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44^e Festival International du Film de La Rochelle

Screening of *Carnival of Souls* (USA, Herk Harvey, 1962)

With concert by *Invaders*

Friday July 8, 2016

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Most of director Herk Harvey's career in the American film industry was spent writing, directing and producing a variety of short industrial and educational films. In 1962, he produced and directed his first and only feature film: a low-budget horror film starring Candace Hilligoss entitled *Carnival of Souls*. Since its initial release and failure at the box office, *Carnival of Souls* has become a cult classic; it is one of those films that surfaces at film festivals or on late-night Halloween TV-specials every now and then. Accompanied by a new, frenzied, original score composed and performed live by Invaders (a duo created solely to work on *Carnival of Souls*), the screening in La Rochelle turned out to be a full-blown sensory experience.

For this unique performance, French musicians and composers Nicolas Courret (drummer of rock band Eiffel) and David Euverte (known for his work with Dominique A) produced a hybrid electro music composition, in between the soundtracks of John Carpenter and the more recent work undertaken by electronic musicians such as John Talabot, composer Cliff Martinez in his film scores, and Kyle Dixon and Michael Stein (S U R V I V E) when working on the Netflix series *Stranger Things* (2016). These artists' work might be said to represent a darker, more pervasive side to today's experimental house music, always oppressive, thrilling and sometimes inviting wonder (for instance, the theme song of *Stranger Things*) or interweaving anguished screams and creaking doors within a deeply threatening yet elating composition (Talabot's "Oro y Sangre"). This choice of using a slightly anachronistic musical genre to accompany the film efficiently participates in the reinvention of a troubling atmosphere similar to that of Gene Moore's 1962 original score, all the while re-contextualising it and tying it back to 1970-1980s pop culture and B-movies. Indeed, it creates a musical link back to the popularization of synthesizers (made available to the public in the mid-1960s) that were largely used in horror and science fiction films, as they made available a wider sound palette to film music composers on a single instrument. The economic advantages of the synthesizer might also explain why it became a staple piece in many B-movies scores (most famously, perhaps, in Carpenter's films), along with the rapid development of electronic music throughout the 1970-1980s, until it became a rather popular music genre.

A long, slow minute of calculated silence drags by before the noise starts. The two musicians of *Invaders* are standing stock still on each side of the unlit screen, facing a set of drums, a bass synthesizer and a computer (Nicolas Courret), as well as an additional three synthesizers and a mixing table (David Euverte). In the darkness, the chattering of the audience has subsided, and yet everyone seems to be hesitating on whether to repress a queeting whisper to their neighbour or perhaps to let out a discreet cough. The screening of *Carnival of Souls* has been kept quite a mystery by the festival organizers, and therefore, suspended in tense silence, we are left to wonder about the performance on the verge of unfolding before us. It starts with a drop of water, almost too loud, its reverberations echoing throughout the movie theater long enough for us to picture the ripples it must have left behind. Drops keep falling, lazily, one after another in the dark. The use of this repeated sound is undoubtedly a bit cliché—a classic Gothic or *noir* motif—yet it is easy to sink in the chilling, ominous feeling it strives to instil in the audience, and it adumbrates the feeling of oppression the score will elicit. The drops finally fade under a burst of static, and a disturbing buzzing noise that increases and stops abruptly as the screen comes to life.

The movie begins with two cars stopped at a red light. Two men in a first car enjoin three girls seated in another vehicle to follow them in a race towards death. Soon enough, the women's car falls off a bridge into muddy water from which organ player Mary Henry (Hilligoss), the film's main protagonist and the only "survivor," miraculously emerges unharmed hours after the accident, with no memory of it whatsoever. Mary quickly leaves after that, and only turns around once to announce to the audience that she is "never coming back," foreshadowing her own end. She is then seen driving away in her car, as if her futile attempt to flee the site of the accident had led her to start the race all over again. She drives until nightfall, until the music has died down, until the scenery outside is no longer a lush countryside but instead a succession of barren desert hills, and until she finds death—a ghastly and smirking male figure (Herk Harvey) that will

relentlessly pursue her throughout the film, staring at her from the front passenger window where her reflection should be. From then on, the character of Mary seems to stop moving. The stereotypical blond in distress wanders across a fragmented canvas of largely empty spaces. Everything about her is white, ethereal, in complete disconnect with the living, though not totally resembling the dead that repeatedly invade the screen. By day, she is an immobile transparent ghost most people do not even see. “There’s nobody there” (or is it “no body”?), her landlady lets out at some point, as though Mary had already vanished into thin air. The statement, however, is immediately forgotten, as the camera focuses once again on the tormented figure of Mary. She doesn’t move again until dawn, when she becomes a doe-eyed silhouette pursued by mysterious “ghouls.” She is constantly drawn back to a mirage, an abandoned carnival site in the middle of the desert, again and again, until it becomes apparent that she is one of the dead that appears there every day after sunset to dance in endless dizzying circles.

The original film score, composed by Gene Moore in 1962, was almost entirely played on an organ, each piece hinting at Mary’s nature and reflecting her emotions as though she were the one playing. Moreover, the organ’s peculiar sound appears, in the words of Clare Nina Norelli, to “heighten the [film’s] spooky atmosphere due to its ability to work with the audience’s association of the instrument with the funereal and supernatural.” In fact, Moore’s unusual instrumental choice quite clearly recalls the horror film genre in which the organ is an oft-used device foreshadowing ominous events,¹ as well as a lasting sonorous influence behind the synthetic music—played on electric organs—used in such films throughout the decades following the release of *Carnival of Souls*. The score performed by Invaders had little to do with the lugubrious simplicity of the original score—although it kept its similar obsessive structures—as the composers chose to use densely layered synthetic music. Though it might seem an odd choice, the plasticity of such music allowed the composers to organize their score to mirror the film’s plot: the protagonist’s attempt to flee death. Indeed, throughout the screening, the synthetic music often seemed to emulate more organic sounds (notably that of the organ), all the while assuming its entirely artificial sonorous properties by incorporating a variety of machinic sounds (static, clicking noises, metallic screeching, an obviously artificial resonance, etc.) to the score. The different pieces of the score blended together in a series of sometimes carnival-like, drawn-out and repetitive melodies, slowly folding onto themselves, abruptly stopping and starting again, encircling both Mary and the audience in a tight hold. The heavy and fast-paced kick drum beats were in stark opposition with the higher, slower shivery melodies reminiscent of those characterizing the appearance of an alien spaceship in science fiction films or series like *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (20th Fox, Robert Wise, 1951) and *Star Trek* (NBC, 1966-1969), made out of sliding aerial notes merging one into another, and hinting at Mary’s entry into a parallel universe.

Invaders composed the music as a means to draw the audience deeper into the film. Being on stage enabled the musicians to interact with the world of the screen. The music got louder and stifling when associated with closed-in spaces (inside rooms, bars or Mary’s car), but seemed to expand when wider areas of space were shown, as though seeking to explore that space alongside the camera. When Mary turns on her car radio, all other diegetic sounds were swallowed up by the obsessive music, much like her headlights engulfed by the dark road ahead. In the few scenes where Mary herself plays the organ, the 1962 score reappeared only to be distorted and played around with, in a clever interaction between the film’s diegetic music and the pit music being performed.

Moreover, the sound of the film's dialogues was often cut out and replaced by the pit music, so that music would become the characters' sole means of expression (apart from the subtitles included for a screening in France). Although it might have masked some of the double entendre scattered throughout the film, it proved to be a compelling strategy to influence the audience's perception of different characters, without even needing to use the recording of the characters' voices. On one notable occasion, *Invaders* even tampered with the sound recording of the dialogue. For instance, in the scene where it is implied that Mary may have gone crazy, the characters' voices are heard as though we were underwater, echoing and progressively plunging us into an incomprehensible mumbo-jumbo.

"The world is so different in daylight," Mary says at one point, "But in the dark, your fantasies get so out of hand. In the daylight, everything falls back into place again." Ultimately, the music used in this performance was very much an extension of the screen into our own world, a means to express the time and space depicted on screen within the small, intimate movie theater. Walking out of there was like walking out of an uncanny dream, not quite a nightmare, but a captivating fantasy gone awry. In the end, Mary vanishes from the carnival, leaving behind a handprint in the sand. Her pale body is pulled back from the waters of the muddy river. Afterwards, I wondered whether anyone could still hear the falling drops or if it was just my imagination.

Carnival of Souls. Directed and Produced by Herk Harvey. Written by Herk Harvey and John Clifford. Starring Candace Hilligoss (Mary Henry), Frances Feist (Mrs. Thomas, Landlady), Sydney Berger (John Linden) and Art Ellison (Minister). Music by Gene Moore. Cinematography by Maurice Prather. Harcourt Productions, 1962.

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NOTES

1. Bach's "Toccatà and Fugue in D minor" is probably one of the best well known example of a pipe organ piece that has been used in numerous horror films since its first filmic occurrence in Rouben Mamoulian's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1931).

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