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AMÁNDIO REIS

«The Hundred-Thousandth Part of What Exists», or,
Representing Maupassant’s Horla in Visual Media

0. The Horla’s adaptive cycle

Since Lettre d’un Fou (1885), a short story written by Guy de Maupassant, the still-growing Horla mythography has spawned two re-writings by the author himself (the short story Le Horla, in 1886, and a longer novella with the same title in the following year), and has been the inspiration for: 1) a number of literary works, such as Ambrose Bierce’s The Damned Thing, in 1893; H.P. Lovecraft’s The Call of Cthulhu, in 1928; and Manly Wade Wellman’s The Theatre Upstairs, in 1936, among others; 2) at least two surviving radio dramas (episode 31 of the second season of Inner Sanctum Mystery, broadcast on August 1, 1943; and episode 3 of the 1947 season of the Mystery in the Air series, narrated by Peter Lorre); 3) a loose film adaptation, Diary of a Madman, directed by Reginald Le Borg and brought to the big screen in 1963; and several short films (including Jean-Daniel Pollet’s Le Horla, premiered in 1966); 4) a progressive rock album by Canadian band The Box, released in 2009 and adequately entitled D’Après Le

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2 Blue Network aired a previous episode in this series, adapting the same source material and starring Boris Karloff, which was broadcast on May 4, 1941, and has since been lost.
1. Diary of a Madman and The Horla, the graphic novel

Le Borg’s and Sorel’s works will be my central objects of study, not only for providing two relevant examples of the appropriation of Maupassant’s fiction into popular culture in different times and places – namely, in the context of American studio horror from the 1950s and 1960s, epitomized in Roger Corman’s work as a film director, and within contemporary French graphic fiction - but, moreover, for doing so through media and art forms that imply having to directly address the issue, naturally absent from the literary and audio versions of the story, of representing (or not representing) the “Invisible Being” in a visible form. How can these two highly codified genres, both pertaining to visual and popular art forms that target specific audiences typically associated with mass culture and entertainment, effectively formulate and bring into question The Horla’s main theme and the philosophical inquiry that is embedded in it – that which Joan C. Keller called “the “other side” of the positivist coin: a nagging disquietude about the invisible, intangible dimension of reality that remains inaccessible to empirical investigation.”

This is the question I will address in the next few pages.

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2 The associations with Corman and Edgar Allan Poe, always via Vincent Price, seem to be a given fact about the film, emerging spontaneously in the interview in which Le Borg admitted it was possible for Diary of a Madman to have been “inspired by the success of the “Poe series” directed by Corman for AIP” (American International Pictures) – (in T. Weaver, J. Bohanac, Reginald Le Borg, “Ecran Fantastique,” 87, December 1987, pp. 56-63, p. 61), and in the introduction to the only monograph on the director’s life and work, where Wheatheriston Dixon compares Price’s “unusually restrained performance” in Diary of a Madman to his “over the top” work in The Pit and the Pendulum or The Fall of the House of Usher, both made at roughly the same time for director Roger Corman – (in W. W. Dixon, The Films of Reginald Le Borg: Interviews, Essays and Filmography, Metuchen, NJ, The Scarecrow Press, 1992, p. 36).

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1.1. Cats and Birds

In fact, Guillaume Sorel was asked a similar question to the one posed by Keller in an interview following the publication of his album: «How to turn transparency into images?». He replied that the only way of doing this in a text such as The Horla, with no actual «events» and «very little action», was by playing with «characters and framings» in order to find the «scenic tricks that can make the characters speak when they are alone.» Not by chance, both adaptations I propose to analyze found a way of doing this by the strategic use of pets and other animals as vulnerable counterparts of the tragic hero, whose mute presence does indeed make him speak in a verbal as well as in a symbolic sense.

Materializing the allegory of the bird breaking his neck on the windowpanes – like the narrator, deceived by his human eyes that fail to «make out» transparent objects – the second page of Sorel’s graphic novel also introduces a male cat, owned by the protagonist, whose «rich diet» resulted in the loss of «all instinct.»

As a projection of Maupassant’s Darwinian semantics, both the cat and the bird are illustrative of the protagonist’s status in the story, of his sensorial and cognitive capacities – or lack thereof – and of his positioning in structures of power and hierarchy. When considering the unmatched superiority of the Horla, the two animals become the equals of the protagonist, and, speaking in general terms, the equals of Man in the animal kingdom.

On one hand, the stunned bird is a metaphorical representation of the protagonist’s deceptive apprehension of the world. Its unawareness of the glass windowpane anticipates and mimics...
the man’s unawareness of the Horla and of all the mysteries it carries with it; and so the bird’s introductory example may be taken not only as a general lesson on the limits of perception, but, more specifically, as Andrea Schincariol put it referring to the arrival of the Horla, «as the sign of an anomaly within the visible, as the symbol of the emergence of the unseen [invis] at the heart of the visible».11 In addition, Sorel’s talent for synthesis is apparent when the hero confronts the bird with the same mutually exclusive alternatives he himself will be faced with: to break the invisible wall or to be killed by it. The bird’s fate is, of course, happier than his.

On the other hand, the lazy cat is undoubtedly a representative, almost a caricature – completely absent from the novella – of the tamed animal whose senses have been dulled by domestic life, much like his owner’s. But this is also Sorel’s interpretation of the «animal dompté»,12 a relatively productive topos in Maupassant’s text, which, according to Brewster E. Fitz, lies at the heart of a «master/slave relationship in the story».13 What we see in the graphic novel is that, if the feline is at first dominated by the human, or at least content with living under his influence, it will rapidly stand for the latter in his subjugation to the Horla. As a matter of fact, the cat prefigures his master inasmuch as it is the first to sense the invisible being, under the form of a blue shadow that turns him aggressive and makes him run away, never to return to the house, after being accused by the owner of mistaking Brazilians for extra-terrestrials. Ironically, one of the character’s later theories will be that the Horla may indeed have come from Brazil.

Also alluding to Maupassant’s doubling processes at the same time as innovating from them, Le Borg (who shot a script written

by Richard L. Kent) shows us magistrate Simon Cordier (Vincent Price) happily chatting to Kiki, his pet canary. Kiki’s captivity is no doubt a foreshadowing of the confinement in which the magistrate will find himself after the Horla traps him in his own house, confining all his movements. In fact, the sudden opening and shutting of windows that marks the creature’s violent invasion of the private realm underlines a feeling of inescapability and a claustrophobic effect already fundamental in Maupassant,14 turning the mansion into a large-scale cage.

But the bird’s presence plays a more sophisticated role. Operating as a turning point in the narrative of possession that dominates the film, it is simultaneously retrospective and prospective, taking part in two decisive occasions. On her first scene, Kiki makes Cordier show himself as an affable man, capable of anything but the utmost consideration for his servants and real tenderness and care toward his pet bird. Only the unexpected and thoroughly unexplainable reappearance of a portrait of his deceased wife and son – which had hitherto been kept in the attic – seems to upset Cordier’s mood, hinting at a traumatic past that has not been overcome. To complete the mise en scène, the magistrate’s shadow is cast on the wall, between him and the portrait, in a symbolic composition meant to denounce the intervention of the Horla, his diaphanous double, in the whole situation.

On her second (and final) scene, Kiki is the victim of Cordier’s first possession by the Horla, who succeeds in making the magistrate choke the defenseless bird while in a state of deep trance. The canary’s pointless death at the hands of her unconscious owner is a demonstration of the devilish cruelty that qualifies this version of the being as opposed to Maupassant’s and Sorel’s, whose cosmic impartiality prevents them from dwelling into questions of right and wrong. Here the Horla is used not only to stress a biological and a cognitive flaw in men, but above all a

11 A. SCHINCARIO, «Le Horla» et l’imaginaire du portrait composite, «Études françaises», vol. 49, no. 3, 2013, p. 87-102, p. 102, I chose to emphasize the participle «invis» in an attempt to make it closer to the French neologism «invis».
14 «I have never read anything that resembles what has been going on in my house. If only I could leave it, if only I could go out, flee and not come back, I would be saved. But I cannot», in G. DE MAUPASSANT, The Horla, p. 43 (my emphasis).
moral one. Cordier’s gratuitous action confirms his first misdeed in the film, although it was an unintended one: the accidental killing, in an act of self-defense, of Louis Girot, himself accused of homicide and waiting for trial. The vestige of guilt the magistrate inevitably feels is then used by the Horla as a crach from where it could pass on to him from the murderer’s dead body. Therefore, the epidemic of madness associated with the Horla in the other works appears in this case in the shape of a contagious murderous impulse. But, in fact, the whole episode is a double-sided mirror at the center of the film. In crushing Kiki with his bare hands, Cordier replicates Girot’s attempt to strangle him, which makes the animal his correspondent and him – the one who declares the death sentence – the victim and the cold-blooded master, at the same time as he prepares for his last sin: the killing of Odette, his adulterous lover whom he wrongfully took for a respectable lady, in a stabbing scene clearly reminiscent of Alfred Hitchcock’s Psycho.

In short, Le Borg’s film incorporates into the basic structure of The Horla a number of literary motifs co-opted from works such as Robert Louis Stevenson’s Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, published in the same year as Maupassant’s short story. Being under the control of the «new being» results in the emergence of a latent persona, a dark Doppelgänger who feeds on the individual’s hurtful memories, fears and guilt, turning him into an agent of evil in an indefinite (and puritanical) sense. However, a long cinematographic tradition related to preternatural possession and mind control is also being recaptured here, as I will try to demonstrate next.

1.2. Trouble Sleeping

Although Sattar asserted that «Maupassant’s choice of name for Doctor Parent» – a physician who experimented with hypnotism and suggestion, and the husband of one of the dinner guests at Madame Sablé’s – was «worthy of consideration» as an intertextual token for also being the last name of the protagonist of ‘Un fou!’ (1884), an embryonic version of The Horla, I believe there is yet another layer of meaning she failed to recognize. In doubling «the image of the Horla», sharing with it the power to subjugate the human will96 (as Sattar pertinently put it), Doctor Parent is also attesting an ontological proximity with the Being, of whom he is a ‘relative’, to underline one of his name’s common meanings in French: parent. To support this theory, one should notice how the author’s play with notions of parentage along the novella is masterfully codified in this passage, because after showing the haunted protagonist and his mesmerized cousin as a reflection of Doctor Parent and his supernatural counterpart, he makes the physician refer to Mme Sablé not as the narrator’s «cousine» – as he himself addresses her every time97 – but as his «parente»98, rendering the correspondence between the four of them perfectly clear and reinforcing the (para-)psychological dimension one could associate with the invisible being: the Horla and his Parent, the narrator and his parente.

One of Diary of a Madman’s most evident deviations from Maupassant’s text, in what actually seems to be a reprise of Doctor Parent’s coalition with the being, is the fact that the latter was made eloquent, using the voice to exert its powers of suggestion, much like a hypnotist, over its hosts (a term that captures its parasitical nature). Le Borg was very displeased with the voice attributed to the creature, preferring a previous «distorted» version of it that was rejected by one of the producers who insisted the Horla should speak «like everyone else».99 As much as I tend to agree with the director in that a deformed voice would certainly offer a more plausible rendition of the Horla’s otherworldly nature, the one that stayed is uncannily similar to

95 A. Sattar, Certain Madness, p. 234-235.
96 Id. Ibid, p. 226.
97 See G. De MAU Pas sand, Le Horla, pp. 922-930.
98 Id. Ibid, p. 925.
99 T. WEAVER, J. BRUNAS, Reginald Le Borg, p. 62. The director also mentions this subject in his interview with Wheeler Winston Dixon, showing true discontent, in The Films of Reginald Le Borg, p. 111.
Vincent Price’s, although clearly different from it, which makes it an especially adequate audio manifestation of the being as his ‘double’.

It has been noted that conceiving the Horla, in literary terms, was no small task for Maupassant and for his fictional author. In this regard, Katherine Kiernan formulated and tried to answer two essential questions related to writing and creation, and reading and perception: «How to register that strange being in the personal diary? How to distinguish it from the self if it is invisible?». A similar interrogation is also pertinent considering Le Borg’s film, which does not have to tackle the problem of registering the strange being in words, nor of showing it through images, since it remains invisible, but faces a different challenge: to represent the invisible being through cinematic means.

Endowing the creature with speech and recurring to voice over is an effective way of achieving this. In fact, the trick is enabled by cinema’s very definition, since the arrival of sound, as an audio-visual art form. Three years later, the technique would be used to a large extent by Jean-Daniel Pollet in Le Horla, in which significant parts of Maupassant’s text are read aloud, taped in a recorder and replayed in voice over.

However, and to cite Michel Chion, the Horla’s ‘acoustic presence» as a voice emanating from an indiscernible source is combined in Le Borg’s film with another visible evidence: a green light around Cordier’s eyes whenever he is under the influence of the invisible being. Interestingly enough, different kinds of chromatic markings of the presence of the Horla are a common feature among the three works I am discussing here. Whereas in Pollet’s film blue backgrounds are contaminated by a yellow ‘infectious’ pigment that appears on a doorknob and spreads as the being’s power over the protagonist (Laurent Terzieff) grows, Sorel did the opposite in his graphic novel, indicating the surreptitious occupation of the hero’s house and body by means of a bluish shadow that is in deep contrast with the warm colors of the surroundings.

Putting aside the atmospheric effect the three distinct uses of color aim to produce, the light emanating from the magistrate’s eyes in Le Borg’s film stresses the fact that not only his will but also his body has been possessed and is being directed by the Horla. Like Cesare, Dr. Caligari’s helpless somnambulist in Robert Wiene’s film of 1920, Cordier is nothing but an automaton under the «Dreadful Being»’s orders.

The violation of the mind and the body, particularly during sleep, is a very important aspect of Maupassant’s novella to which many critics have paid due attention. But in his graphic novel Sorel faced this subject with an interesting specification; he gave the hero’s recurring nightmare the distinctive figure of a life-sucking incubus.

Whether Sorel is offering Maupassant’s story a psycho-sexual overtone, suggesting us to interpret the protagonist’s case as an «erotic nightmare complex» or otherwise, both his incubus and LeBorg’s invisible mind controller come together in a third creature, not explicitly referred to in any of their works but whose ghostly presence we cannot ignore: the vampire. Although this may look like a hastened synthesis of the distinct situations presented in the film and in the graphic novel, the being’s vampiric nature, as Nathan Snaaza effectively argued, was already described as such by Maupassant, albeit in a surreptitious way.

In the realm of artistic representations, the pairing of the vampire and the incubus is not unprecedented nor uncommon. In 1922, to make another comparison with German Expressionist

20 For a detailed study on the implications of Pollet’s work with the concepts of montage and cinematic dispositif in his adaptation of the novella, see A. Reis, «Como um sonho na praia: outra forma de escrever (o Horla)», in C. Rowland, T. Conley (edited by), Falso Movimento: ensaios sobre escrita e cinema, Lisboa, Cotorria, 2012, pp. 177-145.
cinema, F.W. Murnau portrayed Count Orlok precisely as such a hybrid creature. Additionally, and bringing my hypothesis back to Le Borg’s film, he also conceived the vampire, in figural terms, as a puppeteer pulling the strings on his victims with his elongated claws, in a gripping illustration of Count Dracula’s telepathic abilities displayed in Bram Stoker’s novel, which shows that these two entities (the hypnotist and the incubus) may in fact coalesce in our collective imagination.

The convergent perspective I chose to adopt could help to understand one of Diary of a Madman’s last and most unexpected scenes, in which Cordier is temporarily set free of the Horla by simply looking at the reflection of a crucifix on the knife with which he is about to commit another murder. Out of place as it may seem, Cordier’s rushed exorcism points directly to vampire-related imagery and stake-and-cross rituals, just like Sorel’s breath-sucking incubus – one step further from Maupassant’s nightmarish strangler26 – seems to recapture vampirism as “part of a constellation of fears of human edibility.”27 And though it may not be immediately evident in Maupassant’s text, the fact that the Horla consumes nothing but water and milk (baffling critics to this day) may not only be because these are the most ethereal of liquid substances, but because they are physiological ones, and, to a certain degree, they stand for transubstantiation. Water is of course a natural, not a physiological, element, but the watering down of the body is actually a consequence of the parasitical presence of the Horla in the novella,28 which grounds this interpretation.

26 The correspondent episode in the novella reads as the experience of a lucid dream: “I sleep – for a long time – two or three hours – then a dream – no – a nightmare grips me. I am fully aware that I am lying down and sleeping... I feel it and I know it... and I also feel that someone is approaching me, looking at me, feeling me, is climbing into my bed, kneeling on my chest, taking my neck in his hands and squeezing... squeezing... with all his strength, to strangle me, G. De MAUPASSANT, The Horla, p. 5.


28 “When one is stricken with certain illnesses, all the resources of the physical being seem to be destroyed, all energies annihilated, all muscles limp. The bones seem to have become soft as flesh, and the flesh liquid as water”, G. De MAUPASSANT, The Horla, p. 26.


30 G. De MAUPASSANT, The Horla, p. 37.

2. Hors là: writing the way out

In this final section I should like to focus on two infidelities in the adaptations made by Sorel and Le Borg that are in my view extremely fruitful in a comparative reading of the three objects here in question. The first infidelity has to do with the actual, visible figure Sorel offered the Horla. And to complement my previous analysis of the relation of said figure with the incubus it is necessary to look at the way the artist represented the famous mirror scene in the novella, which, as Philip G. Hadlock remarked, encapsulates «the narrator’s scopic engagement with his own body».29 But instead of an empty mirror on which the man’s reflection, like the vampire’s, disappears under the being’s «opaque transparency»,30 like in Maupassant’s description, what we see is a clear superimposition of their two faces that seems to recall nineteenth-century spirit photography.

The Horla’s affirmative visuality is what enables the individual to confront himself. Along this series of panels, he is not not seeing the Horla or himself; but, on the contrary, he is actually looking at his face conjoined with the Horla’s, who seems to be on the other side of the mirror, not blocking his reflection but propelling it, allowing him to address the being and himself in the third person: «I see you», which also means «I see myself». The being’s specular interference literally forced him to face himself. This could also mean that he is made to see the possible inner cause of his angst, in a detail that takes us back to the psychosexual interpretation of the story. In the first panel on this page of the graphic novel there is a small-sized female figure over the mantelpiece, in front of the mirror; but on the sixth panel the same sculpture is shown in a much closer view, in an obviously sexual pose that could signify both pleasure or distress, and now with the same proportions as the protagonist, who is looking beside her with a terrified gaze. It is not clear if Sorel is suggesting.
the man is impotent, or an erotophobe, or a traumatized widower, or that he suffers from any other condition of the same spectrum. What is clear is that his skillful treatment of proportion applied to the statue echoes an investment in notions of gradation and scale, and a conscious will to look at the same things differently, to expand human perception beyond the fraction of the universe our sensory organs allow us to perceive — which, according to the French writer, is not even "the one hundred-thousandth part of what exists" — that comes from Maupassant and was also retrieved in the opening of Le Borg's film as a quote from The Horla shown in two title cards that, once again, partakes in the text's pervasive eating metaphor:

... the vulture has eaten the pigeon; the wolf has eaten the lamb; the lion has devoured the sharp-tongued buffalo; man has killed the lion with an arrow, with a spear, with gunpowder; but the "Horla" will make of man what man has made of the horse and of the ox; His chattel, His slave, and His food, by the mere power of his will. Woe to us!8

If the first infidelity had an iconic nature, the second infidelity, to which I now turn, has a narrative configuration.

Presenting it as a conflation of multiple texts, a title card in the opening credits of Le Borg's film reads "Based on Stories by Guy de Maupassant". This makes it, unlike Sorel's work, a composite adaptation of the Letter from a Madman and the diary that gives shape to The Horla. But the title Kent chose for his script of Diary of a Madman also plays with a coincidence of terms that draws a connection with Nikolai Gogol's well-known short story, Diary of a Madman, published fifty years before Maupassant's writings but equally dealing with "extraordinary" events9 in the life of a 'madman-narrator' confronted with his climbing insanity. In the vein of Maupassant's latest version of The Horla, Gogol's text follows a diary-entry format while dispensing with any kind of narrative framing. In essence, both texts disrupt, for their indeterminacy and subjective focalization, the so-called "affirmation of reality" in nineteenth-century fiction, reliant on the seffet de cadre and in stereoscopic presentation.10

In keeping with the realist precept, Kent materialized the protagonist's written text in his script, fabricating a narrative frame in which, after Cordier's funeral, a group of characters sit together to read his diary. This document is however preceded by a note that makes all of them, as well as the spectator, enter in direct communication with the dead. Price's acousmatic voice, coming from outside the diegesis — from an "hors-texte"11 that produces the text and enables the writer's redemption — reads us the following note: "I speak to you from the grave. In the sanctuary of my coffin I can stake certain facts, which I could not do while I was alive...". Price's post mortem message is what activates the flashback that takes us to the beginning, and from then on the film is at the same time the visual representation of a reading scene and the illustration of a story that is being told by a cinematic revenant, in a compelling exercise of hypotyposis.

In a different, phenomenological analysis, it would be possible to further explore the parallel between Cordier's madness, triggered by the mind-controlling Horla, and the viewers' hallucination of the film, conducted by the narrator's haunting voice. But, to conclude more briefly, I would like to remark that while in Le Borg's and Kent's rendition of the story the superior being is represented in a discursive dialectic (as two overlapping voices), in Sorel's graphic work it takes the shape

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8 G. De Maupassant, The Horla, pp. 9, 33.
9 In Mandell's translation, the original text reads: "Now the vulture has eaten the dove, the wolf has eaten the lamb; the lion has devoured the sharp-tongued buffalo; man has killed the lion with the arrow, with the sword, with powder; but the Horla will make man into what we made the horse and the steer: his thing, his servant and his food, by the simple power of his will. Our woe is upon us!" in G. De Maupassant, The Horla, p. 33.
of a figural dialectic (as two overlapping faces). Considering their effect on our own reading of the original story, both of these creative appropriations can be important hermeneutic keys to Maupassant.