization' (Hirsch 1989: 1). Here is a story in which female rebellion, curiosity and action are central, and the object of investigation is not the enigma of femininity but the secrets of patriarchy. In Angela Carter's version of the tale, 'The Bloody Chamber', the narrator moves from child to woman in marrying Bluebeard, but more explicitly from being her mother's child to being Bluebeard's sexual possession. 'And so my purchaser unwrapped his bargain', she says (1995: 15), as she discovers 'the striking resemblance between the act of love and the ministrations of a torturer' (ibid.: 27). For Carter, the rebellious curiosity that impels the daughter's investigation is her mother's gift: 'My mother's spirit drove me on', she says, 'into that terrible place' (ibid.: 28). It is her mother, too, who effects the daughter's escape, riding 'hard and fast' to her rescue, a 'crazy magnificent horsewoman in widow's weeds' who freezes Bluebeard like Medusa, and descends as an 'avenging angel' (ibid.: 38-9).

Reflecting on Carter's re-working of the tale, however, Tatar suggests that despite the mother's magnificent intervention, the ending of Carter's story, in which the narrator marries the castle's blind piano-tuner and lives quietly with her mother and her new husband, remains curiously flat. It is after all the heterosexual relationship under patriarchy that is the tale's focus. It is this which provides the combination of Gothic horror and seductive fascination that is the source of its narrative pleasure. For the mother-daughter relationship to become truly central, it would seem that a different underpinning myth is called for, one that does position a mother as hero and saviour.

The Greek myth of Proserpine (or Persephone) and Demeter, suggests Tatar, has much in common with the *Bluebeard* story. In it the child Proserpine is gathering flowers (in some versions poppies, the emblem of forgetfulness) by a wooded lake when she is raped and abducted by her 'father's brother', Pluto, and carried off to the Underworld as his bride. It is her mother who searches for her, 'roar[ing] out her pain'<sup>3</sup>, and who finally liberates her from Hades/Pluto, though not before Proserpine, like the heroine of *Bluebeard*, has succumbed to temptation and eaten some of the forbidden fruit of Hell. This story, Mary Jacobus has suggested, is the Greek myth that Freud does *not* select, indeed represses, in his search for a myth that would ground the psychoanalytic story of childhood development. In it, it is the mother-daughter relationship, not that of father and son, that is central, and the founding act is one of paternal rape, not of castration. It is, writes Jacobus, 'the myth that unpacks the function of the Oedipus myth in psychoanalytic theory, which is to convert a fictional hypothesis into a universal law of the (masculine) subject while erasing the question of

mother-daughter relations' (1987: 135). It is also a myth, she suggests, to which feminists have turned<sup>4</sup> in their desire to recover a 'lost' mother-daughter relationship, a 'utopian state in which our relations to the body could be unalienated, and our psychic state whole' (ibid.: 133).

For Jacobus, this act of appropriation, though attractive, is a form of 'feminist nostalgia': a fantasized memory – for all memories are essentially forms of fantasy – of 'an ultimately irretrievable past'<sup>5</sup>. There never was, she writes, 'a prior time, or an unmediated relation for the subject'. Neither we ourselves nor the mother-daughter relationship ever were 'whole'. But, 'as feminists', she adds, we shouldn't deny this yearning for a lost past'; nostalgia, can be a powerful tool (ibid.: 118, 135). For Freud, she points out, nostalgia as 'home-sickness' is identified with the loss of the mother's body for the male subject, of a home [*Heim*] which for him is also *unheimlich* [uncanny]: strange, disturbing, frightening. 'This *unheimlich* place', writes Freud, in terms that link such nostalgia with the language of folktales and legends, 'is the entrance to the former *Heim* [home] of all human beings, to the place where each one of us lived once upon a time and in the beginning' (2001: 245). The space of myth and legend becomes the maternal body, source of both nostalgic longing and horror for the Oedipal subject. Jacobus, however, points to a second definition of nostalgia: as 'a state of melancholy regret, or unsatisfied desire' (ibid.: 137). A feminist nostalgia, she argues, can be a reminder of that desire, its 'texts of memory' a 'remaking, or making over, [of] the past' which remind us of the many forms in which 'as women, we both find and lose our forgotten selves' (ibid.: 138). *This* form of feminist nostalgia both makes visible and displaces the

Freudian uncanny, looking back not to a lost maternal body but to desire: 'not only to what feminism desires but to what it desires different, now' (ibid.). *Top of the Lake*, I argue, is both an exercise in and investigation of such feminist nostalgia. As a 'text of memory', its evocation of the myth of Proserpine/Demeter to underpin its complex mix of female Gothic and detective story counters the dominant cultural narrative of Oedipus. But like Jacobus it remains suspicious of utopian fantasies and the unalienated body.

### ***Top of the Lake: his story***

[T]he writing of the history of the male subject ... constitutes an ...  
elaborate denial of passivity and masochism. (Silverman 1980: 8)

*Top of the Lake* features two Bluebeard figures: Matt Mitchum, the patriarchal 'alpha ass' whose fortress home is the site of male violence, sexual secrets, and a hidden, corrupting basement; and police chief Al Parker, the 'older man' who calls Robin his 'angel', promises her 'a life together, a beautiful one', and requests that she 'Redeem me. Or if you're not interested, go ahead, exterminate me'. The two are linked narratively, in their joint corruption and control of Laketop, and symbolically, through the stags' heads that adorn the houses of both, as they do all the film's male spaces – bar, police station, and finally the gathering of hunters where we see the literal dismembering and devouring of the animals. It is Al's less obviously sinister house that in fact conceals the 'terrible place' that Robin must finally enter if she is to rescue the film's children. But it is Matt whose story presents us with the 'history of the male subject': a Freudian narrative of patriarchs and sons, in which daughters are to be used and controlled; of control



of land, action and looking; and of a powerful sadism that masks impotence, masochism, and a horror of the female body.

The series opens with a low angle shot of the bars of Matt's fortress; behind them the twelve-year old Tui prepares to ride her bike to school. The second shot reverses the view, a surveillance shot of Tui from the upper window of the house, unmotivated and creating a sense of unease. In the sequence that follows, fractured glimpses of Tui's ride are intercut with shots of the vast landscape. She is a tiny figure, at times almost lost in the mist, cycling along a liminal path between water and snow-covered land. Our view remains distanced and fragmented as she walks into the lake, and then we see her underwater body, fists clenched, as if suspended in the water, and hear the piano notes that will reference Tui throughout the series. The atmosphere, as reviewers commented, is 'otherworldly', 'eerie', 'dreamlike'<sup>6</sup>. Tui is silent and elusive throughout. It is an opening sequence abruptly ended by a cut to the interior of the Mitchum house. This should be a more familiar world: a domestic interior, with naturalistic dialogue and habitual actions. But it is uncomfortable; the half-naked bodies of Matt's sons are too close, filling the screen with a barely suppressed sense of violence which will later explode against their father. This, Matt insists, is Tui's *family home*: a space dominated by Matt's controlling violence, and the restless, rebellious energy of his sons, where nameless women work and bear children, and nameless men lounge, drink, and brawl.

In her essay on the 'Woman with the Gun' subgenre, Rikke Schubart argues that in the ostensibly female-centred action narratives of which she writes, where we

see women both act and investigate, the dominant story is in fact not 'hers' but 'his': an Oedipal narrative in which women play the fetishized roles of mother, daughter and/or amazon for men's sado-masochistic pleasure, whilst men control 'plot, spectacle and story' (1998: 208). In *Top of the Lake* it is Matt whose actions drive the narrative, forcing Tui's escape, killing Bob Platt and instigating the death of Wolfie Zanic, causing Jamie's death, and producing Robin's near breakdown. As Robin repeatedly threatens to wrest control of both narrative and meaning, both he and Al return her again and again to the role of victim, the one who does not know and hence cannot act. She is the child who was raped, and whose rape the men both know about and, as paternal figures, 'punished'. She is the daughter whose mother, unknown to her, has been beaten; and finally, as Matt seizes control of her interview with him, she is Matt's own daughter, his 'seed', compelled to watch as he plays her the evidence of her mother's affair.

Matt is a thoroughly Oedipal subject, his view of women characterized by an Oedipal ambivalence<sup>7</sup>. His physical abuse of Anita gives way to expressions of a Freudian sense of horror at the female body: 'Stupid bitch. See what you made me fucking do. ... Your fucking menstrual waste, your scum...You're unfuckable'. His story, however, is not the controlling narrative of Campion's drama. Indeed, it is undercut at every turn. This Bluebeard, who is 'turned on' by a woman's low self-esteem, is, impotent, dependent on chemical aids for any sexual performance. He is lost when his women workers, all mothers, desert him after Jamie's death. The rigid family structure that he seeks to impose ('We're going to sit down, set meals at this table, like a family') is dominated not by him but by the absent figure of his mother, to whom he is bound by the endless repetition of

the Freudian masochistic scenario, 'A Child is being Beaten'<sup>8</sup>. In this fantasy, as Freud describes it, an apparently sadistic voyeuristic pleasure, in which the male subject watches the infliction of pain on his substitute, in fact conceals a repressed masochism. It is the subject himself who is the child being beaten, most often by his mother, and always by a woman (1979: 185). Freud himself is deeply uncomfortable with this scenario, insisting that this female figure is a substitute for the father<sup>9</sup>, and the fantasy one of Oedipal submission. Campion's version is blackly comic. The patriarch Matt repeatedly lashes himself before his mother's grave: 'I know I'm useless. I know. I know. ... I'm sorry, mam. I'm sorry'. It is a dismantling of the master narrative of Oedipus (and Bluebeard) accentuated by the absurdly tiny Chihuahua which accompanies Matt on his quest, and completed by his failure to dominate GJ – the series' sphinx - and finally, in rather less comic mode, by his death at the hands of the daughter who was ostensibly object of that quest.

### **Her story: woman as investigator**

[M]others ... are always already double – both child and adult, both daughter and mother ... (Hirsch 1992: 94)

Robin is the female detective with a dysfunctional relationship familiar from other detective series. She *looks* - one of the characteristic shots of the series is of Robin's intense gaze: at screens, at the vast landscape, at the men whom she must somehow read – and she investigates, persistently, despite constant attempts to return her to the status of victim. She searches for the pregnant child Tui, who, as Al points out, is a double for herself, and when she finally shoots Al

and enters the 'terrible place', what she finds there is not only the solution to Tui's pregnancy but a mirroring of her own earlier gang rape. As daughter-investigator she seems to echo not only cinematic predecessors like Clarice Starling but also *In the Cut*'s Frannie, with whom she shares the shooting of the corrupt cop who would seduce and destroy her and the relationship of half-sister to his victim. Like Frannie she struggles to impose her reading of events and structures against the far more powerful definitions of male authority.

The mystery that Robin must unlock does not, however, primarily concern masculinity and the difficulties of the heterosexual relationship, as it does for Frannie. Johnno, the man with whom she establishes, like other Campion protagonists, a kind of 'truth of the body'<sup>10</sup>, remains a peripheral figure, and one not entirely trustworthy. When she steps into Al's basement, what she finds there, the sexual exploitation of children by powerful men, is, though shocking, not a surprise. Rather, it is the mother-daughter relationship and herself as both daughter and mother that is at the centre of her investigation. The doubling that is such a feature of Campion's work, from the sisters of *Sweetie* (1989) to the mirrored sisters and detectives in *In the Cut*, is multiplied here. If mothers are doubled – both Jude, Robin's mother, and GJ have striking long grey hair (like that of Campion herself) – then the doubling of daughters is even more pronounced. Like Tui, Robin is a daughter and victim of child rape; both are called 'Angel'. Both peer round half-open doors in the series' opening episode, listening in to the conversation of their parents; both sleep in a room redolent of childhood innocence. If Tui's body is the film's 'crime scene'<sup>11</sup>, then it is a body shared by Robin. The foetus which we see in the opening credits, repeated on the

ultrasound image that Tui finds 'disgusting', is also Robin's. When Robin retraces Tui's actions by walking into the lake, it is Tui's underwater body that the camera shows.

But Robin herself is also double: mother as well as daughter. If, as Christine Battersby suggests (1998: 8-11), a condition for establishing the subject as female is the embrace of the 'monstrosity' that this doubling means to a patriarchal order, then this is Robin's journey. Tui may be Robin's own double, as Al suggests, but what he cannot recognise is that she is also that of Robin's lost child. Robin's rage is not only at the originating trauma of her own and Tui's rape, where she is the 'avenging angel' of Al's description, but the maternal rage of Demeter. When she gazes at the videos of Tui retrieved from Wolfie's house, the effect is complex. Her face begins by mirroring that of the onscreen Tui, so that they seem to both mirror and share a smile, but as Tui continues to laugh, Robin's smile is replaced by tears of maternal grief.

As child/daughter, then, Robin is persistently returned to the trauma of her own victimisation and the ubiquitous power of men, who all *know* – about her mother's perhaps violent relationship, about her own rape, and about her possible parentage – when she herself does not. It is the physical reminder of her own rape by Sarge that produces the out-of-control attack which marks a first collapse of her identity – a rape which he does not even remember, and an attack about which he remains unconcerned. The second, in which she comes close to suicide ('I don't know how to keep living', she says to GJ), is produced by Matt's revelation – 'You're my seed, girl. My blood' – though this too seems a knowledge

already shared amongst the male detectives who silently drive her home. As daughter she is the detective who does not know, the Gothic investigator of her own originary and potential victimisation. It is as mother, however, that she continues her investigation and her attempted rescue. Despite GJ's admonition – 'Stop your helping. Stop your planning. Give up!' – she sets out to rescue Tui not once, but twice. At the end of the final confrontation we return to the lake. The shot is of dark blue, rippling water through which we can almost see an image: perhaps a reflection, perhaps an object in the water. It is a shot that echoes the series' title sequence, in which, as we descend deeper into the dark blue of the lake's depths we find floating both Tui's photograph and the luminous outline of a foetus. It echoes, too, the ending of *In the Cut* where, as Sue Gillett describes it, we see an 'image of light on water emerging from a pitch-dark screen' following Frannie's shooting of Rodriguez. For Gillett this is Frannie's 'female inheritance', a freeing from the sado-masochistic traditions of myth and fairytale which have dominated both her fantasies and the film's narrative (2004: 100). Here, its effect is rather different, the 'female inheritance' it suggests elusive - neither linear nor uncorrupted. As the shot shifts and we see Robin stoop to scrub her blood-spattered tee-shirt, she is watched by an impassive Tui. Robin stands, the task abandoned; both gaze out across the lake before Robin turns and they look at one another. This is the exchange of looks that Robin desired as she gazed at Tui's image on the screen, but it is not a reclamation of innocence. The blood cannot be erased; indeed its pattern is echoed in the top that Tui wears as she gazes back at Robin. Tui remains unreachable, and Robin's own past irretrievable.

## Paradise

From the opening sentence ... the possibility of action, understood as self-initiated movement in space, as domination of space, is continually undermined. (Mitchell 1989: 99)

W. J. T. Mitchell is here describing the use of space and time in *Jane Eyre*, which he argues is typical of women's fiction. In place of the 'domination of space' by linear narrative, or time, he argues, we find an emphasis on seeing and on spatial relationships. Narrative – temporal, dramatic, purposive – is disturbed and held in tension with that which, in classic narrative theory, should merely serve it<sup>12</sup>: space, description, the sight and texture of objects, people, and relationships. For Muriel Andrin, Campion's films invite a similar doubleness of view, offering a 'classical narrative structure within which narrative "breathing spaces" are ... inserted', so that the film's linear progression is 'interspersed with moments of stasis that impart a different rhythm to the narrative progression – often making it "strange"' (2009: 28). In *Top of the Lake* this displacing of narrative and its implications, and in particular of the generic structures through which the series positions itself – those of the female Gothic or 'paranoid' woman's film and the detective genre – is effected in three ways: by the self-conscious play on *filming*; by the use of landscape; and, linking the two, by the scenes in the women's camp: Paradise. Together, they create an ironic distancing, not only from the narrative of Oedipus played out through the Mitchums, but also from the assumptions of narrative itself: that its solutions can resolve cultural complexities or redeem the past.

In the third of the series' opening sequences – the first two show us Tui's self-immersion in the lake and the interior of the Mitchum house – we see the establishment of the women's camp at Paradise. In place of the misty blueness of the opening sequence, and the heightened realism of the Mitchum interior, here it is the landscape that dominates, as sunlight bathes the mountains and the lakeside valley on which the women's containers are, incongruously, set down. As electricians rig up power supplies and temporary housing is lowered into place, this seems to be a film set, with GJ the director. Indeed, we see her followed by two women with camera and microphone – the 'making of' documentary seemingly in process. Campion's work has always, argues Laleen Jayamanne, contained 'elements of the fantastic' (2001: 26), surreal elements that both disrupt and frame the narrative realism of the story into which they are so disconcertingly inserted. This is the function of the scenes in the women's camp in *Top of the Lake*. The camp itself offers an ironic inversion of the male-dominated world of Laketop, where violent action is not only, as Al says, 'how men relate to each other', but how problems are resolved. The camp's women – post-menopausal, 'unfuckable' – initiate no actions of their own; they are simply there, a spatial not a narrative presence. It is not they who invest Paradise with its mythical stories – it is the men who do this, from Matt with his self-named biblical family to the helicopter pilot who spots a naked 'Eve' amidst the camp's containers. They offer no solutions. They seem, indeed, to be outside narrative time: no longer part of the stories of their own lives, and peripheral to that of Robin and Tui. Their framing is often painterly; when Robin's mother approaches the camp for help, what she and we see is a reprise of Cézanne's *Bathers* – women's bodies at ease against sky, lake and mountains. On the



occasions when narrative action does invade the camp, it is paused - undermined - by the peripheral sight of a naked woman, the pilot's Eve, who walks, unconcerned, across the frame.

Fig. 1: Cézanne's *Bathers*?

The camp's most *fantastic* element is GJ. Gnostic commentator, sphinx to Matt's Oedipus, without nation, name, past, or, it seems, sex – she speaks repeatedly of the 'intelligence of the body' but seems to barely inhabit hers - she is present in the diegesis only, as she says to Tui, as a figure not really 'alive' and until Robin's quest is completed. It is difficult to avoid seeing her not only as a self-ironizing surrogate for the director herself (as the woman from whom 'enlightenment and peace' is sought<sup>13</sup>, but who can offer neither), but also as a form of cinematic self-haunting. In Campion's earlier New Zealand-set story of mothers and daughters, *The Piano*, the narrative closes on Ada's decision to try to reconcile her own sexual subjecthood with the sort of accommodation with language and culture that will enable her to live. In place of the Bluebeard of white colonial patriarchy she chooses the more fluid and hybrid Baines, and she will learn, finally, to speak. The decision, it seems, will free her daughter, Flora, into her own independent subjecthood. It is an Irigarayan solution<sup>14</sup> that in *Top of the Lake* no longer seems possible – Johnno is too compromised a figure to be a Baines, and no heterosexual relationship can free a daughter - but which the presence of Hunter<sup>15</sup>, here as a GJ out of time and out of body, hauntingly invokes.

### **The cinematic gaze**

Campion's cinematic gaze has been seen as witty, distancing, making strange (Andrin 2008, McHugh 2007), but also as seeking to approximate the immediacy of touch and felt experience (Gillett 2004), as 'bind[ing] image to interiority' (Taubin 2005). The camera, as cinematographer Stuart Dryburgh said of *The Piano*, goes 'places where [it] can't really go ... right down at the level of hands and fingers' (Campion 1993:141). It also invests Campion's female protagonists with what Kathleen McHugh describes as 'a reader's gaze' (2007: 135): intense, interiorized, driven by the desire to know. It can sometimes act as a reversal of the classic male gaze, and it is one that we at times share, but it may also be unreadable, or turned back, disconcertingly, on viewers themselves. In *Top of the Lake* that gaze is Robin's. At first direct and confrontational, it acts initially to block the casually misogynist gaze of the male police officers at Tui, and to insist on Robin's own authority. She will be the one to *look*: investigating beyond the immediate site of Wolfie's hanging, and, despite her clear desire to look away, operating the camera when the grave she finds is opened. Al's response, in the struggle over vision and narrative control that is enacted between them, is to propose a different generic function for Robin. Her looking, he says, is excessive. It constitutes a problem of *reading*: over-identified with her victim-double, she reads everything as 'a sign'. It is a difficulty in reading, he suggests, that stems from her own lack of a father ('We only did what we did because your father wasn't around', he says), and strained maternal relationship. The genre, as so often with a female investigator, has shifted. Robin has become the Gothic heroine, protagonist of the 'paranoid' woman's film. When she gazes, absorbed and lost in the image, at Zanic's videos of Tui, she becomes the woman's film's maternal spectator<sup>16</sup>; as she stands with her mother looking into a mirror she is

its guilty daughter. It is a position, *too close* to the object of her gaze, that corresponds, writes Mary Ann Doane, to Freud's vision of femininity, which is too self-absorbed for subjecthood and knowledge. 'Too close to herself, entangled in her own enigma', argues Doane, for Freud woman 'could not step back, could not achieve the necessary distance of a second look' (Doane 1991: 19).

The close of the series sees Robin investigate the 'terrible place' where, in the manner of the Gothic female investigator, she should face her own victimisation. The scene has already been prefigured by the earlier events in Zanic's house, where Robin's attempt to investigate its basement led to her own endangerment and rescue by Johnno. Now, however, she is a distanced, not an over-empathetic reader of images, interpreting afresh the cosy group photograph of the baristas, with Al at their centre. Her entry into Al's secret room is not that of Clarice Starling in *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991): we do not follow her through the self-consciously cinematic gaze of her potential killer. Instead, we share her 'reader's gaze' at powerful but very ordinary men filming their sexual exploitation of children. It is a gaze that has, precisely, that 'necessary distance of a second look' which Freud would deny to women. Robin is not absorbed by this scene of exploitation, as was Frannie in *In the Cut*, just as her shooting of Al is not in service of her own rescue, as was Frannie's of Rodriguez. Instead, as the men film their abuse of children, and watch the results, Robin films them. Her look as, gun in hand, she orders their surrender, is at her phone screen as she captures the evidence. If, like Angela Carter's maternal rescuer, she is both Demeter and Medusa, she is a Medusa who has borrowed the tactics of Perseus. Like Perseus,

she screens – in its double sense - the horrific object of her vision, but the horror lies not in the female body but in what is being done to it.

Fig. 2: That ‘necessary distance of a second look’

### **Uncanny landscape**

Paradise is a garden. ... In the garden, there cannot be any landscape....

You yourself won’t get lost there. (Nancy 2005: 53)

For Jean-Luc Nancy, landscape is immensity, ‘the limitless opening of place’ (ibid.: 59). It is uncanny – unsettling, estranging - because it has been emptied, of its people and of its spirits. Campion’s landscape in *Top of the Lake* seems far from empty, its spirits very much alive, but like that of Nancy it is a ‘space of strangeness or estrangement’ (ibid.: 60) – reviewers noted its ‘otherworldly’, ‘alien’, ‘deep, dark and dreamlike’ qualities<sup>17</sup>. Caught between land and water, and between reality and dream, it has the liminality of the uncanny (Royle 2003: 2), and it is certainly not a garden.

In the series’ opening sequence it is the landscape’s vastness, its stillness and silence, and its unreadability that we feel. The cycling Tui is a tiny figure in the frame, moving horizontally across as if caught between land and water. The editing is fractured, disorienting, cutting between shots that track Tui’s ride and unmotivated views across the landscape itself. Abruptly we are very close, experiencing the sound and texture of leaves and branches as she kneels to discard bike and jacket. Then once more she is tiny, only head and shoulders

visible above the dark water of the lake, before, finally, there is the kind of impossible, 'witness' shot described by cinematographer Dryburgh: Tui's body, rigid, fists clenched, suspended underwater.

Fig. 3: The 'impossible' shot

This sense of vastness and unreadability – of a meaning always beyond our grasp – continues throughout the series. Images of the landscape do not serve as establishing shots, or become the 'narrative space' of action and plot described by Stephen Heath (1981). Instead they interrupt the narrative, slowing and unsettling it. In the repeated shots of cars travelling along the laketop road they are mere specks, squeezed into a corner of the frame. Their movement, whatever its narrative urgency, is insignificant against the immensity that surrounds them. The mist that merges sky, mountains and water similarly overwhelms those who paddle across the lake. When Robin calls out for Tui at the lake's edge, her voice fades against the wind and, as our viewpoint shifts, she becomes a tiny figure lost between water and shore. We see both Robin and Tui gaze out across lake and mountains and we share their view; but the landscape remains closed, refusing the dominance – the ability to read, to penetrate - that perspective usually gives to the viewer<sup>18</sup>. As Robin extends her search, the helicopter shots reveal nothing other than the face of the landscape itself.

Upon this vastness and unreadability, Laketop's men impose meanings and machines. It is Matt's desire that turns the lakeside into 'Paradise': a garden he

will own, one he can't get lost in, which can enclose his mother's grave - but one that his stories suggest is already corrupted by a history of familial murder. It is the helicopter pilot who labels the camp's naked woman 'Eve'. Matt's speedboat churns up the lake and kills Bob Platt; his men search the mountains for Tui with rifles, motorbikes, and helicopters. It is a mindless and pointless violation: Platt's death is chillingly absurd; the motorbikes overturn on the mountain slopes; the hunters' pursuit produces only Jamie's death. The landscape remains impervious, refusing to be owned or mastered.

The women of Paradise, in contrast, are, in Campion's words, 'in love with the landscape'<sup>19</sup>. Their camp is temporary, provisional – even the electric guitar of Melissa runs on a makeshift system that we see being dismantled at the end of the series. They do not 'play house', as GJ puts it, or make gardens, but live in and with the water. Of *The Piano* Campion said that it was the 'underwater look' of the bush, and its identification with a 'dark, inner world' of the 'subconscious', that she sought to capture in her images (1993: 139). Here as in the earlier film, we do, briefly, see 'underwater', first as the camera shows us Tui's oddly suspended body, and then when Robin abandons her investigative gaze *at* the mountains and instead walks *into* the water. As she echoes Tui's earlier actions, the underwater shot that we see is that of Tui's suspended body, before the two become once more distinct and we see through Robin's eyes a vision of Tui disappearing beneath the surface of the lake. If the lake causes men's deaths (Bob Platt, Robin's father), for women it is a space of life - 'Water's come out me', says Tui as she begins to give birth – but also of those 'dark, inner' depths of which Campion spoke.

## **Feminist nostalgia?**

I can feel my lost child surfacing within me, forgiving me, rising from the lake where it has been prisoned for so long ... (Atwood 1979: 155-6)

Margaret Atwood's early novel, *Surfacing*, like *Top of the Lake*, is a narrative that draws on the myth of Proserpine and Demeter. Like Robin, Atwood's narrator returns as a young woman to the lakeside where she spent her childhood. Like Robin's, her father drowned in the lake. Like Robin, the narrator has been pregnant with an unwanted child, and is now in a sexual relationship with a man who can be trusted only to the extent that he is 'half-formed': a marginal figure in the social structures (capitalist, patriarchal) that the two have, temporarily, left. In returning to the lake, she must shed the self (or 'social reality', as Campion terms it<sup>20</sup>) that she has constructed, immerse herself in the lake, and re-find the truth of her body. Finally, finding her way back from this dark 'country beneath the earth'<sup>21</sup>, she will be able to re-connect not only with her lost child – whose abortion she has denied to herself as well as to others - but also with the mother from whom she has been estranged.

It is a narrative which, like many of Atwood's, challenges the mythic construction of the hero as male. Its pattern of descent and return is undertaken not by the archetypal male hero of the 'monomyth'<sup>22</sup> but by a very different, female protagonist. Like *The Piano*, Campion's earlier story of maternal rebirth, however, it is not primarily a story about the mother-daughter relationship, but about the possibilities for a different kind of heterosexual relationship based on

bodily trust. Like Ada, Atwood's narrator finally refuses death by drowning, returning from the wilderness to place a tentative trust in a man who is inarticulate, 'physical', 'undefined' (Atwood 1979: 51, 155). Atwood's, too, is a story told from the perspective of the daughter: it is about Proserpine's journey, not Demeter's angry quest. It is, finally, the kind of 'text of memory' about which Jacobus is uneasy. 'Impossible to be like my mother', says the narrator (ibid.: 46), but her final acceptance of loss also encompasses a utopian vision of 'the miraculous double woman' (ibid.: 171) who is both her mother and herself.

The conclusion of *Top of the Lake* is less comforting. An aerial view of the women's camp echoes that which introduced the camp to us, though now the mountains are in shadow and the containers drawn into a tight defensive circle. We see GJ finish packing and leave, a bizarre vision as she strides away into the empty landscape pulling a wheeled suitcase. The women of the camp are passive; Robin stands rocking Tui's baby; only Tui runs to stop her. GJ tells Tui to listen to her 'real teacher', the baby, and turns away. Unlike in Atwood's novel, there is no resolution here. Johnno is absent from these final scenes, and there is no shared understanding between Robin and Tui; when Tui turns to face the camera in the penultimate shot she is as wary and unreadable as ever; in the final shot she turns away. The director, it seems, has gone, the narrative has ended, and it is the sense of space, and uncertain spatial relationships, with which we are left.

*Top of the Lake*, then, mobilises its anti-Oedipal myths rather differently. Campion's series reminds us not only of what Freud's paradigmatic story of the subject's development represses but also of its inadequacies. The series'



patriarchs (its Bluebeards) are socially powerful but absurd, their 'master narrative' persistently undermined. For this story's female protagonist, in her doubled role as both Proserpine and Demeter, it is childhood rape not fear of castration and the maternal body that is foundational for subjecthood. In its play with genre the series follows generic demands for action and narrative progression but repeatedly interrupts them, suspending time and returning us to the irreducibility of space. Neither garden nor landscape can be made to stand for the maternal body, as *Heim* or *unheimlichkeit*; the first is a product of male fantasy, and the second opens onto the spatial unknown, dislocating realist progression and resisting moves to make it function *for* narrative.

But if Campion's re-working of the detective narrative offers us in place of an Oedipal journey a feminist quest for a lost maternal relationship, it also suggests its impossibility. Robin can neither repair her relationship with her own mother nor return to Tui the 'right to innocence' that she wants for her own absent daughter. She cannot be Tui's avenging mother: Tui gives birth alone and it is she who kills the patriarch Matt<sup>23</sup>. There is no 'miraculous double woman' and the self remains split. The quest for origins, as for 'Paradise', remains illusory. 'The mother is always lost', writes Jacobus (1987: 137), and in its double sense this is true of Campion's series. But it is also the case that *Top of the Lake* is a series in which relations between mothers and daughters, and women as a community, however fragile and imperfect, define both narrative and space. Driven by a feminist desire which is, inevitably, unsatisfied, it is feminist nostalgia in the sense in which Jacobus defines it: looking back 'not only to what feminism desires but to what it desires different, now' (ibid.: 138).

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<sup>1</sup> See in particular Angela Carter, 'The Bloody Chamber' (1995/1979), Margaret Atwood, 'Bluebeard's Egg' (1983), Cindy Sherman, *Fitcher's Bird* (1992).

<sup>2</sup> Estella Tincknell also discusses the relation of these two films to the Bluebeard myth, and to traditions of the gothic, in her own exploration of the 'hinterland of cultural referents' in Campion's films (2013: 7).

<sup>3</sup> From Ovid's version of the story in *Fasti* Book IV, trans. Boyle. Accessed at: <http://www.theoi.com/Khthonios/HaidesPersephone2.html>

<sup>4</sup> Jacobus cites Adrienne Rich (1976) and Phyllis Chesler (1973). Marianne Hirsch has also seen the myth as 'an alternative to Oedipal narratives', arguing that, unlike the Oedipus story, the tale 'is told from the perspective of a bereaved Demeter, searching for her daughter, mourning her departure, and effecting her return through her own divine power. A breech caused by rape and death is undone by the mother's power to fulfill a mutual desire for connection' (1989: 5).

<sup>5</sup> Amber Jacobs (2007) makes a similar argument, this time in relation to Irigaray's use of the myth as a place where 'traces' of 'a powerful and benign mother-daughter relationship' can be found and reclaimed. Myth, comments Jacobs, 'should not be used for the purpose of looking back to an imaginary and utopian golden age' but 'as a way of creating a future that does not yet exist' (2007: 181).

<sup>6</sup> See Mellor (2013), Stuever (2013), and Hanna (2013).

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<sup>7</sup> His search for his missing daughter is also a version of the classic Western wilderness quest, exemplified in Ford's *The Searchers* (1956), in which the quest is to avenge the rape and murder of daughters, but the film's preoccupation is with white masculine selfhood and its code of values.

<sup>8</sup> Mary Ann Doane uses Freud's account of the female version of this fantasy, in which the fantasy is desexualized, to explain the masochistic construction of the female spectatorial position in the 'woman's film' (Doane 1987: 16-19). Freud, however, is far more concerned with the male version. See Freud 1979, pp. 159-93.

<sup>9</sup> He notably provides no evidence for this assertion.

<sup>10</sup> Speaking of *In the Cut*, Campion talked of Frannie working 'her way towards a stripped-down truthful relationship' with the detective, Molloy because 'I think in this story, sex and the body are where truth lies' (quoted in McHugh 2007: 160).

<sup>11</sup> The comment comes from producer Philippa Campbell in an interview for the BBC DVD release.

<sup>12</sup> Gérard Genette divides storytelling into 'narration and description', the former concerned with 'pure processes', and the 'temporal, dramatic aspect of the narrative', the latter serving to 'suspend the course of time and to contribute to spreading the narrative in space' (1982: 136). It is a division which he argues is inherently unequal. Literature is a temporal (and interior/masculine) art, so that description is 'quite naturally' narrative's 'ever-necessary, ever-submissive, never-emancipated slave' (ibid.: 134).

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<sup>13</sup> The quote is from Holly Hunter, who likens GJ to Campion in an interview for the BBC DVD release.

<sup>14</sup> In 'And the One Doesn't Stir without the Other' (1981) Irigaray writes of the destructive nature of a mother-daughter relationship that is too close. The solution, she argues, lies in the development of a specifically maternal subjectivity (Irigaray 1993a), one that in later works she argues is developed in relation to an equally specific male subjectivity (Irigaray 1993b, 2001).

<sup>15</sup> GJ is of course played by Holly Hunter, who played Ada in the earlier film. Robin was originally to have been played by Anna Paquin, who played Ada's daughter Flora in *The Piano*.

<sup>16</sup> For the female spectator of mainstream cinema, writes Doane, 'there is a certain over-presence of the image – she *is* the image' (1991: 22).

<sup>17</sup> See Bianco 2013, Mellor 2013, Hanna 2013.

<sup>18</sup> Rebecca Solnit describes the conventional landscape shot as 'what one might see in a sweeping look: a foreground, middle ground, a background, and a horizon neither too high nor too low'. These elements, she argues, 'orient the viewer and make the image a space that can be entered' (2003: 79). W. J. T. Mitchell (2002) similarly links landscape - both the visual representation of natural space and the space thus represented - with ideologies of imperial conquest.

<sup>19</sup> Interviewed for the BBC DVD release.

<sup>20</sup> Interviewed for the BBC DVD release, she said: 'This thing called social reality is actually ... just a mental construct, and for you to really accept that it's a mental construct you have to really come to the end of the line.'

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<sup>21</sup> The phrase is from Atwood's poem 'Procedures for Underground' (1970), which also draws on the Proserpine/Demeter myth.

<sup>22</sup> The term is that of Joseph Campbell, who describes the archetypal (always male) hero as journeying into 'the kingdom of the dark', a space of 'unfamiliar yet strangely intimate forces'. Undergoing a 'supreme ordeal' to gain his reward, he returns to 'restore the world' (Campbell 1993: 245-6) The comparison might equally, however, be with Oedipus.

<sup>23</sup> In taking on the role of the maternal investigator/avenger, Robin also displaces Tui's own mother from the narrative – she appears only in the first episode.

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