“It Was a Scene of Life in the Rough”: Herman Melville, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Paracinema

Michael Petitti
In “Cistern and Buckets,” Chapter 78 of Moby-Dick (1851), Tashtego—a “wild Indian” harpooner—falls into a sperm whale’s “great Heidelburgh Tun,” or the cavity in its head, containing spermaceti (Melville, Moby-Dick 270). Eventually, Tashtego is rescued by Queequeg in a vivid, extended metaphorical birthing sequence, where Melville writes,

had Tashtego perished in that head, it had been a very precious perishing; smothered in the very whitest and daintiest of fragrant spermaceti; coffined, hearsed, and tombed in the secret inner chamber and sanctum sanctorum of the whale. Only one sweeter end can readily be recalled—the delicious death of an Ohio honey-hunter, who seeking honey in the crotch of a hollow tree, found such exceeding store of it, that leaning too far over, it sucked him in, so that he died embalmed. (272-73)

What sort of reactions do we now expect this passage to elicit from readers? To start, modern readers might be drawn to the innuendo of dying by either drowning in whale spermaceti or being sucked into a tree’s honey-crotch. Some readers may connect this moment to the novel’s unique obsession with sexuality, including anatomy in the case of “The Cassock” (Chapter 95), a chapter concerned with the whale’s “very strange, enigmatical object”; that is to say, its penis (Melville, Moby-Dick 324). Additionally, Melville scholars may connect the passage to the homoeroticism identified throughout Moby-Dick, finding a later echo during “A Squeeze of the Hand” (Chapter 94), where Ishmael and other sailors work to squeeze crystallizing spermaceti. This latter moment “has often been interpreted as being indicative of a hidden homoerotic drive in
Melville” (Bellini 29). Either way, many passages from *Moby-Dick* might seem coded to current readers.

3 Certain readers may connect these moments from *Moby-Dick* to Susan Sontag’s infamous “sensibility” of Camp (Sontag 259). A sensibility that cannot be deliberately enacted, Camp is a slippery concept. Sontag argues that Camp is a byproduct rather than a practice, stating, “pure examples of Camp are unintentional; they are dead serious” (Sontag 265). Melville’s project with *Moby-Dick* is indeed dead serious. It would be misleading to suggest that any of Melville’s ribald innuendo or ecclesiastical sexuality does anything to trivialize his narrative or thematic concerns.

*Moby-Dick* is above all concerned with a decidedly American form of eschatology—one told through an epic parable of a man and a “fish.” Nevertheless, *Moby-Dick* is also a cultural document. It has gone from unappreciated to canonized; it has been endlessly dissected and analyzed; it has been adapted into countless forms (graphic novels, films, spin-offs); and, as any artwork with staying power, it has become ripe for a Camp recontextualization.

4 Camp is not merely a tool for literary analysis—it encompasses many media. Sontag finds its sensibility especially activated by film (citing movies from *Samson and Delilah*, 1949, to *Rodan*, 1956, to *On the Beach*, 1959). As *Moby-Dick* cannot reasonably be adapted in toto as a feature film, the best hope is to strip-mine it. The result becomes a lesser product and, therefore, one with failure at its core. Cinematic essentializing of Melville’s novel reveals “the chasm between intellectual and popular art,” which happens when filmmakers transform Melville’s “multi-volumed extravaganza, his undefinable picaresque novel-treatise-allegory-epic-tragedy” into something that fits the length of a feature film (Stone 171). This was certainly the case with John Huston’s 1956 adaptation. However, these cinematic dilutions of *Moby-Dick* also transformed Melville’s work into something else: paracinema.

5 Paracinema is neither a subgenre nor a technical approach to filmmaking. Instead, it is “a particular reading protocol, a counter-aesthetic turned subcultural sensibility devoted to all manner of cultural detritus” (Sconce 372). This is where the two concepts—Camp and paracinema—are alike. It has been noted how “one of the primary slippages with respect to camp is how it can describe an active, strategic performance... as well as the mere reception of a particular event or person” (Shugart and Waggoner 29). Similarly, the cult cinema at the heart of Jeffrey Sconce’s seminal 1995 article on paracinema identifies for assessment everything from “splatterpunk,” to “sword and sandal epics,” from “Elvis flicks,” to “juvenile delinquency documentaries” (Sconce 372). Just what sort of films should be classified as paracinema has become a matter of debate, and any “broader adoption of a paracinematic approach leaves questions about what this includes and excludes” (Barefoot 19). There is one significant distinction between Camp and paracinema: “Camp is a term that has a long history of usage which extends far beyond cinema itself, whereas paracinema is a word that more specifically applies to cult cinema” (Mathijs and Sexton 86). Curiously, Melville and Hawthorne have become fodder for cult cinema.

6 Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) was adapted, in 1995, in a profoundly sensationalized manner. For his adaptation, director Roland Joffé opted to centralize the sexual tensions at the margins of Hawthorne’s work; presumably, in a plea for mainstream success. Instead, *The Scarlet Letter* (1995) can be seen as a poster child for “BADaptation... a concept employed to engage with and challenge those approaches to
adaptation and remaking that routinely employ a rhetoric of betrayal and degradation, of ‘infidelity’ to some idealized original” (Verevis 216). For instance, in Joffé’s *The Scarlet Letter*, Demi Moore’s Hester Prynne “bathes more than anyone else in the seventeenth century,” in an obvious ploy on the part of filmmakers to sensationalize Hawthorne’s source material for modern audiences (Daniels 4). “BADaptation” requires that a film “reprograms the social function of the work, reorienting it for a new... audience, eschewing its critique,” in a way that also tempers “the production... through its commercial orientation” (Verevis 225, author’s emphasis). By adapting *The Scarlet Letter* into something sexier and more commercial, the filmmakers evacuated the social function of Hawthorne’s novel. In such cases, paracinematic readings offer a lens for drawing out what is fascinating about a failure like Joffé’s *The Scarlet Letter*.

Even though he is speaking of paracinema, Sconce could also be talking about Camp when he identifies paracinema as “a most elastic textual category” (372). Things overlap the most when it comes to the practitioners of each. For instance, Sontag’s audience for Camp has shifted from “an improvised self-elected class, mainly homosexuals, who constitute themselves as aristocrats of taste” (Sontag 290) to, now, “an ironic viewing/reading practice that is only available to an elite audience” (Shugart and Waggoner 27). Similarly, even as he is defining paracinema audiences “in opposition to... cultural and economic elites,” an audience who did not “care much for the activities of film scholars and critics,” Sconce also acknowledges an inherent paradox within his conception (374). Specifically, paracinematic culture also requires education—autodidactic or otherwise—to function. Therefore, Sconce argues that paracinematic viewers are “particularly rich with ‘cultural capital’ and thus [possess] a level of textual/critical sophistication similar to the cineastes they construct as their nemesis” (375). In certain ways, the battleground between the native users of the concepts of Camp and paracinema, and the cultural elites who have taken them up, mirrors the culture wars during Melville and Hawthorne’s era.

Before we go much further, however, it is important to draw a line of distinction. For this essay, I will mostly utilize paracinema to analyze the two adaptations of Melville and Hawthorne’s works: *Twice-Told Tales* (1963) and *2010: Moby Dick* (2010). As Camp is a kindred sensibility, it will occasionally slide into view. However, to apply any sort of paracinematic close reading to these films, I must first detail how a shift in cultural tastes and sensibilities in the United States—from the nineteenth, into the twentieth, and even the twenty-first centuries—shaped these particular adaptations. Ultimately, I hope that applying a paracinematic approach to these two films reveals how many factors—particularly class and taste—have colored the legacies of Melville and Hawthorne.

Literary critic Van Wyck Brooks officially coined the terms Highbrow and Lowbrow in *America’s Coming-of-Age*, a 1915 book-length essay. Brooks wrote about the duality of American “attitudes of mind” that “have been phrased once for all in our vernacular as Highbrow and Lowbrow” (Brooks). In a 1949 issue of *Life*, Russell Lynes adapted his own article about the High-Brows, Middle-Brows and Low-Brows into a visual chart. In both cases, the writers were being cheeky—in the end, Brooks advocated for “nobrow” culture—yet their distinctions revealed something about art and taste in the twentieth century. For example, in the nineteenth century, “[o]pera in America, like Shakespeare in America, was not presented as a sacred text; it was performed by artists who felt free to embellish and alter, add and subtract” (Levine 89-90). In fact, during Hawthorne and
Melville’s lifetime, “[it] was common too for opera to be presented along with other forms of popular entertainment, often being preceded or followed by comic plays” (Levine 90). As the American theatrical content of the era mixed the elite with the common, so did its audience makeup.

An illustrative example of the extent to which class differences can be found in Hawthorne’s recollection of an evening at the theater (May 8) in his notebooks. During an 1850 performance of “Jack the Giant Killer” at the National Theater in Boston, Hawthorne observed,

> [t]he theater itself is for the middling and lower classes; and I had not taken my seat in the most aristocratic part of the house, so that I found myself surrounded chiefly by young sailors, Hanover-street shopmen, mechanics and other people of that kidney. It is wonderful! the difference that exists in the personal aspect and dress, and no less in the manners, of the people in this quarter of the city, as compared with others…. It was a scene of life in the rough. (American Note-Books 381-84)

Awed as he sounds, Hawthorne continues to elaborate on his fellow audience members, exhibiting casual racism along the way (“Her companion... was so dark, that I rather suspected her to have a tinge of African blood”). This entry marks “a useful example of how anxieties over class and gender emerging at mid-century were sometimes managed by aesthetes such as Hawthorne” (Anthony 440). Nevertheless, Hawthorne was not the only aesthete who had found the theater to be a fertile space for cultural anthropology.

Approximately one year before Hawthorne’s theatrical observations the infamous 1849 Astor Place Opera House riot of May 10 took place. The riot proved “a conflict which crystallized distinctions between working-class audiences of lowbrow productions such as melodramas or minstrel shows and the city’s elite purveyors of highbrow productions such as the opera” (Anthony 440). The riot stemmed from a prior incident when members of the working class drove William Charles Macready, a well-regarded English Shakespearean, from the stage “with catcalls, rotten eggs, and the vile-smelling drug asafoetida” (Berthold 429). Working class audiences preferred Edwin Forrest, an American Shakespearean. Following the disruption of Macready’s performance there was a petition printed in the New York Herald on May 9, 1849, which urged the actor back to the stage. The petition assured Macready that “the good sense and respect for order” would guarantee that his future performances were not interrupted (Berthold 429). One of the signatories (there were 47) was Herman Melville. The following day, however, when Macready took the stage to perform in Macbeth, “[t]en to fifteen thousand working-class New Yorkers gathered outside the Opera House and pelted it with bricks and stones,” resulting in the National Guard firing into the crowd and killing 22 (including children and innocent bystanders) and injuring 38 more (Berthold 430). If the Astor Place Opera House riot was “in essence a struggle for power and cultural authority within theatrical space,” and one that would precipitate “the cultural changes that came to characterize the United States at the end of the century,” it found Melville caught in the middle of these changes (Levine 68).

Melville may have wrestled with what it meant to sign the petition. On the one hand, “[f]or all his irony and subversiveness, Melville shared many of the political and aesthetic values of the other forty-six petitioners, men who found in Macready a representative of artistic subtlety and sophistication” (Berthold 432). Yet Melville might have also signed for business reasons. The petition was spearheaded by many men involved in the Young America movement, including Evert Duyckinck, who was...
Melville’s literary mentor during the author’s time in New York. Even so, Melville’s “signature on the petition was more than a personal favor to Duyckinck; it was a logical step in his increasing identification with the cultural aspirations of the Whig elite” (Berthold 436). Unlike with Hawthorne—who would write the biography of President Franklin Pierce and serve under him as U.S. consul in Liverpool—this petition was the only time Melville would openly dabble in (even cultural) politics. Regardless, the riot did help calcify Melville’s idea of art “as a stay against social anarchy” because “[i]f being a democrat meant supporting a mob … Melville would side with authority and tradition, even if their power to minimize class differences lasted only as long as a play” (Berthold 453).

What is ultimately revealed by events like the Astor Place Opera House riot is that during Hawthorne and Melville’s time there was an increasing “sacralization” of art in America (Levine 139). This sacralization “increased the distance between amateur and professional” by looking to European art and religious art (theater and opera could draw from both) as a template (Levine 139-40). As such, theater and opera became the exclusive domain of the highbrow, while the distinctly American art (vaudeville and popular songs) was left to the masses, and thus lowbrow. Wealthy patrons had shifted the influence of what sort of theater got produced, and for whom. With the ensuing explosion of nickelodeons and movie palaces, the divisions between highbrow and lowbrow art became clearer. Elsewhere, publishing played a significant role.

Thanks to the “inventions of the steamboat and the railroad and the extension of literacy,” publishing had become “a commercial industry with the technical capacity to produce for a mass audience by 1830” (Radway, Romance 22). By the time of Hawthorne’s Twice-Told Tales reprint (1842), and certainly by the release of Moby-Dick (1851), “book charges had dropped so low” that a work “could be purchased from one of three sources for as little as six cents” (Radway, Romance 24). The result was that literature in the United States could now be consumed by the masses. With this increased access, literary tastes changed. Serializations and romances thrived in America, and authors like Melville and Hawthorne were negatively impacted: “the goals of maximizing sales and pleasing already-identified audiences were imposed tacitly on writers who could never have appealed to a mass audience even if they had so wished. Hawthorne, Melville, and James were only a few of those who suffered as a result of this early conceptual confusion in the publishing industry” (Radway, Romance 25). Yet Melville and Hawthorne’s literary fates were not the same.

In a letter dated July 17, 1852, Melville praised the “ubiquitous” nature of Hawthorne’s literary fame by acknowledging spotting people with copies of his friend’s work in “Brooklyne,” Boston, and “the solitary Crusoeish island of Naushon [in Massachusetts]” (“Letter to Nathaniel Hawthorne, July 17 1852”). This consideration of Hawthorne’s fame seemed to be connected to Melville’s doubts about his own. In a letter from June 1851, Melville complained, “[w]hen I speak of posterity, in reference to myself, I only mean the babies who will probably be born in the moment immediately ensuing upon my giving up the ghost…. Typee will be given to them, perhaps, with their gingerbread” (“Letter to Nathaniel Hawthorne, June [1?] 1851”). For all his self-deprivation, Melville cared deeply about being successful as a writer. Not only did he work tirelessly on his craft, but he also traveled “to a paper mill by sleigh… buying his own store of fine paper,” confirming his “sense of himself as a craftsman” (Thompson 54). Melville went so far as to finish Moby-Dick “on machine-produced paper” because its ultimate
legibility was so important to him (Thompson 54). These efforts, along with his signing
of the Astor Place petition out of career anxiety, illuminate Melville’s professional
concerns.

The result of the fast-evolving publishing landscape of the mid-nineteenth century was
that it siloed off books and authors along class lines. By the early twentieth century, the
creation of Pocket Books, Avon, Popular Library, and Dell, as well as “the invention
of synthetic glue,” all “helped add speed to the publication of the mass-market
paperback” (Radway, Romance 27). As expected, this mass-market paperback craze
furthered readers’ desires for popular genres like gothic romances and mystery. In
response, there was a push to canonize ‘classics’ of literature during this period,
including the works of Hawthorne and Melville. These intellectual class wars were
connected to John Erskine’s Great Books series and Harry Scherman’s Book-of-the-
Month Club. Erskine’s series found its outlet in universities, while Scherman’s club
circulated around “a perceptive social observer who understood keenly the rich
cultural meaning attached to the book at a transitional moment in American history”
(Radway, Feeling 161). All these factors coalesced to help the paperback industry
explode, as sales “ballooned from 95 million in 1947 to 250 million in 1952” (Matthews
323). Comic books would prove another factor in how Melville and Hawthorne’s work
would be understood.

By 1949, comic books were enough of a phenomenon—60 million sold in the U.S. every
month—that The Nation would decry their effects, claiming, “[w]e would be the first to
acknowledge that a generation of Americans has been driven several degrees toward
illiteracy by the ‘comic’ book” (qtd. in Matthews 320). Some within the industry
emphatically resisted such proclamations. In fact, Albert Kanter, a Russian immigrant
and the publisher behind Classics Illustrated, considered his project to be a patriotic one.
As an immigrant, Kanter believed that comic adaptations of “good books” would “stress
Americana and democracy at work,” and so, to these ends, Classics Illustrated “adapted
over 169 ‘masterpieces’ of literature in 1,343 printings, in twenty-six languages, and for
thirty-six countries,” resulting in “putting hundreds of millions of ‘classic’ books into
the hands of young and old American citizen-readers” (Matthews 323). Furthermore,
comic books like Classics Illustrated were linked with other “mid-century mass reading
advocacy” that included the Great Books Program and the Book-of-the-Month Club. At
the same time, comics were seen as a great tool for indoctrination at a time when
America wished to emphasize that “a good citizen is a good reader,” which meant that
less literary formats, like comics, could “attract and reassure allies… combat and stifle
Communist propaganda, and … inform and empower U.S. citizens so that they could
responsibly participate in the democratic process” (Matthews 320). Much of this bluster
was commercially motivated.

Abridged by necessity, Classics Illustrated blurred “the lines between high and low
culture,” as they were “collapsing the distance between intellectual edification and
commodity consumption” (Matthews 321). In addition to life, liberty, and the pursuit of
happiness, comic books also indoctrinated young readers with a fusion between
highbrow literature and lowbrow consumption. By abridging, further sensationalizing,
and even bowdlerizing the originals, Classics Illustrated helped essentialize characters
and themes of classic literature while bronzing one-dimensional reputations for the
authors. Classics Illustrated, alongside other projects of mass market literacy, helped
fortify the American canon. As such, “adaptations of Irving, Melville, Twain, Cooper,
Hawthorne, and Stowe” revealed “the comic’s part in and commitment to the growing American literary canon” (Matthews 325). For Melville and Hawthorne, this bolstering of their works and reputations also worked in concert with film. *Moby-Dick* was adapted twice in the silent and early sound era (1926 and 1930, respectively), while, proving that even in this new landscape Hawthorne’s popularity reigned supreme, *The Scarlet Letter* was adapted three times as a silent film and once as an early sound film.

Despite its name, writer-producer Robert E. Kent’s 1963 film adaptation of *Twice-Told Tales* (1837/1842), starring Vincent Price, features only one story from Hawthorne’s titular collection—the opening “Dr. Heidegger’s Experiment”. The second segment (“Dr. Rappaccini’s Daughter”) is from another of Hawthorne’s collections, *Mosses from an Old Manse* (1846), while the third is a substantially abridged version of his novel *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851). However, the reasons for which Kent settled on *Twice-Told Tales* as the title seem crass. During Halloween 1962, shortly after concluding their work on *Diary of a Madman* (1963), Kent and Price began work on “The Corpse-Makers,” as *Twice-Told Tales* was briefly titled, but the name was “changed to cash in the success of *Tales of Terror*,” a 1962 Corman / Price American International Pictures (AIP) film (Meikle 100). Indirectly, AIP is responsible for many of the ails of *Twice-Told Tales*.

During the 1960s, AIP struck upon a goldmine when it decided to adapt the works of Edgar Allan Poe into a series of b-films directed by Roger Corman and starring Vincent Price. Beginning in 1960 with *House of Usher* and culminating in 1964 with *The Tomb of Ligeia*, Corman and Price managed to whip through eight Poe adaptations, some of which overlapped with Price’s work with Kent. These films lionized Poe as the master of the macabre, and, as importantly, connected Price’s name with creaky adaptations of classic horror literature. Accuracy was never the concern. *The Haunted Palace* (1963) drew only its title from a Poe poem (the film was listed in the poster and opening credits as “Edgar Allan Poe’s *The Haunted Palace*”). In truth, however, it was an adaptation of an H. P. Lovecraft work. This helps explain the deceptive nature of Kent’s adaptation of Hawthorne’s *Twice-Told Tales*.

Hawthorne’s reputation mattered considerably less to Robert Kent than nabbing Vincent Price, who was the reason *Twice-Told Tales* could be made at all. Throughout the 1950s circumstances like a ‘star shortage’ and an inconsistent stream of Hollywood studio product meant that gimmick stars, like Price, and independent film companies, like AIP, could seize control of the theatrical market. Price—an actor with a “fey, cuckolded sensitivity, prompting a 1960 *Time* magazine article to call [him] ‘sort of a sissified Bela Lugosi’”—moved from supporting roles in Hollywood noirs, Westerns, and romance pictures during the 1940s into being a lead in successful horror films in the 1950s and 1960s (Heffernan 97). Price also took advantage of the contract-free film industry of the era by working with various studios and companies, including Warner Bros (*House of Wax*, 1953), Fox (*The Fly*, 1958), Allied Artists (*House on Haunted Hill*, 1959), and Columbia (*The Tingler*, 1959). By the time Price connected with Corman, he was a proven box office success. So when *Twice-Told Tales* was released, “the incorporation of Vincent Price’s name in a cast-roller could have financed an adaptation of the fables of Aesop” (Meikle 100).

If American International Pictures was low-budget, Kent’s Admiral Pictures was below shoestring. By 1959, AIP was “with Disney, the most consistently profitable studio in Hollywood” (Cook 323). Unlike AIP—running from 1955 to 1980—Admiral Pictures only survived for approximately six years. Luckily for Kent, Hawthorne was “another writer
whose work fortuitously resided in the public domain,” while Price was available between AIP commitments for the back-to-back shooting of Diary of a Madman and Twice-Told Tales (Meikle 100). Unfortunately, audiences and critics alike demanded more. Motion Picture Herald may well have been speaking of Admiral Pictures when it identified imitators of AIP’s formula as “catch-penny opportunists who seek to take fly-by-night advantage of an era of scarcity by whipping out on minimum money a film that has little but running time to fill a desperate theater exhibitor’s screen and marquee” (qtd. in Heffernan 105). Not only did Kent skimp on the resources around Price, but Corman, as time revealed, was also a far more creative, ingenious director than Kent. As with most paracinema, Kent’s adaptation of Twice-Told Tales also distilled the source material. Kent vacated all the complexity from Hawthorne’s work and turned it into a collection of “overly simplistic and decidedly old-fashioned moral allegories” (Meikle 100). At the time of their publication, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and fellow b-film target Edgar Allan Poe had praised the complexity of Hawthorne’s tales in their reviews. Longfellow celebrated the “vein of pleasant philosophy” (24) in Twice-Told Tales, while Poe effusively claimed, “[t]he style of Mr. Hawthorne is purity itself. His tone is singularly effective—wild, plaintive, thoughtful, and in full accordance with his themes” (Poe 32, author’s emphasis). Such richness did not make it to the screen.

While Corman’s Poe / Price AIP films utilized psychedelic chiaroscuro, suggestive bodices, and canted angles in a nod to the youthful, spunky, and chemically-altered counter-culture of its era, Kent’s Twice-Told Tales is staid and sexless. In a 1967 review of Twice-Told Tales for the Monthly Film Bulletin, after the film’s UK re-release, the critic concludes, “[i]t is hard to credit that this film was made in the Sixties. You have to go a long way today to see such badly finished sets, such pantomime lighting, and so many streaky make-up jobs larding such two-dimensional performances.... Even collectors of Vincent Price will discover little to treasure in Twice Told Tales [sic]” (“Twice Told Tales”). Elsewhere, Variety hedged, stating, “[p]romising horror trade item. Literary sources brutalized and details vulnerable to faulting, but those who go for Poe should like this bowdlerized Hawthorne” (Quin 6). As paracinema can champion or disparage films within its purview, it neatly encapsulates both the serviceable Corman / Price Poe adaptations as well as the trainwreck Hawthorne ones by Joffé and Kent.

“Dr. Heidegger’s Experiment” is perhaps a standout from Hawthorne’s Twice-Told Tales. In the story, Dr. Heidegger, “a very singular man,” invites four friends—“all melancholy old creatures, who had been unfortunate in life, and whose greatest misfortune it was that they were not long ago in their graves”—to his home for an experiment that involves an elixir that provides (fleeting) youth to the group (“Dr. Heidegger’s Experiment” 165). For Kent’s version of the tale, the didactic core of Hawthorne’s tale is abandoned in favor of a revenge story in the vein of nearly every Poe adaptation by Corman / Price. Kent’s segment is set on a stormy night as Dr. Carl Heidegger (Sebastian Cabot) and his closest friend, Alex (Vincent Price) meet to celebrate the doctor’s birthday. Heidegger is still melancholy, decades later, because his fiancé, Sylvia, had died before their wedding day. Conveniently, Sylvia was laid to rest in a crypt on Heidegger’s property. As with Hawthorne’s story, the cinematic Heidegger also keeps a withered rose that Sylvia was meant to wear on their wedding day. Whereas the rose becomes proof of concept for Dr. Heidegger’s friends in Hawthorne’s tale—reanimating to full bloom once the elixir has been sprinkled on it—for the film segment Heidegger’s rose becomes a secondary experimental object. Prior to
reanimating it, Price and Cabot notice that a curious rivulet of water dripping onto Sylvia’s crypt has actually preserved her corpse at the age she was at her death. Naturally, Kent has the trio all quaff the potion, bringing youth to the men and reanimating Sylvia. During this process, it is also revealed that Alex was responsible for poisoning Sylvia before her and Heidegger’s wedding. (Alex and Sylvia were having an affair that would have ended, apparently, if she had wed.) After a sloppy on-screen tussle between Cabot and Price, Heidegger is accidentally stabbed to death, and the vial, with the remaining liquid, is broken. Worse yet, Alex discovers that the potion only provides temporary relief, and, inconveniently, the rivulet of the elixir from the crypt has dried up. Kent’s actual gimcrack reveal, with a clunky pan-and-zoom at the base of the stairs, is that Sylvia has now returned to her natural state: a skeleton in a wedding dress. In fact, this image of the desiccated Sylvia was exploited by the theatrical poster for the film.

The playful philosophy undergirding Hawthorne’s “Dr. Heidegger’s Experiment” is rendered obsolete by Kent’s adaptation. In Hawthorne, with each sip of the magical “Fountain of Youth” potion that the quartet takes, “the exhilarating gush of young life shot through their veins” (“Dr. Heidegger’s Experiment” 172). Since it functions as a didactic tale, this group also manages to knock the vase containing the precious liquid off the table. This is not because of a violent fight in Hawthorne’s text, but rather because two of the men wish to dance with the now-youthful Madame Wycherly. For the film, Kent felt the need to raise the stakes of this moment (losing an opportunity to exploit sexual frisson), resulting in the loss of the elixir and the accidental stabbing death of Dr. Heidegger. However, Kent keeps upping the ante. Cabot’s death is followed by the reveal of the liquid’s transient charm by having Price and Cabot’s faces age through a series of transitions, its silliness topped only by Sylvia’s skeletal reveal. Meanwhile, Hawthorne’s story ends with Dr. Heidegger learning his lesson from his friend’s behavior and vowing to never again pursue the Fountain of Youth’s liquid. This is followed with a commentary on human foolishness, stating, “the doctor’s four friends had taught no such lesson to themselves. They resolved forthwith to make a pilgrimage to Florida, and quaff at morning, noon, and night, from the Fountain of Youth” (“Dr. Heidegger’s Experiment” 175). Paracinema does not allow a viewer to escape into its created world. Therefore, Kent’s Twice-Told Tales—whether his liberties with Hawthorne’s material, or its moody, cheap Victorian sets of darkly illuminated New England manors and foley lightning-riddled crypts—resists any immersion into the simulacrum of its world.

“Rappaccini’s Daughter” from Kent’s Twice-Told Tales is the most faithfully adapted. (Granted that the story is not from the titular collection.) However, despite its relative faithfulness, Kent is still unable to adapt the nuance of Hawthorne’s original. Specifically, at the start of his story, Hawthorne claims that it originates in a collection by M. de l’Aubépine, a writer who “seems to occupy an unfortunate position between the Transcendentalists … and the great body of pen-and-ink men who address the intellect and sympathies of the multitude” (Hawthorne, “Rappaccini’s Daughter” 318). Hawthorne uses this framing gimmick to poke fun at himself, writing, “[de l’Aubépine] generally contents himself with a very slight embroidery of outward manners,—the faintest possible counterfeit of real life,—and endeavors to create an interest by some less obvious peculiarity of the subject” (318). This self-effacing framework provides an accurate assessment of Hawthorne’s writing. Furthermore, ‘de l’Aubépine’ is French for ‘hawthorn,’ and was the nickname given to the writer “on a holiday in Maine in 1837,
and he sometimes used it afterward to sign letters to his fiancée” (McIntosh 228). Hawthorne also writes that de l'Aubépine’s bibliography includes “Contes deux fois racontées,” or ‘twice-told tales’ (“Rappaccini’s Daughter” 319). This metatext would be difficult to retain in Kent’s horror anthology—or, more accurately, Kent is not the caliber of filmmaker to effectively pull it off. What is worthy of commentary here is the fact that Kent has Price narrate the intros and outros for each segment of Twice-Told Tales, suggesting that integrating Hawthorne’s framework would not be unthinkable.

One of the most impactful emendations to “Rappaccini’s Daughter” is far subtler. Near the conclusion of the segment, Beatrice Rappaccini (Joyce Taylor)—whose blood courses with poison due to her father’s experiments—seeks to break off her romance with the young student, Giovanni Guasconti (Brett Halsey). In Hawthorne’s story, this moment serves as Giovanni’s awakening to the nefarious intentions of the titular family. Giovanni recognizes that he is being used as a pawn between daughter and father. In turn, he is furious about Beatrice’s deception, noting, “[a]t least... her poison has not yet insinuated itself into my system. I am no flower to perish in her grasp” (“Rappaccini’s Daughter” 344). Beatrice, however, is ignorant of her father’s experiments and its potential to harm others. Giovanni is further disarmed as she pleads, “[n]ot for a world of bliss would I have done it” (348). In the film, Kent flips this moment by having Beatrice recognize her father’s cruel experiment, and, as a result, withdraw from Giovanni. Kent’s decision here empowers Beatrice, shifting her from Hawthorne’s naïve, tragic figure. This choice is the most modern aspect of Kent’s adaptation, aligning Beatrice (slightly) with the era’s second-wave feminism. It perhaps also aligns with Hawthorne’s intent. Margaret Fuller, a close friend of Hawthorne’s, published “Rappaccini’s Daughter” “in the Democratic Review, a journal committed to women’s issues” (Easton 87). To Fuller, Hawthorne’s story was able to “embody truths of profound importance” such as “the loveliest idea of love and beauty of feminine purity” (Fuller 41). In this way, the unnamed daughter of the story’s title—rather than Giovanni—becomes its central character in both versions.

The most evident change in the film adaptation of “Rappaccini’s Daughter” is that Rappaccini, played by Price, is an actual character. In Hawthorne’s story, Beatrice’s father is a puppet master whose comeuppance at the end is the only moment that brings him, visibly, into the narrative. Nonetheless, Kent has paid for Vincent Price and, given the actor’s advanced age, there is only one role from Hawthorne’s story that would make sense: Professor Baglioni, Rappaccini’s foil. Instead, Kent opts to draw out the character of Beatrice’s father as a misguided, sympathetic figure, with Price expected to do the heavy lifting that such a turn requires. For example, in the story, Beatrice decides to drink the supposed curative potion Professor Baglioni has given Giovanni to be “purified from evil” (Hawthorne, “Rappaccini’s Daughter” 349). In the film, this moment (which proves fatal) is framed as a rebellion against her father’s machinations. This allows Kent to depict a concocted standoff between Beatrice and her father that allows Price more screentime. In a moment of over-the-top artifice that draws to mind the phoniness to which paracinematic readings are drawn, Price makes the most of his added screentime with an absurd death. At the segment’s end, Price removes his gloves and grabs hold of the notorious poisoned plant in his garden. During this embrace, the plant sputters and slowly poisons (or steams) Rappaccini to death. The whole incident is depicted by having a deep blushing purple rotoscoped onto Price’s steaming hands. Here is where one of Sontag’s Camp maxims feels perfectly illustrative: “It is the difference ... between the thing as meaning something,
anything, and the thing as pure artifact” (Sontag 281). Hawthorne’s moral tale of jealousy and love becomes, in Kent’s adaptation, something to be ogled and observed; that is, Vincent Price’s purple, steaming hands.

Finally, there is the longest segment of *Twice-Told Tales*—the film’s two-hour runtime does it no favors—an adaptation of *The House of the Seven Gables*. In Hawthorne’s novel, the history of the Pyncheon family and their claim on the titular house doubles for New England and Hawthorne’s own history, particularly regarding witchcraft and the courts (respectively). The Pyncheons’ claim to the House of the Seven Gables fuels the intergenerational mystery at the heart of the novel. The novel found an admirer in Melville—“We think the book, for pleasantness of running interest, surpasses the other works of the author” (Melville, “Letter of Herman Melville” 23)—while others, like Henry James, praised its themes more than its structure, claiming the novel “never wholly fructifies” (James 54). What it certainly manages is to serve as perhaps Hawthorne’s strongest commentary yet on class—“a deep, fearful interest” in the subject (Easton 92). It was written during a time when “Hawthorne himself experienced … bourgeois existence … yet remained highly vulnerable to economic uncertainty” (Easton 92). This complexity is particularly ill-suited to being reduced to a portion of an anthology film, so, naturally, cue Robert Kent.

In *The House of the Seven Gables* Hawthorne creates the character of Holgrave (“master of a number of media—music, authorship, daguerreotyping”) to serve as a stand-in for the author himself (Baym 64). Illustrating Hawthorne’s class tension between artistry and poverty, Holgrave writes the story of Alice Pyncheon for middle-class magazines and is later revealed to be an ancestor of the Maule family, who initially owned the House of the Seven Gables. Kent sidesteps any such intricacy. Holgrave is absent from the film adaptation, and the multi-faceted Pyncheon family’s story is streamlined: Kent makes the tale entirely about the seizure of the titular house. Holgrave is partially integrated into the narrative as the composite character of Jonathan Maule (Richard Denning). (In utterly confusing fashion, Kent adds an extra ‘l’ to the family name.) Kent’s segment is only interested in depicting the reprehensible Gerald Pyncheon (Price) as he seeks to exchange with Jonathan Maule the titular house for information concerning a vault hidden within it. In short order, Alice (Beverly Garland), Pyncheon’s wife, recognizes her husband’s villainy and falls for Maule. The dynamic for Kent’s segment becomes one of greed and infidelity instead of broaching any of Hawthorne’s material on law, art, place, and family.

As with the rest of his *Twice-Told Tales*, Kent applies a hammer rather than a paintbrush to the act of adaptation. (I have willfully omitted the film’s actual director, Sidney Salkow, who was merely a hired hand meant to enact Kent’s poorly conceived vision.) Excising complex thematic material to adapt two Hawthorne short stories and one novel is only logical, given his framework of a feature film. However, Kent seems to have expunged all of Hawthorne’s nuance and thematic content as well. For instance, Jonathan lacks the depth or sensitivity of Holgrave because, for Kent, he must instead become a mere romantic interest/savior figure for Alice. The vignette greatly reduces the complexity and dynamism of Hawthorne’s novel, replaced by mere atmosphere, stolen from the Corman/Price AIP Poe material. Even the *Variety* review of *Twice-Told Tales* draws specific attention to the demerits of this segment, noting, “[Kent’s] optical effects and mountings are solid, except in the last item, ‘House of the Seven Gables,’ in which the miniature exterior looks very miniature indeed. Interiors in ‘Gables’ are okay
until portraits and walls start oozing ‘blood,’ the orange-ish shade of which is more reminiscent of priming paint than the stuff quested by vampires” (Quin 6). The biggest difference from Hawthorne’s novel can be found at the conclusion of this segment. At the end, the titular house breaks apart (bleeding in the process) into a rumble heap. This moment does not double as an inspired twist on Hawthorne’s novel—where nothing of the sort occurs—but is instead an evident cribbing of the conclusion of Corman’s *House of Usher*, where the house self-destructs in a similar fashion. In this way, it eschews what can be radical about paracinema, which can be “celebrated as unique, courageous and ultimately subversive cinematic experiences” (Sconce 385). *Twice-Told Tales* challenges the paracinematic trait to “[render] the bad into the sublime, the deviant into the defamiliarized” (Sconce 386). Instead, *Twice-Told Tales* is merely a bad deviation of the Corman / Price AIP cycle of Poe films—true paracinematic products.

2010: *Moby Dick* (as its title appears in the opening credits), on the other hand, is pure paracinema. It is also, compared with the lifeless Admiral Pictures rendition of *Twice-Told Tales*, easy to watch and even surprisingly admirable as adaptations go. Occasionally (and confusingly) stylized in reviews as *Moby Dick: 2010*, this adaptation of Melville’s novel proudly announces itself as “a campy third-rate action monster movie” (Dowling 59). Third-rate may be generous. *2010: Moby Dick* is a product of The Asylum, the independent film company responsible for releasing *Sharknado* (2013). (The Asylum’s films are not theatrically released, but available as physical media and/or for streaming.) Despite offering its unique spins on H. G. Wells, Alexander Dumas, and Arthur Conan Doyle, The Asylum has no committed interest in literary adaptations, nor does it make films with a pretense to Academy Award nominations or even theatrical distribution. Presenting a unique challenge to the very concept, The Asylum only seems to make paracinema. But, as Sconce notes about the filmmaker Ed Wood Jr., paracinema—a paragon of filmmaking as excess—sometimes is fused into the content due to the approach of certain filmmakers or film companies.

The Asylum makes cult cinema with a huge wink. Illustrative of the sort of independent film company that can now exist, it hopes to corner a hyper-niche market by offering cheap, cult product. The sustainability of something like The Asylum can be attributed to an amalgam of factors, including atomized audiences with precise, curated cultural tastes, the requirement of quick product necessary to replenish our always-in-deficit streaming landscape, as well as the widespread accessibility and relative affordability of film technologies. Despite its success with *Sharknado*, The Asylum began its life as a direct-to-video company in the late ‘90s. (The company’s first film, *Bellyfruit* from 1999, was a socially conscious film about teenage pregnancy—directed and co-written by Kerri Green of *The Goonies*’ fame.) Currently, The Asylum produces ‘high concept’ horror films that are adjacent enough to proven hits to skirt lawsuits, like *Snakes on a Train* (2006) and *Titanic 666* (2022). The company also releases its films for streaming (it maintains its own channel on Pluto TV) and directly to the SyFy channel. (The Asylum produced the show *Z Nation* for the SyFy network, which often airs their movies).

Sconce’s prognostication about the future of paracinema aligns with the mission of The Asylum. Sconce argued,

Perhaps paracinema has the potential... to answer Brecht’s famous call for an anti-illusionist aesthetic by presenting a cinema so histrionic, anachronistic and excessive that it compels even the most casual viewer to engage it ironically, producing a relatively detached textual space in which to consider, if only
superficially, the cultural, historical and aesthetic politics that shape cinematic representation. (393)

Enter 2010: Moby Dick. It is a film so histrionic, so excessive that it is bound to elicit a paracinematic appreciation from even the most casual viewer. As film scholar David Dowling aptly notes, “The Moby Dick: 2010 whale indeed would love to swallow all of academic discourse, including this article, which it would regard as so much whale watching, but it would pause to wink at the camera in the process” (Dowling 60). But—and here is the bind—it is also academic discourse that is capable of wresting that which makes 2010: Moby Dick meaningful in conjunction with and against Melville's source material.

There is nothing to be gained from adapting Moby-Dick for the screen—as better studios, actors, and filmmakers have all discovered. For one thing, Ahab's motivations have always been a chief stumbling block, which is a problem that predates film adaptations:

When Melville died, in 1891, an anonymous admirer in Boston finished his tribute to him with: 'I wish Melville had explained before his death the reasons of the fierce and long-established hatred between the White Whale and Captain Ahab.' Now it happens that Melville had. It is no mere loss of leg, he had explained, nor even the second serious injury (inflicted by his splintered artificial leg), but the excessive introspection, the brooding on the possible symbolic importance of the agency of these injuries that induced Ahab's insane hatred. But what matter his explanation? Probably few readers had understood. And so he had not communicated to them his vision of the tragedy of mind. (Stone 180, author's emphasis)

This explains how when adapting Moby-Dick in quick succession as a silent film (The Sea Beast, 1926) and a talkie (Moby-Dick, 1930), with each starring John Barrymore as Ahab, the filmmakers felt the need to articulate Ahab's motives. To these ends, they added a love interest in what can only be assumed derives from an off-hand comment late in Melville's novel. Starbuck, walking the deck, sees Ahab as he "dropped a tear into the sea" (Melville, Moby-Dick 405). The captain goes on to confess that he sometimes grows melancholic about his life at sea, claiming, “away, whole oceans away, from that young girl-wife I wedded past fifty... leaving but one dent in my marriage pillow” (405). Ahab calls his young girl-wife “a widow with her husband alive,” stating, “I widowed that poor girl when I married her” (405). Neither Melville nor Ahab ever address this “widow” again. Early film adaptations of Moby-Dick latch onto this morsel and use it to motivate Ahab's quest. For the talkie version, the ending is revised so that Ahab both survives his encounter with Moby Dick and ends up with the girl. (The silent version also has Ahab survive, but does not reconnect him with his former love.) Again, this is conditionally to be expected with Hollywood adaptations of serious literature: “It would be wrong... to disdain the radical surgery that Hollywood performed on Herman Melville's masterpiece in these two movie versions.... When serious fiction is converted into drama, its sad endings have often been muted or altered” (Stone 179). This helps explain why the 1995 The Scarlet Letter ends on a note of triumph with Hester (Moore) and Dimmesdale (Gary Oldman) riding off, quite literally, into the sunset.

Given the tacked-on happiness of previous adaptations, 2010: Moby Dick is already an improvement. Despite playing fast and loose with Melville's novel, this adaptation does feature Ahab bringing about his own demise due to his monomaniacal quest. In 2010: Moby Dick, Ahab is portrayed—after a brief opening set in 1969, meant to explain his lost leg, his scar, and his vendetta—with Camp aplomb by Barry Bostwick (The Rocky Horror Picture Show, Weekend at Bernie's II). His turn as Ahab allows Bostwick to perform
with Shakespearean angst as he mixes actual dialogue from *Moby-Dick* (“I’d strike the sun if it insulted me!”) with material more conventional to the paracinematic product he is starring in (“He took my leg, I don’t intend to give him my ass”). Even though it is set in the present, and filled with the prosaic, expository, and silly writing ubiquitous to The Asylum films, *2010: Moby Dick* manages to be surprisingly faithful to Melville’s novel. One point of significant departure is that Ishmael (or his proxy) does not exist in this adaptation. (Vacating Ishmael became a feature of cinematic adaptations, as both the silent and early talkie *Moby-Dick* adaptations did likewise before John Huston’s 1956 adaptation restored the character into the narrative.) For *2010: Moby Dick*, we instead get the composite character of Dr. Michelle Herman (Renee O’Connor), a scientist with a scrambled if familiar name. Dr. Herman and her assistant Pip (Derrick Scott), modeled after Pippin from Melville’s novel, are out testing equipment for studying whale songs when they are taken aboard the USS *Pequod* submarine at the behest of Ahab. This mechanical version of the *Pequod* is also captained by Ahab, alongside a familiar crew that includes Lieutenant Commander Starbuck (Adam Grimes) and Queequeg (Michael B. Teh). The rest of *2010: Moby Dick* charts the overall arc of Ahab’s quest with Melville’s titular whale. It also includes some fascinating moments that speak to more than a cursory knowledge of *Moby-Dick* (unlike other film adaptations of the novel). At one point in the film there is another submarine, the USS *Essex*, which is blown up due to Moby Dick’s cunning. Certain viewers might recall that the USS *Essex* is the name of the infamous ship whose nautical misfortune inspired Melville’s novel. Elsewhere in the film, Ahab and his crew mistake a school of large squid for Moby Dick, this moment being an obvious reference to the “Squid” (Chapter 59) section of Melville’s novel. Unlike Kent’s *Twice-Told Tales*, *2010: Moby Dick* suggests how to adapt a film in a way that departs from and honors the source material. Evidently The Asylum executive Paul Bales (writer of *2010: Moby Dick*) had more than a passing familiarity with Melville’s novel.

Still, *2010: Moby Dick* is best read through the lens of paracinema. Paracinema’s chief precept of “material poverty and technical ineptitude” is abundant throughout the film (Sconce 385). Technically, the whale is rendered in shoddy CGI and far from anything approaching white—at the lightest, he appears dark grey. Given its unexpected fidelity otherwise, one may consider this as an acknowledgment of Melville’s elusiveness about Moby Dick’s exact coloring: a “body... described as ‘marbleized,’ often more bluish-gray as it blends with the ocean water” (Gehlawat 387). For all its knowing references and fidelity to Melville’s novel, however, the film is also outlandishly absurd at times. During the film’s climax, Ahab, Dr. Herman, and others await Moby Dick’s approach on an island beachfront. Implausibly, they discover that they have not been standing on the beach at all, but have instead been perched on Moby Dick’s face. In a truly paracinematic turn, the whale takes advantage of this moment to launch itself from the beachhead onto a nearby mountain and, in the film’s most outré moment, use the mountain as a sort of slip-and-slide to hurtle himself at Ahab’s crew. It is beyond the excess of some of Sconce’s cited paracinematic examples (Douglas Sirk; Russ Meyer). Despite the material, most of the actors are passable as they deliver line after line of refurbished Melville or tongue-in-cheek ripostes. In an interview, Bostwick notes that he had to build the harpoon gun Ahab uses in this final scene from “some bullshit little spear gun that [producers had] gotten at some yard sale” (Gencarelli). These handmade details and general bonhomie further cement the film’s paracinematic status, and they also explain why *2010: Moby Dick* is such an easy watch. In fact, in a review for *The
Stranger, critic Paul Constant (who claims to have “watched a ton of Asylum’s movies”) cites 2010: Moby Dick as “one of [Asylum’s] better outings,” before conceding that it “still doesn’t make it great or even good” (Constant).

For 2010: Moby Dick, the “unconvincing special effects, blatant anachronisms... histrionic acting,” all work to “activate” the film as a paracinematic text “alongside the narrative film we tend to think of ourselves as watching” (Sconce 387). One way in which it differs from plenty of paracinema, however, is that classic paracinema has “no interest in the story worlds of these films, which are often trite and negligible, but are included to focus on the stylistic quirks that render such films distinctive” (Mathijs and Sexton 90). Given the source material, the story world of 2010: Moby Dick is far from trite or negligible, which can offer certain viewers an even more dynamic paracinematic experience. For example, Bostwick’s harpoon-missile hybrid is labeled as “Fedallah.” This small detail links the harpoon-missile—which will eventually hook Ahab to Moby Dick and bring about his doom—to its namesake peculiar harpooner. “[A] muffled mystery to the last” (Melville, Moby-Dick 191), A malevolent influence on Ahab, he is spoken about in cryptic, Orientalist ways. Fedallah’s “turban and... Chinese jacket” render him into “a cosmopolitan concatenation of oriental tags: a stereotype and yet a parody of stereotyping” (Bryant 1047). Troublingly, Melville also links Ahab’s downfall with Fedallah’s foreign influence: “[Ahab] is strangled by a line intimately linked to Fedallah, the orientalized emblem of Ahab’s fate” (Bryant 1046).

Turning Fedallah into a missile is part and parcel with other reclamation efforts in 2010: Moby Dick. During an early exchange between Pip and Doughboy (Durant Fowler), a black sailor aboard the USS Pequod (in Melville’s novel Dough-Boy is a white steward), the two black sailors paraphrase Melville’s “The Whiteness of the Whale” (Chapter 42) section to talk about whiteness and evil. Doughboy states, “It’s the whiteness of the whale that freaks me out the most, you know what I mean?” before clarifying that he always associates whiteness with “the good guys.” This prompts Pip to respond, “I have no problem seeing white as evil.” This is why it is worth acknowledging Joan Hawkins’ claim that paracinema should be broadened out to consider affect. Hawkins argues that purely ironic or intellectual readings of paracinematic films “[do] not take into account the possibility that some people may actually become emotionally involved in viewing these films” (Mathijs and Sexton 91). As such, dropping the Orientalist baggage behind Fedallah or allowing for an exchange between two black sailors that literalizes Melville’s concern with “whiteness” may allow some viewers to connect more emotionally to an otherwise madcap film.

Lastly, applications of paracinema will shift because texts are always changing. John Bryant writes convincingly about how cultural shifts can be tracked through both print and film changes to Moby-Dick, stating, “the first British edition of Herman Melville’s classic The Whale differs remarkably from the first American version, called Moby-Dick, and today’s scholarly edition differs substantively from both, as does John Huston’s film adaptation, itself a revision of Ray Bradbury’s screenplay” (Bryant 1043). As Bryant argues, ”Moby-Dick (like any other work) is not a fixed text; it is a textual phenomenon” (1044). Changing reputations and interpretations of Melville’s Moby-Dick and Hawthorne’s Twice-Told Tales or The House of the Seven Gables have impacted how these works have been adapted, also paracinematically. If paracinema is a concept constructed around analyzing characteristically bad films, such as those of Russ Meyer or Friday the 13th Part VI: Jason Lives (1986), it can also inform how we approach bad filmic
adaptations of classic texts whose meanings are never fixed. This unstable nature has been reflected by the changing cultural attitudes towards Melville and Hawthorne’s work that often occurred in conjunction with changes in the media during the twentieth century (abridged paperbacks; comic books; silent films). Therefore, paracinema has allowed us one way to try to fix a reading onto cultural material that is, in essence, highly mutable.

Just as scholarship about Melville and Hawthorne has undergone transformations in the ensuing decades, and as their unfixed texts adjust and pivot to meet the demands of their present legacies, and as the nature of their relationship is unpacked and dissected, so too will adaptations of their work transmogrify. After Hawthorne’s death—which preceded Melville’s by 27 years—the younger writer could not help but review and revise the work of his friend in light of the present: “In Hawthorne’s sketch ‘Monsieur du Miroir,’ Melville marked the sentence ‘He will pass to the dark realm of Nothingness, but will not find me there’ and next to it wrote, ‘This trenches upon the uncertain and the terrible’” (Robertson-Lorant 48). It is not unrealistic to imagine a paracinematic offering being constructed from this very moment: a ghost story whereby Melville summons the spirit of Hawthorne through midnight readings (incantations) of the latter’s work. The Asylum would produce.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


ABSTRACTS

Jeffrey Sconce defined paracinema (“a most elastic textual category”) as a term that houses nearly every conceivable (non-pornographic) film subgenre of ill-repute. For Sconce, paracinema was “less a distinct group of films than a particular reading protocol.” In many ways, paracinema’s elasticity and approach to critique mirrors that of Susan Sontag’s articulation of Camp (“A sensibility”). What both concepts reveal, however, is a perspective into the history of taste as a critical feature of culture in the United States—something taking root in the highbrow/lowlowbrow debates in America catalyzed around the nineteenth century’s theater and publishing industries. Firmly in the center of it all was Nathaniel Hawthorne and Herman Melville; their literature and their legacies. Therefore, by tracing how matters of taste transformed American culture in ways that directly impacted how we conceived of and adapted the literature of Hawthorne and Melville, I bring paracinema (and its Camp tendrils) into focus to analyze two specific adaptations of their works: Twice-Told Tales (1963), starring Vincent Price, and Asylum Pictures’ (of Sharknado fame) 2010: Moby Dick (2010, naturally). The result is a critical insight into two otherwise unremarkable films that helps provide a backward glance at taste and its transformations over the past few centuries in the United States.

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Keywords: paracinema, Camp, film, adaptation, taste, cultural capital, highbrow/lowlowbrow, reception, publishing, comics
AUTHOR

MICHAEL PETITTI

Michael Petitti is an Associate Professor (Teaching) in the Thematic Option honors program at the University of Southern California. He has previously written on auteurism and William Castle and Woody Allen’s creative partnership with United Artists. He teaches courses on taste and art, slow texts, and food justice. Additionally, he teaches introductory film courses for the Prison Education Project.