

SPIDERS, WEREWOLVES AND BAD GIRLS: CHILDREN READING HORROR

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Johanna (Year 9) has watched Neil Jordan and Angela Carter's film, *The Company of Wolves*, as part of a Media Studies project. It's a course I teach, which I've taken over from the teacher who originally devised it. Its explicit aims are to teach about genre - specifically, horror, and the werewolf subgenre - and to explore the representation of women in horror, looking at classic Gothic horror as well as Carter and Jordan's intentionally feminist text. My questions in this article, about Johanna's act of viewing, or reading, are partly about the nature of response (a problematic term in itself, of course): what counts as response, and what counts as text; about the social context in which such response occurs (both the classroom, and outside); about gendered readings of film; about subjectivity; and about pleasure. I'll also touch on pedagogy, and teacher intervention - though briefly, as my main concern is to foreground the independence of students' readings.

As I explore these questions, I'm also searching for theoretical perspectives that will help. I expect to be something of a magpie. In particular, while semiotic and social semiotic theory helps to give a convincing account of the semiotic field of the film and of the social meanings into which this is transformed by the reader, there's also, it seems to me, a need to account for certain aspects of subjectivity, such as acts of identification, the nature of pleasure, and the interplay of conscious and unconscious engagements with the text. Here, psychoanalytic theory might be more productive. There are well-known difficulties in attempting to resolve cultural materialist perspectives with the traditionally transhistorical character of psychoanalytic theory; but I'll argue that some kind of synthesis, albeit provisional, is better than none.

Engaging with the film: brushing away the spiders

The evidence I have covers various stages of Johanna's engagement, response, production. There are some observations of her in the journal I wrote as the class watched the film; an interview with her and two friends she's working with; and her finished assignment. The assignment is to choose significant images from the film, 'grab' them with a video digitiser, and write about them, incorporating the digitised images into their desktop-published text.

While they watched, then, I observed, and wrote a journal. Boys' and girls' reactions fall into distinct patterns. They sit separately to watch. Boys are more likely to crack jokes, comment aloud, follow startled reactions at shock or suspense by laughing aloud, debunk the horror,

contest the modalities of the film, ridicule the special effects. They also check out the narrative (one boy asking questions throughout), mimic the voices of the actors, and share sweets. At certain key moments of horror during the werewolf transformation scenes, however, they are completely silent, wide-eyed, frowning with concentration.

The girls comment much less, laugh much less, grimace at the horror, frown when the narrative takes a complex turn, smile with appreciation. Some girls laugh when the boys laugh. One covers her face at the werewolf transformation. They whisper interpretations to each other - at the end, when the titles begin, they check interpretations and reactions, while the boys are silent. One girl, Laura, makes ironic `posh conductor` movements with her hand to accompany the Baroque music of the final title sequence. There are also some boys, and some girls, who fit less neatly into these rather stereotypical patterns. Johanna is one of them.

Clearly, the engagement with the text begins here: but I want to avoid the idea of a `response` - a process - which leads into the students` own `texts` - the finished products. Rather, I want to problematize the idea of both `response` and `text`, partly to avoid the kind of reductive, partial account described by Richard Johnson (1980) as 'the literary reduction':

Here the concern is primarily with cultural products of a particular kind, text-like products, nicely lying there, inertly awaiting analysis or appreciation. (248)

And partly because the insistence of social semiotic theory on the social and historical contingency of textual production and reception seems to me an urgent matter for the classroom. So, avoiding Johnson`s neat, text-like products, and bearing in mind the variety of semiotic codes described by social semiotics, I want to look for Johanna`s responsive `text` in all corners of the material context in which it is built.

Johanna and other students have approached *The Company of Wolves* through a group of related texts: *Red Riding Hood*, Angela Carter`s story, 'The Company of Wolves' from *The Bloody Chamber*, and other werewolf movies, including the hybrid horror movie/pop video that John Landis directed for Michael Jackson`s *Thriller*, and Terence Fisher`s *The Curse of the Werewolf*. So, already, the borders of the film text blur, and connect with these others, literary and film texts; as well as others Johanna has seen, and mentions later in interview and written work: *The Hand that Rocks the Cradle*; *Alien*; *Dracula*; *Terminator 2*. In certain senses, her particular work is as much about the metatext that is the genre, as about this specific film. And (not to render the teaching in the course too invisible!), the question of the representation of women in horror movies has already been raised and discussed in the classroom. So, already, discourses of the classroom - of textual study - have merged (or collided!) with discourses of popular understandings from beyond the classroom. These appear, so far, to be spoken texts; Johanna`s first engagement with the film, however, is

unspoken. It employs a semiotic of gesture, facial expression; and perhaps a reading of the film more visual than verbal.

My memory of Johanna is that she was one of the small number of girls who laughed with the boys, but 'appreciated' with the girls. I've only noted her response by name once, during a sequence when a mass of spiders falls from the church ceiling onto the bible of the central character, Rosaleen, and she fearlessly brushes them off (illustration 1). Several girls made 'Ugh!' exclamations. Johanna made brushing away movements with her hand, imitating Rosaleen; and smiled.

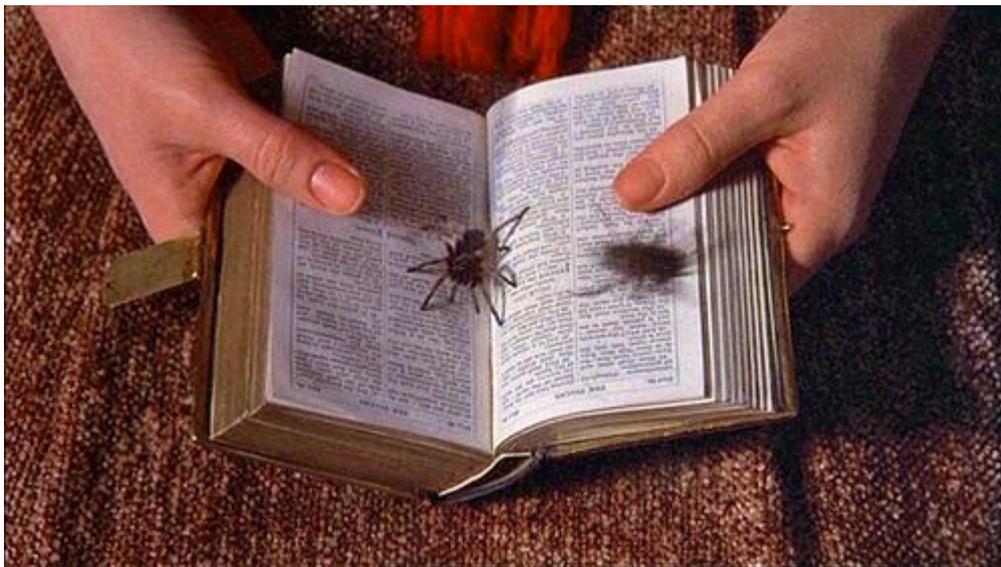


Figure 1: *The Company of Wolves* - spiders on Rosaleen's bible

What's happening here? Two things, it seems to me. She laughs with some of the boys at the sequences of spectacular horror; and the laughter seems to be an assertion of mastery - toughness for the boys - over the fear response, expressed through a laughter which seems to operate as a camouflage sign, disguising the more usual expressions of shock or fear (the 'ughs' and grimaces of some of the girls). It seems linked to the familiar disparaging remarks about the special effects, which appear to be a contestation of the modality of these sequences; but may actually be again a discourse of misinformation, concealing a reluctant assent to the modality of the episode. For boys, this kind of joky response is well-documented (eg, Canaan: 1990; Wood: 1993); for girls, less so.

The other thing is her brushing away movement. What kind of sign is this? It looked almost unconscious - she wasn't looking at anyone else, didn't seem to want to share this gestural echo of the screen movement; but rather was looking directly at the screen, smiling. It seemed to be a mirroring, a bodily expression of a kind of identification with the film text. With the character? Or with the brief shift in the paradigm of horror heroine which this

brushing away of the spiders represents? It's a shift that works against the affective structures of the genre: the fearless sweeping away of phobic myths prefigures the refusal of the girl to be afraid of the werewolf later in the film. If the fear response to horror is an identification with the fear of the victim, then this film invites, to some degree, a refusal of such fear.

This gesture, the brushing away of imaginary spiders, the smile at the screen, raises some interesting questions. I take it to be part of a set of texts - here a bodily text of gesture and expression - that form Johanna's remaking of the film. It's a drama, a role-play of the film character, a semiotic replay. It raises the question, as it seems almost unconscious, of the nature of the unconscious in the viewing of film. Psychoanalytic film theory spends a good deal of time on the puzzling two-way nature of the viewing of film - the viewer positioned by the camera's gaze, which creates the film; but also the gaze of the screen at the viewer. In some accounts, such as Laura Mulvey's well-known article (1975), this results in a profoundly pessimistic view of the helplessness of spectators, pinned to a point-of-view always structured as male. The deterministic effect this has on the representation of women and on women as spectators is refused by later feminist critiques, such as that of Teresa de Lauretis (1980), who associates it with effects of cultural domination intrinsic to the figures of Freudian/Lacanian thought. Christian Metz (1982) is criticized by de Lauretis for the same reasons; though his account is less negative. He explores the Lacanian image of the mirror in relation to the act of viewing, finding that the screen in some ways resembles the mirror which forces the first division of the self in Lacan's account; but is in other ways very different:

A strange mirror, then, very like that of childhood, and very different. Very like ... because during the showing we are, like the child, ... prey to the imaginary, the double, and are so paradoxically through a real perception. Very different, because this mirror returns us everything but ourselves, because we are wholly outside it, whereas the child is both in it and in front of it. (49)

What light does this throw on Johanna's small act of identification? She mirrors the character: a recognition of the likeness of self to the represented other, perhaps. We can only speculate on what's going on inside her head, on the basis of this bodily engagement with the text. Is it worth speculating on the conscious or unconscious nature of such a response? Such speculation makes a social semiotic reading difficult - we're no longer dealing with the relatively transparent signs of the fully conscious sign-maker; the Freudian unconscious raises the difficulty of a dimension apparently beyond the semiotic. Such a domain preoccupies Metz, in his comparison of film with dream. It's also a recurrent feature of critical commentary on horror literature and film, whose images and narratives, along with fantasy fiction in general, self-evidently connect with dreams and the repressed fears and desires of the unconscious. A dimension beyond the semiotic is also a feature of Paris school semiotics, in the form, for instance, of Barthes' 'third meaning' of the cinematic still (1978); and his punctum (1993) - moves to establish an ineffable form of apprehension beyond mundane signification.

Metz, on the other hand, attempts to bring the semiotic and the unconscious closer together. A main thrust of *The Imaginary Signifier* is to weaken the boundary between them (imagining Freud's 'censorship' as a leaky, fluid process rather than a solid barrier, for instance), to recognise the actions of the unconscious in conscious thought, and, with Lacan, to recognise the discursive nature of the unconscious, thereby pulling it into the realm of language, of the semiotic.

Similarly, Gunther Kress and Theo Van Leeuwen, in an article on Barthes' *punctum* (1994), reject the ineffable nature of this image, its attempt to move beyond the semiotic, arguing that such a move is mystificatory and elitist. Their proposal is to extend the realm of the semiotic ever further, bringing more material within its reach, a move of demystification, much more in tune with Barthes' earlier analysis of myth.

This all sounds a long way from the classroom; but it seems to me to raise some interesting questions. For instance, we would argue, presumably, that the ideal project of the classroom, and of Media Studies in particular, is to move from unconscious knowledge of and pleasure in media texts to more conscious, explicit kinds of knowledge. Johanna's movement, from the gesture of immediate engagement to final written assignment, shows something of this. But Metz's argument reminds us that this movement, while it may shift from broadly unconscious to broadly conscious engagement, retains aspects of both throughout. So we can look, in our reading of the gesture, and other first responses to the film, for all the complexity of full engagement, and perhaps a particularly visual kind of literacy, accepting, perhaps, Freud's idea of 'visual thinking' (1984), and his association of it with the preconscious. And we can look, in final product writing, such as Johanna's written piece on *The Company of Wolves*, not just for unambiguous conscious structures, but for slips, gaps, silences, the polysemy which, Metz argues, is the repressed, unconscious field of meaning that lies behind the conscious sign.

There are two further questions for the classroom. Social semiotics - which Kress and Van Leeuwen, in the same article, characterise as a theoretical wing of cultural studies - insists on the irreducibly social nature of the making of signs. It's this element that screen theorists in general, and Metz in particular, might miss in Johanna's brushing away of the spiders. In fact, critiques of Metz in the early eighties, such as those of Stephen Heath and Teresa de Lauretis (1980), point out the need to restore the social dimension of cinema, and a historical materialist perspective, missing from Metz's account. So Johanna's gesture needs to be read alongside her choosing to sit with the two girls who later become her partners in the task of interpreting the film; and against her later choices to focus on Rosaleen's role as rebel, bad girl; and against what Bourdieu (1984) would call her 'cultural capital' in this encounter - her knowledge of film, of the genre, and the structures of taste, choice and pleasure in which this is bound up. All of this has certain implications, clearly, for which texts we choose to work on in school, how we deal with them, and how we recognise, make room for, films children have watched outside school.

The second point is my response to that other signifier - the smile which accompanies her gesture. It seems reasonable to read this as a sign of pleasure - but of what kind? Her earlier laughter (at the horror sequences) signified something quite different, much more of a distancing of the text. I'll return to the question of pleasure later, in the context of her written work about the film.

Talking about the film: 'she's the villain, yeah!'

Later, I interview Johanna with Clare and Laura. They've decided, as a group, to do the question on the worksheet about the representation of women, each choosing one image from the film as a point of departure. Johanna has chosen an image from one of the subordinate narratives of the film, a story in which Rosaleen becomes narrator of the folk-tales for the first time, taking over the role from her grandmother. She tells her mother the story of a witch from the village who takes revenge on an aristocrat who has made her pregnant, as he's about to marry another woman from his own class. Johanna's first real contribution to the interview is to explain connections she's made between the Company of Wolves and other films:

AB Can you tell us the other ones you've written about?

J Um - Aliens - where Sigourney Weaver is a - she's the - sort of - heroine - and she has to - get rid of all the aliens.

The emergence of a paradigm of strong heroine is clear here; and, it seems to me, the connection with Johanna's brushing away of the spiders, sign of fearless heroine, is equally clear. This paradigm is fully, and fascinatingly, explored by Carol Clover in her brilliant study of horror films, *Men, Women and Chainsaws* (1993). She describes how the price paid by the girl survivor, in appropriating the traditionally male hero role, is to become sexually ambiguous herself. Clover lists, as evidence, the androgynous names of several of these 'Final Girls', of whom Sigourney Weaver's character - Ripley - is one (Figure 2).



Figure 2: Aliens - Ripley attacks the aliens

The three girls go on to describe *The Hand that Rocks the Cradle*, in which the main character assumes the role of a nanny to exact revenge on the woman who has indirectly caused her husband's death:

J And then she goes back to get revenge. Against the woman. And she plays a character - that she's sort of acting -

C - the (character she's acting -

J (it's her fault that her husband died. And - she went back - she went back to - take revenge - so she went and babysitted for - (for like - to find a new baby - and er -

C (she's like an imposter, and you don't know -

J - treated it like her own child, 'cos she's lost hers.

C She's like an imposter, and at the beginning she's like a stereotype - sort of - mother, kind of - and she's actually the person who's - evil, person [laughs]

AB So she's the villain as well, is she?

J She's the villain, yeah.

I'm interested, here, in Johanna's preoccupation with the imposter nanny. In fact, the film demonises her, and our sympathies are invited throughout with the innocent mother whose motherhood is usurped and life threatened by the revenge-obsessed Pelham (Rebecca de Mornay). It looks, from this interview, as though Johanna is reversing the sympathies the film invites, unsettling the allocation of blame ('it's her fault [the innocent mother's] that her husband died'), and emphasising the reason for her act of maternal usurpation ('- treated it like her own child, 'cos she's lost hers').

These brief responses seem to produce a particular variant of the horror-heroine paradigm that I've tried to raise earlier in the course. The new elements of Johanna's version seem to be a transformation of the heroine-as-victim into the heroine-as-hero (the character type described by Carol Clover (1993) as 'the Final Girl'); the revenge motif; and, related to revenge, the heroine-as-villain. Johanna, in fact, also seems to attribute a victim-function to the villain of *The Hand that Rocks the Cradle*, emphasising her lost husband and child. This complexity of female role in horror - the woman who can combine functions of hero, villain and monster, is perhaps most fully realised in Stephen King's *Carrie*, in Brian de Palma's film (1976). King himself (1993) remarks of her:

For me, *Carrie White* is a sadly misused teenager, an example of the sort of person whose spirit is so often broken for good in that pit of man- and woman- eaters that is your normal suburban high school. But she's also *Woman*, feeling her powers for the first time, and, like *Samson*, pulling down the temple on everyone in sight at the end of the book. (198)

Writing about the film: "women as the baddies"

These themes appear again in Johanna's final written assignment. The visual design of the page consists of five frames: four textframes and one picture frame; inside one large frame with a double border. Clearly, the picture frame, at the top left-hand of the page, is the element placed first in the syntagm of the page design. Johanna has chosen an image that foregrounds the witch, as the transformed guests destroy the wedding table in a carnivalesque inversion of the former social order: as gleeful disorder ensues, to the accompaniment of fairground music (previously it was Bach), and the servants stop playing and serving, and toast each other with their masters' wine, the witch looks on from Johanna's chosen frame, and laughs (Figure 3).



Figure 3: *The Company of Wolves* - The Witch at the wedding

The page design then becomes ambiguous: do we read from the left (the box below the picture); or from the top right (the box on the right of the picture)? The one on the right echoes the theme of the avenging heroine:

This is the scene where the witch is at the wedding party and she is pregnant from the groom. She has come back to seek revenge because he left her and what she does is disrupt the party. She then goes on to turn them all into wolves.

What she seems to be doing with the image is to use it to reconstruct, in brief and condensed terms, the narrative syntagm of this sequence: beginning with the present tense moment of the image (the witch is at the wedding party); moving to the past tense of the understood prior events, her motivation (She has come back to seek revenge because he left her); and moving to a present/future telling of the consequences (She then goes on to turn them all into wolves). It's necessary to remark, though, that in the course of this three-part narrative syntagm, the paradigm of the avenging heroine is signalled clearly in the assigning of motivation to the witch: `to seek revenge`, linking this narrative strategy with the expository passages that follow.

The next sentence appears to be a complete non-sequitur:

The wedding is very old fashioned and the costumes are great.

I'll return to it later, however.

The remaining text in this frame, signalled by the introductory 'I think...' as a discourse of explicit commentary or interpretation, develops the theme of the heroine who, like those mentioned by others in the group, is a transformation of the victim type; but who, as Johanna alone observes, is also a 'baddie':

I think this scene is showing women as the 'baddies' which you don't normally see in films because you usually see them as the weak one's and the scared one's because they are exploited so much.

Here, weakness and fear are opposed to being a baddie rather than to strength; though strength seems to be assumed; and is implied in the linking of this heroine with the protagonist of the film (and the narrator of this episode) - Rosaleen:

But it also shows Rosaleen as the heroine in the end, as she isn't scared and she tames the wolf and becomes a wolf herself.

Here, just as strength is implicit in the baddie-weakness opposition in the previous sentence, 'baddie' seems to be implied in the cluster of qualities implicitly opposed to 'scared'.

What does she mean by baddie? Johanna seems to be operating a kind of concept of 'admirable wickedness' - we sense that she considers both the witch and Rosaleen to be justified in their behaviour. She is constructing a heroine paradigm whose narrative function is to combine the role of heroine and villain in an exciting transgression of the conventional character types. The connection with the villain of *The Hand that Rocks the Cradle* is clear; and the revenge motif links the witch and the imposter nanny.

Her second box has a different expository intention: to take an overview of a number of related films; but in relation to the same explicit theme, in which the political principle of the equality of women is realised through narrative structures in which heroines are transformed not just into heroes, but into that particular narrative function of horror movies which is the threat on which the fears and pleasures of the narrative turn:

This film is very different from, for example 'Dracula' where the women are the victims and the man is the threat. Nowadays, women are begging [sic] to take more of a main role in

films as the threat themselves, to make men and women more equal. Two of these kind of films are 'Alien' and 'Terminator 2.' I have chosen this image because I think it's very important that women are treated as equals.

Threat is Johanna's word - an interesting word, because, like the admirable baddie figure she constructs, it's ambiguous in terms of the moral themes of the films. Unlike the word monster, or villain, which suggest intrinsic wickedness, threat derives its moral loading from whom it's directed at. So in *Alien*, it's a benign threat (Ripley's destruction of the monster); or is Johanna referring to the female monster of the sequel, which has attracted extensive commentary from feminist critics (see, for instance, Creed: 1986; Clover: 1993)? In *Terminator 2*, it's a more ambiguous threat of the guerrilla heroine, Sarah Connor - benign in the sense that she's attacking the interests of global capital in constructing the computers which will threaten humanity; malign in that her action is against the innocent inventor of the machines, and is presented as excessively violent (Figure 4).



Figure 4: Terminator 2 - Sarah Connor, guerrilla heroine

The next frame continues both the expository mode - "I think..." - and the 'female baddie' theme. It deals explicitly with the link between this scene and the whole film, in terms of her preoccupation with this paradigm, repeating the link she's already made in the first frame between the witch and Rosaleen:

... it is showing women as the more evil type and the threat, because she is getting revenge against her ex-husband, which I think makes the film more exciting. I think probably the audience would not of expected a woman to be the threat, so maybe that sort of evens out the stereotypical view of the threat because both women and men are playing the roles of baddies, the wolf being a man and the woman being the witch. Also, Rosaline is sort of a baddie because she is sort of friendly with the wolf which gives her a bad side I think.

We can see even more clearly here how Johanna articulates two sets of oppositions: one of good and evil, driven by the suspense dynamic of horror movies; the other of weak/good women against strong/wicked women, driven by an emancipatory inversion of gender stereotypes. Interestingly, the audience reactions might conceivably be thrown into confusion by this - simultaneously booing the villain for her wickedness and cheering her for her strength! Needless to say, it's more complex than that, and Johanna at least suffers from no confusion, holding together structures which, though apparently contradictory, depend on different orders of audience desire.

So far, Johanna emerges as a skilled, competent and experienced reader of film in general, and this film in particular. So far, I've only really asked the question - 'How does she read this film?' There are features of her responses, however, that don't fit the surface logic of her expository piece, and I've left these till last, in the belief that they relate more to the question - 'Why does she read it like this?'

To backtrack a little - the first response that gave me pause for thought was that, while she gave signs, like the other girls (stronger, if anything) of identification with the strong female protagonist, she joined in, unlike most of the girls, with the dismissive and joky reactions of the boys. This seemed to be related to a reluctance to be taken in by the horror scenes; and in the interview, she asserts that 'people like being sort of scared ... like being frightened ... just the thrill of being scared' - but also, about horror films: 'they're so - unrealistic!'; and, about *The Company of Wolves*: 'It was funny [laughs]'. This oscillation between thrilled engagement and dismissive laughter is much more typical of boys than girls in this study.

In her written assignment, I would identify two features that don't fit the rather neat account of her readings and uses of the film I've given so far. The first is what appears to be an irrelevant sentence in the first text frame:

The wedding is very old fashioned and the costumes are great.

This is a brief moment of delight in the beautiful fabrics which construct the world of aristocratic privilege in the scene: marquee and guests' and servants' clothing are all of pastel silks, contrasting with the ragged homespun of the witch. But this isn't, in fact, an irrelevant aside at all. If the social meanings of these costumes can be read as a signification of outrageous social and sexual inequity on one level, they're read, by Johanna, in relation to a different pattern of female pleasures and social roles on another. The structure that holds together her pleasure in the costumes and her pleasure in the emancipated heroine is an unconscious one - it's not signalled by any conscious structure of rational discourse in her text - reminding us of Metz's emphasis on the action of the unconscious within conscious thought, and language.

Johanna's choices between the social roles available to girls in school are complex. She likes to do well in lessons; but draws back from excessive academic eagerness. She shares other girls' enthusiasm for work, but doesn't like to show it. She dresses in practical clothing with little decoration, little jewellery, no makeup. But she loves dance - and in musical productions, revels in tights, lyotard, tutu and ballet shoes.

So it comes, perhaps, as no surprise that she should inscribe this careful balancing of social roles - good, but not goody-goody; appropriating 'boyish' toughness and 'girlish' sensitivity in well-judged proportions - into the narratives and images of femininity that she encounters. These structures of subjectivity extend even to the pleasures and unpleasures she experiences in the text, and to the actual cognitive processes of reading/spectating itself.

That she finds pleasure in the female roles of the film is clear from her language, producing the least ambiguous terminology of evaluation and pleasure: 'exciting', 'great'. But there is also resistance. The film is commonly experienced by pupils as puzzling, because of its complex narrative structure, shifting modalities and use of opaque visual tropes, which Metz (1982) describes as the kind of pure metaphor rare even in avant-garde film. There's no doubt that Johanna can unravel these complexities: in the interview she demonstrates a clear understanding of the final sequence:

J Yeah, the dream comes into real life - dream sort of comes true - and it jumps through her window.

But in her written commentary, she adopts a different strategy to deal with the hypotactic narrative of the film, a strategy much more typical of boys in the study than girls - she uses much more ambiguous evaluative terms ('mad', 'weird'); refuses the fear/thrill response of horror ('it makes me laugh more than being frightened'); and contests the modality of the film ('This film is very unrealistic'; 'stupid'). At the same time, she admits to the kind of textual pleasure of interpretation that is more characteristic of the girls in the sample - 'The overall film wasn't bad and because it was weird it was interesting, and really kept me thinking and awake!'

There are other ways in which Joanna's dealings with the film are marked by these tensions, balances, mediations: the kind of open, fluid condition of Mikhail Bakhtin's dialogism. There's the mixing of genres she seems to me to employ: formal categories of film analysis alongside a colloquial refusal of the sort of abstract terminology she might associate with the English classroom ('weird'; 'mad'; 'stupid'). There's the link (but also opposition) between school viewing and home (she watched *The Hand that Rocks the Cradle* at home on telly). There's the social nature of classroom viewing - with a group of friends; but close enough to groups of boys to hear their reactions to the film. There's the girl-group work: choosing the

images from the film together; digitizing them; working and talking together as they write; sharing their (separate) pages on adjacent computer screens; putting together the printouts into a satisfying booklet.

Response, Reading, Production

The evidence of this study complicates, it seems to me, the whole question of what counts as "response". The word itself carries a freight of controversy that is central to debates about the nature of culture, reading, and the production of meaning. I'm certain that Johanna's `response` is an active making of meaning; but I'm not sure where we might place the boundaries of her engagement with the text, bearing in mind, for instance, that she arrives at the film text already conversant with Angela Carter's story, with Red Riding Hood, with a complex set of references from horror movies, and with her own version of the horror heroine well-articulated. My preferred image of what she does with the text is Bakhtin's image of open dialogism (1981), and the active contributions to continuing discourse made by both reader and by author anticipating response:

Responsive understanding is a fundamental force, one that participates in the formulation of discourse, and it is moreover an active understanding, one that discourse senses as resistance or support enriching the discourse. (281)

Bakhtin's metaphor of centrifugal and centripetal forces in language, pulling between centre and margin, echoed in this opposition between `resistance` and `support`, prefigures the hegemony theory in which were rooted the accounts of textual engagement given by cultural studies in the late seventies and early eighties, and later accounts of ways in which engagement with texts always involves ideological contestation of one kind or another (eg, Hodge and Kress, 1988, pp 7/8). The question of resistance to the ideologies surrounding the text seems clearly there in her specifically political work on images of women in these films; but also in her distancing from a film whose narrative structures signal the art-house movie, and its attendant structures of taste.

What about her `response`? It's begun, as I've noted, well before she even begins to watch the film, in the sense that she arrives in the classroom already engaged with the discourse of which this particular film is one part, a dynamic process memorably described by Bakhtin:

The living utterance, having taken meaning and shape at a particular historical moment in a socially specific environment, cannot fail to brush up against thousands of living dialogic threads, woven by socio-ideological consciousness around the given object of an utterance; it cannot fail to become an active participant in social dialogue. (276)

In the case of Johanna, what corresponds to Bakhtin's 'utterance'? Not only the film text, but also Johanna's 'response' - not just a response, then, but a remaking, a new text in its own right. Bakhtin's image of dialogue blurs the distinction between text and response (the text, in any case, being a response to other texts). Gunther Kress (1993) has recently described, similarly, the undoing of 'the settled distinctions of reading and writing, of consumption and production generally; of speech and writing; of reference and signification; ...'. This undoing, unsettling, is characteristic of Johanna's engagement with the film.

Final thoughts: pleasures, visual literacies and English

Much of this article has been about subjectivity, gender, and the ways in which these determine readings and writings of film in the classroom. Johanna seems, then, to be transforming the film into a text, or series of texts, of her own, structured around the images and narratives of femininity which intersect with her own experiences, desires, social roles. She embraces certain pleasures, readings, understandings; and refuses others. She positions herself as a reader/viewer in ways analogous to her positioning of herself as a girl among girls, a girl among boys, a student, a dancer, a daughter watching TV. In all this, the material conditions of viewing, reading, writing, producing, play an important determining role, so we need to recognise the significance of classroom rather than home or cinema; the social groups and gendered viewing patterns of the class; my role as teacher, choosing the film; the representational resources and technologies available to her.

Two final points: one about pleasure, one about teaching.

The pleasures she finds in this work seem many and complex, and there's no room here to develop an account. I'll make two brief observations, however. Firstly, that these pleasures are not, as we often imagine, simply the sugar on the pill that makes the curricular medicine go down. Rather, they are indissoluble aspects of the processes of cognition and affect that allow meaning to be made at all. Secondly, as with her readings of the film, we could profitably look to different theoretical perspectives for a convincing account of these pleasures: to Bourdieu's theory of social tastes; to Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*; to Bakhtin's carnival; to Barthes' *Pleasure of the Text*. In spite of the many contradictions between these theories (and I wouldn't want to underestimate these!), they might all have a part to play in constructing a topography of textual pleasure that could inform the pedagogies of English.

One final point to stress - for me, Johanna's teacher - is her role as pupil; and the classroom as the social site in which this encounter took place. My suggestion, briefly, is that, while the classroom might seem to inhibit viewing pleasures (in a traditional cultural studies analysis, for instance, such as those of Willis (1977, 1990), whose assumptions about the school as a

site of cultural engagement are either negative, or simply omit the classroom as a legitimate cultural site altogether); it produces certain readings, understandings, even pleasures of its own, as well as (perhaps because) adding to the tensions and contradictions within which the act of making meaning must take place. Rather than repeat the descriptions I've given above of this process, I'll translate them into the material plane of the events in question. The darkened classroom; clumps of pupils; the rattle of Dylan's Tic-Tac mints; the bright screen; the quiet of the school library where the video digitizer lives; the noise of the computer room and the flicker of image and text; the infuriatingly slow emergence of the paper from the printer. These people, textures, fabrics, machines, all image the network of discourse and the chain of texts, and the play of competing and cooperating language that is the English classroom. This context, these readings, leave me, on the whole, optimistic that it's possible to begin to transform this space into one which meets some of the demands made (in the context of a recognition of new visual 'literacies') by Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996):

If schools are to equip students adequately for the new semiotic order ... then the old boundaries between 'writing' on the one hand, ... and, on the other hand, the 'visual' arts ... should be redrawn. This will have to involve modern computer technology, central as it is to the new semiotic landscape. But, above all, it is crucially dependent on having the means of analysis, the means for talking about the 'new literacy', about what it is we do when we read and produce images.' (33)

Meanwhile, Joanna goes off to her next lesson, or to the next year, or to post-16 education, the process of dialogue continuing. Curiously, she's found in the film almost the opposite of the empty mirror described in Metz's Lacanian image of the film screen, the mirror which 'returns us everything but ourselves'. She's found herself - or some of herself - for the time being.

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