The Museum That Looks Back: *Guillermo del Toro: At Home with Monsters*

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Guillermo del Toro: At Home with Monsters
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The museum exhibition *Guillermo del Toro: At Home with Monsters* focused on the personal collection of author, illustrator, film producer, and film director Guillermo del Toro, who was born in Guadalajara, Mexico in 1964. Del Toro has become well known in the last fifteen years due to his movies in Spanish, such as *El laberinto del fauno* (2006, released in the United States and United Kingdom as *Pan's Labyrinth*) and his movies in English, such as the 2013 science fiction blockbuster *Pacific Rim*, the more recent neo-Victorian Gothic horror film, *Crimson Peak* (2015), and his recent monster love story and Cold War thriller, *The Shape of Water* (2017). He has also proven successful as a popular novelist, co-authoring multiple works. With Chuck Hogan, del Toro wrote the pulpy vampire trilogy that begins with *The Strain* (2009) and was later adapted for a television series (2014–present). The trilogy transfers the fears of invading, contagious vampires from Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) to the twenty-first century United States, amplifying *Dracula*'s fears with representations of infectious disease control and viruses that spread by air travel. Del Toro also collaborated with the author Daniel Kraus and illustrator Sean Murray to write the young adult novel, *Trollhunters* (2015), which became a Netflix animated series the following year.[1] Del Toro's multimedia success and his position as a popular figure on Twitter and at comics conventions have generated an interest among audiences and readers regarding his influences, his imaginative processes, and the creation of his distinctive style.

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Two of the most recent outcomes of this interest are in book form. In 2013, he published *Guillermo del Toro: Cabinet of Curiosities: My Notebooks, Collections, and Other Obsessions* – a coffee table book including images from his planning notebooks for his films as well as unfinished film projects and photographs of his personal collection. The book also contains a section titled 'Mainstays of Horror' that addresses his literary influences, and endorsements by Hollywood directors James Cameron, John Landis, and Alfonso Cuarón, effects designer Adam Savage, fantasy authors Neil Gaiman and Cornelia Funke, comic book author Mike Mignola, and actors Ron Perlman (a regular in del Toro's films) and Tom Cruise. Though del Toro wrote some sections of the book himself, the majority of the text consists of Marc Scott Zicree's interviews with the director as well as descriptive texts written by Zicree himself. Also during 2013, del Toro teamed up with Penguin Books to act as the editor for the Penguin Horror Series, a set of hardcover editions of classics by Mary Shelley, Edgar Allan Poe, and H. P. Lovecraft, among others, illustrated with original cover art. The Penguin Random House website describes del Toro as a "filmmaker and longtime horror literature fan", emphasising that he has "curated" the series and referring to the works in the series as "some of del Toro's favorites" (Penguin Random House 2013).[2] Each of the books in the series carries the same introduction by del Toro, titled 'Haunted Castles, Dark Mirrors', while notes and the scholarly introduction are handled by S. T. Joshi, scholar and author of the academic study *The Weird Tale* (1990).

Given these publications, *Guillermo del Toro: At Home with Monsters* expanded on the idea of del Toro as a 'curator' and an artist who would create his own cabinet of curiosities. In the exhibition that ran at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) from 1 August 2016 to 27 November 2016, del Toro again took on the role of curator, with the museum's rotating exhibition space serving as a partial reconstruction of his house.[3] The exhibition followed other exhibitions at LACMA that drew upon the blend of art, cinema, and popular culture uniquely fitted to Los Angeles because of its ties to the film industry. These included the 2007-08 exhibition *Dalí: Painting & Film* and the more recent exhibits focusing on the work of director and animator Tim Burton (2011) and director Stanley Kubrick (2012-13). While the focus on one artist guided these three exhibitions, just as it guided the subsequent del Toro exhibition, *At Home*

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with Monsters relied not simply on del Toro's accomplishments as a novelist, artist, and filmmaker, but on his own tastes and fascinations as a collector. With a few exceptions, the basic requirement that justified the selection of articles on display was that they were usually displayed in another exhibition space: 'Bleak House', one of the houses in the suburban Los Angeles area that del Toro calls his "man cave" (del Toro and Zicree 2013: 19). The exhibition thus strove to recreate del Toro's Los Angeles 'Bleak House' within the space of LACMA's galleries. Yet despite the fact that it is a house, del Toro's 'Bleak House' – however much it shares the name with the labyrinthine, ill-omened house of Charles Dickens's *Bleak House* (1852-53) – is not a domestic space.

As a "man cave", 'Bleak House' is a creative space, in which he designs the monsters of his films, consults his library, writes his screenplays and novels, and finds inspiration. Thus, the exhibition was at two removes from del Toro's actual home. Yet given the exhibition's connection to Hollywood movies and television shows, it partly resembled the more recent practice of excursions to Beverly Hills that involve driving by residences of stars. Despite its efforts to describe and display artefacts from del Toro's personal creative space, one could not shake the sense that one was missing out on the authentic creative space of which the exhibition was a simulacrum: 'Bleak House' itself. While a blown up photograph of the entrance hall of 'Bleak House' provided some sense of the actual house's interior in one room of the exhibition, this image, often used for selfies and group pictures by the museum's visitors, simultaneously drew attention to the absent house that lurked behind the exhibition. Similarly, the exhibition's website features a video clip of 'Bleak House', in which a bookcase that functions as a secret door opens to reveal an imposing grandfather clock and a model of the vampire from the F. W. Murnau's film, *Nosferatu* (1922).[4]

It is not the blown up photograph, the website's video, or even the absent creative space that took centre stage at LACMA, however, but the sheer variety and idiosyncrasy of del Toro's collection. LACMA curator Britt Salvesen, head of the Wallis Annenberg Photography Department and the Prints and Drawings Department at the museum, echoes del Toro's 2013 coffee table book and relates del Toro's collection to the cabinets of curiosities well known during the nineteenth century and earlier (see Salvesen 2016: 15). Referring to the cabinet of curiosities as a "private

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accumulation of oddities", Salvesen also links del Toro's collection at 'Bleak House' to those of museums, public institutions that she notes "have long been associated with taxonomies, connoisseurship, and instruction" (Salvesen 2016: 15). The LACMA museum exhibit was unique in bringing together these two forms of collecting, one that is secular and educational while the other is "magical", with its strange objects "valued for their talismanic properties" (Salvesen 2016: 16). Salvesen ultimately sees del Toro's personal collection as rejuvenating the museum as a public institution, democratically catering to all tastes: "When a private collection such as del Toro's is brought into a public museum, it reanimates the mausoleum and erases hierarchies" (Salvesen 2016: 26).

Salvesen's statement about the reanimating power of the exhibit is particularly apt for students of the Victorian period, given the period's proliferation of so many different kinds of objects and aspects of visual culture. The exhibit was entirely unique in the way that it juxtaposed movie props and costumes, clips from del Toro's films, life-size models, scholarly books, comic books, models, illustrations, and actual artefacts. Beyond the general engagement with visual culture, the Victorian period is important to del Toro because his tastes broadly include science, the Gothic, and science fiction, such that, beyond his investment in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* (1818), he has been inspired by the Gothic and science fiction works of the 1880s and 1890s, such as *The Time Machine* (1895) and *Dracula* (1897). Del Toro first encountered these works in part through film adaptations, so his initial sense of the Victorian period was mediated through the popular culture of the twentieth century. Most intriguingly, however, del Toro's approach to his films mirrors that of his Victorian precursors in the way that he unites his interests in science, monstrosity, and the Gothic in his understanding of the creative power of the fairy tale. Speaking after a November 2017 screening of *The Shape of Water*, del Toro described the genres of movies that he makes as "fables or fairy tales or parables that utilize this vernacular" of monsters (Del Toro 2017: n.p.) Del Toro's understanding of his work in relation to the fairy tale indicates how his own sense of his work mirrors that of the late Victorians. Andrew Lang, in one of his articles that seeks to define the adventure tale in relation to the term *romance*, describes "romances of adventures" and how they "descend, as it were, from fairy-tales" (Lang 1888: 4). Lang thus considers the commonalities between supernatural adventure stories (such as

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those of H. Rider Haggard) and works that might gesture towards the nascent genre of science fiction as genealogically related to the fairy tale. Critic Molly Clark Hillard, discussing Lang's engagement with fairy tales, notes that Lang was, "one practitioner of a kind of discourse generated in the wake of the Victorian fairy tale surge – that is, the widespread incorporation of fairy tales into other Victorian literary and cultural forms dating from the middle of the Victorian era" (Hillard 2013: para. 8). Lang, like del Toro, displayed a fundamental interest in enduring stories, while he also delighted in the flexibility of the fairy tale as what Hillard calls "an endlessly renewable resource" (Hillard 2013: para. 24).

Like Lang's understanding of the fairy tale, Del Toro's exhibition at LACMA is eclectic. While this eclecticism is inextricably tied to twenty-first-century commercialism and consumerism, it also continues a trend from the Victorian period in which the fairy tale as a form that united many different kinds of non-realist writing. Del Toro's reliance on the fairy tale genre to describe his films suggests an intellectual debt to the Victorian period that del Toro may or may not intend, as well as a fascination with enduring stories and the preservation of a great variety of popular past art forms and narratives. Del Toro's use of fairy tale terminology also suggests parallels between del Toro and nineteenth-century polymaths, such as folklorist, author, and editor Andrew Lang. The eclecticism of del Toro's imagination was also on display in the range of printed materials that visitors encountered, often without labels but arranged in bookcases, as they toured the exhibition. Though they were arranged throughout the different rooms of the exhibition, with the comic books located in a room titled 'Movies, Comics, Pop Culture', these books, comics, and magazines together allowed for a provocative juxtaposition of works spanning diverse communities of taste and expertise (see **Figure 1**). Examining the entire exhibit, visitors found Oscar Wilde's poems, Lang's fairy books, a copy of Dickens's *Bleak House*, Lynd Ward's 1954 illustrated edition of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, the collected works of Robert Louis Stevenson, and, just as crucially, comic books such as Stan Lee and Roy Thomas's *The Man-Thing* (originated in 1971) and the anthology series *The House of Mystery* (originated in 1951), as well as popular magazines such as *Famous Monsters of Filmland* (1958-83) and many volumes of the British popular reference work, *Man, Myth & Magic: An Illustrated Encyclopedia of the Supernatural* (1971). Twentieth-century popular culture served as del

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Toro's entry point into the Gothic and fuels his on-going fascination with monsters. *Famous Monsters of Filmland*, for instance, proved crucial to his acquisition of English proficiency, as the exhibition catalogue notes how del Toro taught "himself English in order to decipher the puns and slang in American periodicals such as *Famous Monsters*" (Salvesen and Shedden 2016: 95). The magazine also served as one of the potential gateways into the Anglo-American representations of the Gothic that took up most of the exhibition space. Indeed, as much as I found myself inclined to celebrate the eclecticism and variety of artworks found in the exhibit – from John Lounsbery's 1951 concept art of the Cheshire Cat for Walt Disney's *Alice in Wonderland* (also 1951), to Stephen Gammell's shadowy and sinister charcoal illustrations for Alvin Schwartz's 1980 volume *Scary Stories to Tell in the Dark* and Thomas Kuntz's throwbacks to the machines of earlier centuries, the automatons 'L'Oracle du Mort' (2009) and 'Fakir' (2010) – this same colourful miscellany is what enables *Guillermo del Toro: At Home with Monsters*' evident commercialism.[5]

Figure 1: Photo of Comic Books,
Installation photo of the exhibition *Guillermo del Toro: At Home with Monsters* at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), August 1, 2016 - November 27, 2016. Photo © Museum Associates/ LACMA, by Josh White/ JWPictures.com

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The proliferation of texts bearing del Toro's name in the gift shop, as well as the monitors displaying montages from his Hollywood films, indicated that this exhibition was inseparable from Hollywood's commercial ventures and American consumerism more generally. The book describing the exhibition itself, titled *Guillermo del Toro: At Home with Monsters: Inside His Films, Notebooks, and Collections* (2016), joins a growing bibliography of attractive art books accompanying del Toro's collection, movies, and shows, often with only a part of the book written by del Toro.[6] Del Toro has become an industry in his own right, and one cannot help but ask a question similar to the one Marie-Luise Kohlke posed in the inaugural issue of this journal: "Will future generations perceive today's superabundance of neo-Victorian fantasies and criticisms as a superficial glut, little more than a complicit reflection of a self-indulgent, over-sexed consumer society?" (Kohlke 2008: 5). This question haunted the exhibition just as much as the monsters on display, leading viewers to question whether they had paid an entrance fee merely to witness a sophisticated advertisement for a series of Hollywood movies.

This misgiving surfaced most strikingly for me in the section of the exhibition titled 'Victoriana', a section that oscillated between easily digested stereotypes and sophistication in its presentation. The exhibition placard describing the section indicated that the Victorian period joins the Romantic period and the Edwardian age in "provid[ing] del Toro with copious visual and narrative inspiration". The placard also mentioned the "modern interpretations of Victoriana" that interest del Toro, referencing the Haunted Mansion attraction at Disneyland along with steampunk fiction. While these observations are accurate, the statements about the Victorian period are somewhat limited in capturing the period's variety and its connections to the present. The placard further noted that "[t]he Victorians embraced science, seeking to exert dominion over nature through meticulous categorization" with reference to del Toro's own insect collection, which was partially represented in the room. The connection between the Victorians' collecting habits and those of del Toro was elided, however, by the claim on the "Victoriana" placard, that "insects in his films tend to exceed human control in spectacular ways", possibly an allusion to del Toro's early film about human-sized cockroaches, *Mimic* (1997). While not disputing the often liberating excess of del Toro's films, it is worth highlighting that with his meticulous collections, the artist is himself both

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repeating and parodying the carefully categorised collections of scientific institutions from the Victorian period, most notably the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford, with its gradualist ethnological displays, and the Natural History Museum in London, with its often uniform glass cases exhibiting similar kinds of organisms. The exhibition's organisers replicated the carefully classified organisation of animal specimens familiar to those who visit natural history museums, but the displays contained a blend of real and fantastic organisms, undercutting the authenticity that museum-goers might expect and juxtaposing imagined monsters with animals that resemble them. The distinction between replicating and parodying the Victorian museum is fuzzy, however, since the museum of the nineteenth century had already mingled educational insight with a Gothic frisson. The shrunken heads of Oxford's Pitt Rivers Museum served as both authentic artefacts of a foreign culture and objects that might inspire awe and terror in a museum-goer.

The other statement from the placard about the Victorian period highlighted "the Victorians' lingering preoccupation with irrationality and the sublime". It juxtaposed this preoccupation with the desire to categorise the world in order to describe an "uneasy mindset, equal parts intellect and emotion" also found in del Toro's *Crimson Peak*, which is set in the late Victorian period. While the mind-set allegedly inhabiting *Crimson Peak* seems so general that it might describe any period, the juxtaposition of reason and passion that it implies also seems less than insightful. Similarly, the central articles on display from *Crimson Peak* were somewhat predictable (see **Figure 2**). Admittedly, the craftsmanship of Kate Hawley's costumes for the film, featured in the centre of the room, was spectacular, representing the care that went into Jessica Chastain's costumes as the frightening and imposing figure of Lucille Sharpe. While the beautiful costumes suggest the sensuality and aristocratic sumptuousness that the Victorians associated with the Gothic and its threatening *femmes fatales*, their restrictive design and chin-to-floor coverage, when coupled with their centrality within the 'Victoriana' section, risked reinforcing the dubious clichéd image of nineteenth-century femininity or what Matthew Sweet calls the "whaleboned women shrouding the piano legs for decency's sake" (Sweet 2001: ix).

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Figure 2: Photo of 'Victoriana' Room with Dresses from *Crimson Peak*
Installation photo of the exhibition *Guillermo del Toro: At Home with Monsters* at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), August 1, 2016 - November 27, 2016. Photo © Museum Associates/ LACMA

There are additional items, however, that slyly undermine the sense of a cliché in the centrality of the two dresses and their stereotypical bodices. Though it still conceals as much skin as the other two dresses, Edith Cushing's nightdress (worn by Mia Wasikowska in the film and also designed by Hawley) is stained with both the prop blood from the movie (that of Edith Cushing) and the blood-like dirt of the movie's ominous estate, Crimson Peak. The bloodied and dirtied nightdress hearkens back to Franklin Blake's stained nightshirt hidden away by Rosanna Spearman in Wilkie Collins's *The Moonstone* (1868), suggesting that *Crimson Peak*, like *The Moonstone*, is mining the same dark secrets of the upper middle class explored by Collins. In addition, Mia Wasikowska had, by the time of *Crimson Peak*'s release, already starred as the title character in Tim Burton's adaptation of Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* (2010), and

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Hawley's nightdress, with its blood and dirt, also invites comparison with the gauzy frock that Alice sports in the opening of Burton's film. Indeed, Edith Cushing can be read as a sexually awakened version of Burton's Alice, a woman who descends into a Gothic nightmare of incest, ghosts, and murder rather than one of talking caterpillars and nonsensical verse.[7] Wasikowska's own acting choices point to further intertextual connections between neo-Victorian films, as Wasikowska had starred both as Alice in Burton's film and as Jane in Cary Joji Fukunaga's *Jane Eyre* (2011) by the time she appeared as Edith Cushing. Thus, Wasikowska's costume, and, by extension, her performance in *Crimson Peak* self-referentially reminded viewers of the Victorian works of Wilkie Collins while also gesturing towards neo-Victorian films of Burton and Fukunaga.

After examining the dresses, the museum-goer's gaze was drawn away from the main display to the rest of the Victoriana room, which did represent a greater diversity of interests in the Victorian period, as well as troubling the distinction between Victorian artefacts and neo-Victorian experimental works. The books that inhabited the lower and top levels of the black Gothic display case in the centre of the room appeared to be publications from the nineteenth century (see **Figure 3**) and many of the Andrew Lang fairy books elsewhere in the room (not pictured here) certainly were period publications, but much of the rest of the exhibit caused the viewer to reconsider where and when one's perceptions of the period actually come from. The models of the machine from H. G. Wells's *The Time Machine* (1895) found in the display case, for instance, while according with the descriptions found in Wells's original novel, were more reminiscent of the film adaptations of the novel, most notably the 1960 film directed by George Pal. Even without a placard, many museum-goers would have identified these models as representing Wells's time machine, although technically they were miniature reproductions of a movie model extrapolated from Wells's descriptions. The time machine models hinted at the way film has shaped our understanding of Victorian fiction and iconography, even as they prefigured the steampunk contraptions imagined in the later twentieth century. While a bust of Charles Dickens decorated the cabinet (far right on the shelf in Figure 3), other items within the case played with the notion of direct mimetic representation implied by the bust. These items included two mixed-media automata by Los Angeles-area artist Brian Poor, including his *Phoenix* (2001) and *Chopin v. 2.0* (2009)

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(displayed on the two middle top shelves of the cabinet in Figure 3, respectively).[8] The latter work, in which a Chopin bust has been mounted on some sort of metal meter, features a port for a VGA cable. The portion above the beard on the Chopin bust has been broken off, leaving exposed wires, glass eyes, and a seemingly mobile mouth with false teeth. Given that mechanical reproduction plays a significant role in the aesthetic experience of Chopin's music in the twenty-first century (whether through a compact disc, mp3 file, online movie, or DVD), the modified bust is a canny representation of the circumstances through which we encounter the sounds of the nineteenth-century past.

Figure 3: Photo of Displays from the 'Victoriana' Room,
Installation photo of the exhibition *Guillermo del Toro: At Home with Monsters* at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), August 1, 2016 - November 27, 2016. Photo © Museum Associates/ LACMA, by Josh White/ JWPictures.com.

The exhibit's playful attitude towards realism found in the cabinet continued on the walls and in the other cases of the Victoriana room. An 1853 edition of *Bleak House*, published in New York and on loan from UCLA's Charles Young Research Library, shared a case with some

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examples of William Mumler's post-mortem and spirit photographs. The blend of realism, melodrama, and the Gothic in Dickens's novel was echoed visually in the mélange of modes in the photographs, and this combination repeated itself in some of the more intriguing neo-Victorian works to be found on the walls. Chief among these were three recent paintings by the early twenty-first-century artist Travis Louie. Though produced with acrylic paints, the three images combine a spectral aspect with techniques reminiscent of Victorian photographic portraiture, introducing the Gothic and the uncanny in a painterly parody of mechanical reproduction.[9] The most arresting of these 2009 paintings is *The Strangler*, which first calls attention to its female subject's serpentine hair, then draws the viewer's attention to her shining but distracted eyes, and finally, when one has read the placard, focuses the museum-goer's gaze on her sharp and ferocious fingernails, the aspect of her physical presence that makes her monstrous criminality identifiable.[10] Another of Louie's paintings, *The Coachman and His Brother*, at first glance seems like a portrait of an odd, gaunt, and troll-like man in a top hat and Victorian clothing. The title of the work once again multiplies its strangeness as the viewer, looking for the brother, notices a small bald head and large hands that peak over the top hat. In its best moments, the 'Victoriana' section of the exhibition thus expanded the viewer's idea of what constitutes Victorian art and design, not simply by juxtaposing works created during and after the period, but also by entrancing the viewer with works that play with Victorian conventions. In some instances, images from the present were clearly meant to trick visitors into viewing them as relics from the past, such as Daniel Horne's large oil painting, *Lady Beatrice Sharpe* (2015), visible in the background of Figure 3, which might have been either Victorian or neo-Victorian art – unless recognised as a movie prop depicting one of the ghosts from *Crimson Peak* as she appeared during her lifetime.[11] Hence the painting harmonised with the other objects in the 'Victoriana' room that also self-referentially pointed back to del Toro's films.

Though the Victorian period clearly provides del Toro with inspiration, the exhibition itself also suggested the centrality of the Romantic period in the artist's imagination. Del Toro appears enraptured by the figures of the creator, the monster, and the overreacher. His discussions of art and literature frequently focus on the authors and painters themselves, emphasising their genius and the sublimity of their creations. The dominant

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feeling of the exhibition was one of fandom blended with Romanticism. The exhibition prioritised monsters, and specifically, the creature from *Frankenstein*. One entire room is devoted to both Victor Frankenstein and the creature from Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and its various cinematic adaptations. By referring both to Shelley's original novel and its many subsequent reincarnations, the room exemplifies the double referentiality associated with neo-Victorianism. The introductory placard for the room, titled 'Frankenstein and Horror', stressed the importance of James Whale's 1931 film of the novel (as well as the film's sequels) in sparking del Toro's interest and inspiring him to read the novel while still a teenager. While the display was not exhaustive, the room illustrated the fertility of the Frankenstein narrative and the way in which del Toro's own fandom facilitated his artistic career and his exploration of literary works. In his 'Haunted Castles, Dark Mirrors' essay, del Toro speaks about Shelley's novel with a verve and romanticism that echoes Shelley's writing. He notes that "[t]he novel is so articulate and vibrant that it often surprises those who approach it for the first time. No adaptation—and there are some masterful ones—has ever captured it whole" (Del Toro 2013: xiii). Despite his comments on the primacy of Shelley's written narrative, the room devoted to *Frankenstein* and horror was more a display of the way that the creature of the novel has, to use del Toro's own wording, "tak[en] its place among the essential characters in any narrative form" (Del Toro 2013: xiii). Del Toro subsequently compares the creature to figures such as Sherlock Holmes and Pinocchio, characters he sees as "embodying a concept, even in the minds of those who have never read the actual books" (Del Toro 2013: xiii). It is not the book or story, but the image of the creature that dominates the room, which is understandable given del Toro's imagination and his emphasis on special effects, cinematic and visual art, and visual representations.

As shown in **Figure 4** (see below), one corner of the room juxtaposed three representations of Shelley's creature, as refracted through the 1931 film and its sequels. First, the creature appeared in an acrylic painting by Basil Gogos, *Boris Karloff as the Monster in Son of Frankenstein* (1993). The creature in the painting appears resigned and aggrieved, while his blue-white skin gives off a strange orange glow that contrasts with the hulking, grotesque trees in the background. The material circumstances of the painting, along with one of the novel's main themes,

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are echoed in Mike Hill's sculpture, *Creation, Boris Karloff as Frankenstein's Monster and Jack Pierce* (2009), which, composed of silicon, oil, human hair, plastic, and an antique barber chair, represents Pierce's application of Karloff's makeup. While the sculpture does undercut some of the seriousness of the painting by revealing Karloff's bare chest and his teacup, the sculpted face of Karloff echoes the face in Gogos's painting, even repeating itself to a degree in the wrinkled, concentrated face of Pierce.

Figure 4: Installation photo featuring Mike Hill's *Creation, Boris Karloff as Frankenstein's Monster and Jack Pierce* (2009) and *Unrequited* (2012), and Basil Gogos' *Frankenstein's Monster*
in the exhibition *Guillermo del Toro: At Home with Monsters* at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), August 1, 2016 - November 27, 2016. © Mike Hill, © Basil Gogos, Photo © Museum Associates/ LACMA, by Josh White/ JWPictures.com

The painting and sculpture are not simply new artistic incarnations of Shelley's novel and the classic films, but explorations of the detailed processes required to *create* a monster and the mimetic relationship between the creature and his creator, which is equally central to the original text. The sculpture serves as a tribute to the novel, to Hollywood, and, given its

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collector, to the unique creative exercises that are required for a film and TV director to 'create a monster'.

In *Unrequited* (2012), the other sculpture in Figure 4 (shown more fully in **Figure 5** below), the artist Mike Hill features yet another scene of the creature's tribulation, here connecting the troubled face of the creature in Gogos's painting with the creature's unrequited love in James Whale's *Bride of Frankenstein* (1935). Del Toro's ownership of both sculptures indicates an appreciation of the 'viral' transmission of the *Frankenstein* narrative across various media, as this sculpture represents a scene from another sequel to the 1931 movie, a scene not found in the novel itself.

Figure 5: Installation photo featuring Mike Hill's *Unrequited* (2012)
in the exhibition *Guillermo del Toro: At Home with Monsters* at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), August 1, 2016 - November 27, 2016. © Mike Hill, Photo © Museum Associates/ LACMA, by Josh White/ JWPictures.com

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The intriguing Gothic window frame built into the gallery partition allowed museum visitors to 'see' this encounter not only as museum-goers but also as voyeurs who imagined themselves witnessing an intimate scene of thwarted desire from inside the Gothic castle of *Bride of Frankenstein*. The rug, light fixture, wallpaper, settee, and wall art that accompany *Unrequited* added to the 'authenticity' of the scene, recreating the movie scene within a diorama. The maroon colour of the gallery wall continued in the lower part of the wall behind the creature and his bride, suggesting a harmony between the scene from the film and the exhibit itself.

The inspiration that del Toro finds in the Frankenstein objects both thematises and emphasises how del Toro's 'man cave' is a creative space. As the objects are situated in his home away from home, del Toro moves among them for inspiration. Curators further placed a replica of 'Del Toro's Rain Room' at the heart of the LACMA exhibition. As the placard described, "Drawing on his early experience as a special-effects designer, he created a permanent thunderstorm in sunny Southern California: his 'rain room' features rear-projected lightning effects, a false window spattered with silicone raindrops, and a nonstop thunder soundtrack". The Rain Room's perpetual thunderstorm augmented the Gothic characteristics of the rest of the exhibition, and the room contained within it other sources of del Toro's inspiration, most notably a life-size model of Edgar Allan Poe: Thomas Kuebler's *Once Upon a Midnight Dreary* (2013), which, in its reference to Poe's 'The Raven' (1845), reinforced the permanent meteorological condition of the Rain Room. The same interior space also featured multiple etchings by the Mexican visual artist Julio Ruelas (1870-1907), most notably *La Crítica* (*The Critic)* of 1906-07, in which a bat-like creature donning a top hat and sporting a need-like nose sits, poised to plunge his proboscis into the forehead of a man who, given his moustache, resembles Ruelas (see https://www.google.com/culturalinstitute/beta/asset/YgFcH8rt8ONLGw). In contrast to del Toro's desire to include a rain room in Bleak House as motivation and inspiration for his creative work, the Ruelas and Poe artefacts testify to the distress and pain of the artistic process, echoing Goya's etching, 'El Sueño de la Razón Produce Monstruos' (1799), which is hung elsewhere in the exhibition.

Despite the sinister side of artistry suggested by these artefacts and images, del Toro's own sensibility seems to be energised by them. The

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sinister inspiration implied by the art displayed in the Rain Room can be explained in part by del Toro's Mexican Roman Catholic background, which is described in detail in the 'Death and the Afterlife' placard for the exhibition. The placard states:

> Growing up in Guadalajara, Mexico, in the 1960s and 1970s, del Toro had a number of disturbing confrontations with death, seeing corpses in the street, in a morgue, and in catacombs beneath a church. His strict Catholic grandmother instilled in him the notion of original sin and even submitted him to exorcisms in a futile attempt to eradicate his love of monsters and fantasy. Now an outspoken critic of institutional Catholicism, del Toro declares, "The fantastic is the only tool we have nowadays to explain spirituality to a generation that refuses to believe in dogma or religion."

Three points in this statement provide the key to understanding *At Home with Monsters*. First is the notion of del Toro as both an insider and outsider when it comes to the cultures and 'Victoriana' that make up most of his collection. His origins in Mexico have provided him with a vital lived connection to the violence that he relates to Anglocentric notions of the Gothic. Discussing his upbringing in an interview about *El laberinto del fauno*, del Toro described the violence of his time in Guadalajara, a city that became ensnared in the US and Mexico 'drug war' of the 1980s:

> It would be a cliché to say that, because I am a Mexican, I see death in a certain way. But I have seen more than my share of corpses, certainly more than the average First World guy. I worked for months next to a morgue that I had to go through to get to work. I've seen people being shot; I've had guns put to my head; I've seen people burnt alive, stabbed, decapitated … because Mexico is still a very violent place. (Kermode 2006b: n.p.; original ellipses)

Implicitly, del Toro thus understands the Gothic as a traumatic reminder of the violence of his homeland – not so much a historical trace of the nineteenth century, as that period's appropriated trace repurposed to reflect

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postmodernity. The seeming signifier of the past becomes a simulacra of the present, though this signifier retains connections to the Victorian past because of del Toro's childhood fascination with Romantic and Victorian writing as well as his willingness – as in the case of his collaboration with Penguin classics – to attach his name and his brand to the actual source texts that intrigued him.

Simultaneously, however, he combines the different ingredients of the Gothic that come to him from the United States and Europe with elements of his heritage. Poe and Ruelas inhabited the Rain Room together, and the exhibition itself frequently juxtaposed works that del Toro encountered as a consumer of Mexican, United States, and British culture. In an area that spanned from the exhibition entrance to the 'Victoriana' room, a granite Aztec *Insect Effigy*, dated between 1200 and 1520, flanks a display of real and imagined insects and marine invertebrates. The stone effigy reminded visitors in part of the mechanical and insect-like Cronos device of del Toro's vampire film, *Cronos* (1993), while it is also positioned near Spectral Motion's resin and foam model of the alien *Kaiju Parasite* from *Pacific Rim* (2013), a six-eyed crustacean that attaches itself to the film's monstrous lizards. Del Toro mixes elements from Mexico with the European Gothic that is central to his imagination.

The third relevant point from the placard relates to del Toro's religious upbringing. Raised within Roman Catholicism but also deeply ambivalent about its imagery and values, del Toro has created works that draw upon the fears of Roman Catholicism that readers find in early eighteenth-century Gothic novels by Ann Radcliffe and Matthew Lewis, as well as later Victorian negotiations with Roman Catholicism in *Dracula* and Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890-91). Del Toro's childhood was plagued by dark imaginings (or realities) related to Catholicism, as he describes being visited by his uncle's ghost as a twelve-year-old and, later, believing that the chimes of "a small Gothic temple in Guadalajara" – which he compares to "having an Aztec pyramid in central London" – summoned a terrifying faun out of his bedroom's armoire (Kermode 2006a: n.p.). The image of the Aztec pyramid in central London is an appropriate symbol for the cultural mixings and reverse colonisation from Mexico to the United States and Britain that the exhibition sometimes suggested despite its Hollywood veneer.

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Given del Toro's comment in an interview that he "love[s] monsters" in a "Mexican way", meaning that he is "not judgmental" (del Toro qtd. in Feld 2014), the exhibition might be seen as a reintroduction of the Gothic into European and American culture via a Mexican detour, such that the space of LACMA became a Gothic space and, by extension, a Mexican Gothic one. Del Toro's statement that "[e]verything is overwrought and there's a sense of acceptance of the fantastic in [his] films, which is innately Mexican" (del Toro qtd. in Feld 2014) seems equally applicable to *At Home with Monsters* implying that visitors were to be greeted by a heterogeneous – perhaps even 'Frankensteinean' – mix of European, US, and Mexican cultures that should be embraced, despite the delicious terror some exhibits might evoke. In its treatment of Victorian culture and the culture of the long nineteenth century, the exhibition highlighted the "transnational aspect of new-Victorianism" previously pointed out by neo-Victorian critics (Primorac and Pietrzak-Franger 2015: 2). Similarly, the exhibition worked to trouble the 'center to periphery' model that critics have questioned in some accounts of 'global' neo-Victorian studies (see Llewellyn and Heilmann 2013: 24). While there is undoubtedly 'Anglocentric bias' in my own reading of del Toro's exhibition as a US-based literary scholar of the Victorian period, del Toro's artistry on film, in print, and in the museum works to broaden the "plurality of attitudes, contexts and mindsets from which the long nineteenth century and its neo-Victorian incarnations can be viewed" (Primorac and Pietrzak-Franger 2015: 4). The gallery of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art became a space filled with monsters, such that those in attendance, much like del Toro himself, could feel 'at home' with them. In its blending of cultures and reimagining of museum space, the exhibition, distinguished its version of neo-Victorian Gothic from the "contemporary Gothic [that] no longer foregrounds otherness" (Kohlke and Gutleben 2012: 2). Rather, it invited visitor immersion in and identification with monstrous otherness, obliquely presented as a marker of lived postmodernity as much as of a superseded past.

The unsettling otherness of the exhibition was nowhere more striking than in its entrance area. After having passed through the glass doors from the terrace to the museum interior, those entering the exhibition were forced to walk by a model of one of the monsters from del Toro's films: specifically, the *Angel of Death* (2008) from del Toro's film of the

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same year, *Hellboy II: The Golden Army* (2008). Built by the creature effects studio Spectral Motion, the model is the size of an adult person and sits upon a black pedestal in front of a red Gothic arch painted on the gallery wall. His jaw, fingers, and arms look like bones from a decaying skeleton, and this effect is amplified by the large, fan-like bone that protrudes where the viewer would expect his eyes to be. Though not entirely clear from Figure 6, the eyes are actually found elsewhere, in the massive black wings that tower over the visitor and cast a dark shadow on the gallery wall. Each wing displays six bulging, off-white eyes in various degrees of openness, surrounded by large black eyelids. Commenting on the angel's appearance, del Toro has noted that "the Angel is really rooted in medieval illustrations, which show angels with four wings with eyes in the wings", and has suggested that the eyeless faceplate indicates that the Angel is "blind to human suffering" (del Toro and Zicree 2013: 219).

Figure 6: Installation photo featuring Spectral Motion's *Angel of Death* from *Hellboy 2: The Golden Army* (2008)
in the exhibition *Guillermo del Toro: At Home with Monsters* at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), August 1, 2016 - November 27, 2016. © 2008 Universal Studios, Photo © Museum Associates/ LACMA, by Josh White/ JWPictures.com

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The Romantics' and Victorians' work, which del Toro so often draws on, of course evinced a similar fascination with medievalism, especially in the case of William Blake and William Morris respectively. Del Toro's engagement with medieval illustration is refracted through that of prior artists, since Blake's *The Great Red Dragon and the Woman Clothed with the Sun* (1803-05) (see http://www.blakearchive.org/copy/biblicalwc?descId=but519.1.wc.01) may have influenced his design of the Angel just as medieval illustration influenced Blake.[12] The Angel also seems to inform the appearance of del Toro's subsequent film creatures. The stained, hooded, red and brown cape worn by the angel anticipates the clothing of the deceased mother from *Crimson Peak*, suggesting a resemblance between the angel and a monstrous Victorian widow, whose dilapidated dress is worn by Kate Hawley's model, *Ghost of Edith Cushing's Mother* (2015), represented in the 'Victoriana' section of the exhibit.

In *Hellboy II*, the Angel proves to be a threatening but impartial figure, given that he grants Hellboy his life but warns that his death would have saved humanity; in the exhibition, however, the supernatural agent seemed mostly a frightening phenomenon. Like the mythological Cerberus, the Angel guarded an entrance, here to an exhibition instead of the underworld, and suggested that much of what viewers would witness beyond the entryway related to the dead and the grotesque. The twelve eyes on the wings also suggest an uncanny museum object that can confront the viewer with a startling otherness, looking back at the viewer rather than sitting comfortably, hardly an object sedately controlled by the exhibition space. In much the same way, del Toro's exhibition did more than merely look back on the (mostly nineteenth-century) cultural history of monstrosity, instead producing an uncanny effect of *the past looking back at us* to discern the monstrous in contemporary society with its unremitting appetite for the Gothic.

The Angel of Death model signalled the LACMA exhibition's larger participation in the late-Victorian trend of what Ruth Hoberman calls the "museum Gothic" in her readings of short stories by Vernon Lee and M. R. James, among others (Hoberman 2003: 469). Hoberman ultimately argues that such stories establish museum objects as having a "museal aura", or "a transcendent essence linked to their presentation as decommodified, decontextualized objects under the care of an expert and under the gaze of a

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properly detached and analytic museum-goer" (Hoberman 2003: 467). Yet in the case of *Guillermo del Toro: At Home with Monsters*, it is difficult for museum-goers to remain detached and analytical. Despite the exhibition's ties to commodification, items such as the Angel of Death model break from Hoberman's "museal aura" and instead hearken back to Walter Benjamin's notion of the aura from 'On Some Motifs of Baudelaire' (1939): "To perceive the aura of an object we look at means to invest it with the ability to look at us in return" (Benjamin qtd. in Hoberman 2003: 468). An object in del Toro's collection just might "disrupt the [museum's] schemata designed to contain it" (Hoberman 2003: 469). The curators of LACMA performed the work of the museum Gothic in reverse, proliferating the mysteries, ambiguities, and occult forces that stories such as Arthur Conan Doyle's 'The Ring of Thoth' (1890) attempt to eliminate or at least subdue.

Marc Davis's 1969 painting *Medusa*, for instance, referenced its original allegedly supernatural appearance as one of the artworks displayed in Disneyland's Haunted Mansion attraction, but also brought to mind Medusa's ability to turn those who gaze upon her to stone. Elsewhere in the exhibition, Herman Snellen's *Set of Glass Eyes of Varying Colors Contained in a Mahogany Box* (1860) augmented the effects of the Angel model, as 45 glass eyes pointed in multiple directions, some of them at the viewer. This is the museum object that can look back *par excellence*.[13] Some objects even engaged the viewer through the deployment of animatronics and visual effects. DDT Effectos Especiales's model, *Santi* (2016), a silicone and fiberglass rendering of the ghost child Santi from del Toro's *El espinazo del diablo* (translated as *The Devil's Backbone*, 2001), appeared to shed ghost blood that floated into the air through Marios Kourasis's visual effects. Thomas Kuebler's *Hans (Harry Earles)* (2011), a silicone and mixed-media sculpture inspired by the character Hans from the movie *Freaks* (1932), was shrouded by curtains that parted rapidly and periodically in a way that might startle unsuspecting viewers. The content of Davis's and Snelling's works in the exhibition foregrounded their gaze at the museum-goer in a way that questioned the analytical and rational experience of the "museal aura" described by Hoberman, while special effects also created a sense of the supernatural and the living in the models inspired by *El espinazo del diablo* and *Freaks*, respectively.

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The overall impression of the exhibition, upon the museum-goer's entrance, built upon the initial encounter with the Angel of Death. Even if one managed to somehow avoid the angel, the two doorways immediately subjected those entering to two of del Toro's most captivating and frightening monsters. Entering on the left (the doorway proscribed by the exhibition), one immediately faced the large resin model of the menacing but inscrutable faun from *El laberinto del fauno*, who, with his knees bent and his bony hands wide open, seemed ready to lunge at the viewer (see **Figure 7**). Entering from the right hand door (perhaps to avoid the faun), the museum-goer encountered another model of silicone and fiberglass, *The Pale Man*, a human-sized representation of the monster of the same name, again from *El laberinto del fauno* (see **Figure 8**).

Figure 7: Photo featuring DDT Efectos Especiales, *The Faun*, 2016, resin, inspired by *Pan's Labyrinth*
Installation photo of the exhibition *Guillermo del Toro: At Home with Monsters* at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), August 1, 2016 - November 27, 2016. Photo © Museum Associates/ LACMA, by Josh White/ JWPictures.com.

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Figure 8: Photo featuring DDT Efectos Especiales, *The Pale Man*, 2016, silicone and fiberglass, inspired by *Pan's Labyrinth*
Installation photo of the exhibition *Guillermo del Toro: At Home with Monsters* at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), August 1, 2016 - November 27, 2016. Photo © Museum Associates/ LACMA, by Josh White/ JWPictures.com.

Like the Angel of Death, the Pale Man is also without eyes where one might expect to find them; the eyes reside on the palms of his red hands, glaring at the viewer just under a set of sharp and black fingernails. The model of the Pale Man replicates the stance and position of the Pale Man in the film, as he attempts to capture the young protagonist, Ofelia. According to the paintings that decorate his dining room in the film, this capture by the Pale Man typically precedes the mutilation, dismemberment, and cannibalism of his young victims. Given del Toro's self-conscious allusions to *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* in *El laberinto del fauno*, it is possible to read the Pale Man as a reimagining of the Queen of Hearts, who threatens to decapitate rather than dismember Alice, or to see the elaborate banquet in which eating is forbidden as reminiscent of the mad tea party. Del Toro's familiarity with the works of Arthur Machen also suggests an additional context for the Pale Man. Machen's story 'The White People' (written 1899,

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first published in 1904) describes a young girl's descent into a world of occult beings whom she calls 'the white people'. Though Machen's white people do not attempt to dismember the protagonist, their presence is clearly sinister, and story culminates in the girl's death just as *El laberinto del fauno* culminates in Ofelia's demise.

The initial statues of the Faun and the Pale Man drove home the fact that being 'at home with monsters' is not simply intriguing, as del Toro seems to find it, but uncanny and potentially terrifying. Given that televisions that played clips from del Toro's movies flanked the initial models of the Faun and the Pale Man, the exhibition clearly aspired, at points, to provide the unsettling imagery one has comes to expect from horror films. On the day I attended the exhibition, children visiting with their parents gaped, wide-eyed, at the video clip of a vampire eating a man's brain from del Toro's *Blade II* of 2002. The exhibition itself sometimes resembled the Halloween mazes popular at Los Angeles-area theme parks and elsewhere in the United States, in which actors, wearing sophisticated costumes and prosthetics, frighten willing patrons as they wander through an ominous staged environment, whether a haunted house, hospital overrun by zombies, or the recreated setting of a horror film.[14] Del Toro's creatures, especially when rendered in lifelike model form, changed the museum into an environment that resembled other modes of popular horror consumption. Perhaps unwittingly, the exhibition reproduced elements of the Victorian Gothic that Ruth Hoberman sees tamed by late-Victorian fiction about the museum and, in certain objects, created potentially startling or surprising reactions in museum-goers through the visual and animatronic technologies of the film studios and theme parks that are hallmarks of the Los Angeles area. Despite its intimate relationship with what is quickly becoming 'the del Toro industry' and its somewhat stereotypical approach to the Victorians, *Guillermo del Toro: At Home with Monsters* provided its audience with an intriguing (re)introduction to Romanticism, elements of the Victorian period, and American popular culture as they are refracted through the lens of del Toro's eclectic imagination.

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Notes

1. *Trollhunters* the television series, unlike the book, is aimed at children and categorised as 'suitable for all audiences'.
2. See the Penguin Random House website at http://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/series/BM8/penguin-horror.
3. A parallel but not identical exhibition of the same title took place at the Minneapolis Institute of Art from 5 March 2017 to 28 May 2017, and another followed at the Art Gallery of Toronto from 30 September 2017 to 8 January 2018. Though no dates have been mentioned, *Guillermo del Toro: At Home with Monsters* is also slated to head to Mexico after its time in Canada.
4. See the LACMA exhibition website at http://www.lacma.org/guillermo-del-toro#about-the-exhibition.
5. See Kuntz's website for videos of both automata: *L'Oracle du Mort*, http://www.artomic.com/automata/L'Oracle%20du%20Mort/output/Oracle.html and *Fakir*, http://www.artomic.com/automata/Fakir/output/Fakir.html.
6. These works include *Guillermo del Toro: Cabinet of Curiosities*; *Guillermo del Toro's* Pan's Labyrinth*: Inside the Creation of a Modern Fairy Tale* (2016); *The Art of* The Strain (2016); Crimson Peak*: The Art of Darkness* (2015); *The Art of* The Book of Life (2014); Pacific Rim: *Man, Machine, & Monsters: The Inner Workings of an Epic Film* (2013); and a less flashy work of fiction with a film tie-in, *Don't Be Afraid of the Dark: Blackwood's Guide to Dangerous Fairies: An Original Tale from the World of* Don't Be Afraid of the Dark (2011).
7. Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) serves as an inspirational text for del Toro. The exhibition plaque for 'Childhood and Innocence' notes that "Ofelia, the heroine of *Pan's Labyrinth* (2006), is dressed to resemble Alice in Wonderland as depicted by illustrator Arthur Rackham, and she similarly traverses from reality into a fantasy realm".

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8. Images of these two works can be viewed on Poor's website: for *Phoenix*, see http://www.brianpoor.com/#!chingaderas1/photostackergallery2=12, and for *Chopin 2.0*, see http://www.brianpoor.com/#!chingaderas2/photostackergallery3=8.
9. Unlike contemporary artist Anthony Rhys, Louie does not appear to have used genuine nineteenth-century photographs as the basis for his painting, but has merely relied on them for inspiration. For more about Rhys's techniques, see Kohlke 2016.
10. See Louie's website for an image of *The Strangler*, http://www.travislouieart.com/curiouspeople/j409b8l1wo7u7n8gb2khw38rs8opzi.
11. See Horne's website for an image of one section of the oil painting, http://www.danielhornestudios.com/crimsonpeak.htm.
12. Thanks to a member of the editorial board for making the connection between del Toro's Angel and the Blake illustration. For additional information about Blake's chalk, pen and ink, and watercolour illustration, see the Blake Archive: http://www.blakearchive.org.
13. Salvesen makes a parallel point about the restive nature of objects in del Toro's films, noting that del Toro's objects "have powers and destinies of their own"; she also suggests that del Toro's obsession with eyes (often eye injuries) allows him to "comment[] on the ocularcentrism of modern museum and film culture" (Salvesen 2016: 24, 25).
14. Thanks to Ryan Quan for making this observation.

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