

# From *Fantômas* to *The Black Doll*: the aesthetics of silent cinema and the nonsense of Edward Gorey

**Nikola Novaković**

University of Zagreb, Croatia

[nikola.novakovic@ufzg.hr](mailto:nikola.novakovic@ufzg.hr)

## Abstract

*American author and illustrator Edward Gorey (1925–2000) was open in interviews about the importance of silent cinema for his work, and in particular the films of the prolific French film director Louis Feuillade (1873–1925). Focusing on this underexplored aspect of Gorey’s work, the paper examines how Gorey employs visual, compositional, and narrative elements from Feuillade’s films, as well as their development of uncertainty within the areas of space, narrative, and character and object identity within the genre of nonsense. The influence of Feuillade is traced across such works as La Malle Saignante (The Bleeding Trunk, 1975), a bilingual homage to silent cinema, and Gorey’s silent screenplay The Black Doll (1973), while also identifying possible conventions of nonsense within Feuillade’s own silent films.*

*Keywords: Edward Gorey, humour, Louis Feuillade, nonsense, silent cinema.*

## 1. Introduction

“I’m one of those people who feels the movies have been going downhill steadily since 1918. And that things really got bad when sound came in.”

Edward Gorey  
(Tobias, 2001, p. 20)

The work of American author and illustrator Edward Gorey (1925–2000), the “master of the macabre and brahmin of the bizarre” (Hodenfield, 2001, p. 2), has been examined from several perspectives that are all important to his style: he is read within the context of genre fiction (Kennedy, 1993; Lackner, 2015), Dickensian melodrama (Hoffman, 2016), surrealism (Shortsleeve, 2018), ballet (Greskovic, 2018), and perhaps most importantly, children’s literature and nonsense (Shortsleeve, 2002). However, one way of approaching Gorey’s unusual picturebooks remains underexplored, and concerns one of the most significant influences on both narrative and visual components of his style: the world of cinema, and particularly silent film. According to Ed Park, Gorey’s work, “with its heightened poses and penumbral

malevolence, deft text and impeccable texture” exhibits “that quality of oneiric distillation it shares with silent film” (Park, 2009). Touching upon this cinematic connection, Mark Dery points out that Gorey’s “little books refuse to be categorized. What are they, exactly? Picture books for grown-ups? Precursors of the graphic novel? Mash-ups of Victorian literature, the comic strip, and the silent-movie storyboard?” (Dery, 2018, p. 148, emphasis added). Gorey was a self-attested cinephile, referring to himself as a “real movie nut” (Tobias 20) and “inveterate moviegoer” (Nocenti, 2009, p. 12). Recounting how he spent his time as a child, Gorey claimed that, apart from reading, “he was obsessed by serials and horror films” (Dyer, 2001, p. 113). His appetite for film survived into adulthood and apparently only increased with time. “He wants to buy every book he sees, wants to see every movie that plays,” wrote Stephen Schiff for *The New Yorker*, painting the author as a collector (or “amasser”, as he calls him) and pointing out that “he even goes to sequels of *Friday the 13th* and *Nightmare on Elm Street*” (Schiff, 2001, p. 150). Indeed, Gorey’s knowledge of cinema was prodigious, but he seemed to have a special preference for silent film. In an interview from 1998, Gorey spoke of the importance of Fritz Lang and D. W. Griffith for his work, singled out the American silent film serial *The Perils of Pauline* (1914) as especially influential, praised Charlie Chaplin as “[t]he greatest single talent the movies ever produced”, and called Buster Keaton his “idol” (Nocenti, 2009, p. 13). Gorey talked extensively about cinema in interviews, commenting on everything from casting to editing, music, and acting styles.

Gorey was also forthright regarding the importance of early cinema for his own work, saying in one interview that “I’ve been very much influenced by old movies, and a lot of my books derive, in one way or another, from old movies” (Dahlin, 2001, p. 32). In the same interview Gorey goes into more detail, revealing that the idea for his picturebook *The Hapless Child* (1961) came from *L’Enfant de Paris* (1913), a silent film directed by Léonce Perret (1880–1935) for Pathé. In the conversation with Schiff, Gorey admits “There’s hardly anything I haven’t filched some time or another. Silent films, especially serials” (Schiff, 2001, p. 143). Elsewhere Gorey said: “I think basically I kind of think in a silent-film way” (Henwood, 2001, p. 158). In his books Gorey occasionally refers to film directly, for instance in one panel of *The Loathsome Couple* (1977), which places the viewer behind the two protagonists as they sit watching a movie in a cinema auditorium. Gorey’s connections with silent film can sometimes be found in the peritextual elements of his tales. For instance, Richard Dyer has commented on the fact that “[Gorey] dedicated *The Willowdale Handcar* to Lillian Gish, because he patterned the amiably peripatetic story after the D. W. Griffith two-reelers she starred in” (Dyer, 2001, p. 122). Other critics have also identified some of the general connections between Gorey and silent film. Mark Dery finds that

we can detect the influence of silent movies in the anachronistic phrasing and ironic histrionics of his captions, which remind us of silent-movie intertitles, and in the existentialist blankness with which his characters confront the confounding and the calamitous, so reminiscent of the deader-than-deadpan Buster Keaton.

(Dery, 2018, p. 168)

As Michael Heyman has astutely noticed, Gorey also inherits and foregrounds a crucial aspect of silent cinema which is easily overlooked: its silence. Even when Gorey’s works contain text, they abound in

empty, desolate landscapes [...]; mind-bending expanses of monotonous wallpaper; the mouthless, practically faceless (let alone wordless) children; the ever-present silence of death; and the menacing mute villains, whether human, drapery, furniture, or other lacy manifestations of the domestic unheimlich.

(Heyman, 2019)

In some of the interviews he gave, Gorey focused much more on a specific cinematic influence which he considered of primary importance for his work: the silent serials of the prolific French film director Louis Feuillade (1873–1925) “who essentially invented the serial thriller between 1913 and 1920 with films whose plots hinge on disguises, doubled identities, and photosurrealist distortions of reality” (Wilkin, 2009, p. 16). The artistic director of Gaumont is best remembered for his crime serial *Fantômas* (1913–1914), based on a series of crime novels by Pierre Souvestre (1874–1914) and Marcel Allain (1885–1969) (in fact, thirty-two volumes produced over a period of just thirty-two months) recounting the efforts of inspector Juve and the journalist Jérôme Fandor to apprehend the master-criminal Fantômas. In 1995 Gorey called Feuillade “the greatest influence on my work”, commenting on his serials *Fantômas*, *Les Vampires* (1915–1916), *Judex* (1916), and *Tih Minh* (1918), and calling his film *Barrabas* (1920) “probably the greatest movie ever made” (Henwood, 2001, p. 159). Indeed, Feuillade is most famous for his “moody, gothic-surrealist” (Dery, 2018, p. 168) silent crime film serials which seem to have left a significant mark on Gorey’s work in several ways. As most of Gorey’s books are drawn in ink, with crosshatching used to indicate the play of light and shadow, and with only very seldom use of colour, the connection with black and white silents is immediate. Karen Wilkin has pointed out several visual ties between Gorey and Feuillade, positing that perhaps Gorey

simply assumed that the origins of the iron railings and pompous furnishings of his settings or the prototypes for his characters’ fantastic hats and handlebar mustaches or the models for their exaggerated gestures would immediately be obvious to anyone who had seen any of Feuillade’s vivid shorts or haunting serials.

(Wilkin, 2001, p. xvi)

Beginning from Dery’s and Wilkin’s above-cited identifications of some of Gorey’s ironic references to Feuillade’s films, it is the aim of the present study to expand on this network of recognized connections and simultaneously explore the functions such visual, compositional, thematic, and narrative borrowings from Feuillade’s crime serials (as well as some other examples of silent cinema) perform in Gorey’s establishment of irony, parody, and, most importantly for Gorey’s style, humorous nonsense. As a theoretical point of departure for this retracing of Gorey movement between Feuillade and his unique brand of nonsense, this study takes Wim Tigges’ definition of nonsense as a text that maintains “a perfect tension between meaning and absence of meaning” (Tigges, 1988, p. 5). As Michael Heyman explains, to keep this balance and maintain the tension of nonsense, “the ‘sense’ side of the scale must weigh heavily”, which is why nonsense is often “written in tight structures, that is, with strict poetic form or within the bounds of formal prose” and “also usually follows meticulously the rules of language, like grammar, syntax, and phonetics” (Heyman, 2007, p. xxiv). This would explain Gorey’s steadfast adherence to the rules of such forms as the limerick or the alphabet book, and his reliance on the conventions of such genres as melodrama, Dickensian narrative, detective fiction, or Gothic horror (Lackner, 2015).

Of course, as Heyman also points out, nonsense texts simultaneously “foil attempts to make sense in many of the traditional ways [...] primarily on the semantic and logical levels” and, importantly, by subversively playing with the rules of sense: “nonsense leads us down a path of sense, only to turn aside from the expected destination at the last moment” (Heyman, 2007, p. xxiv-xxv). As Eden Lee Lackner has shown, Gorey performs this “turn[ing] aside at the last moment” by setting up the boundaries of a particular form or genre, thus making readers “aware of which genre expectations rule each piece”, but then undermines such expectations by ultimately removing “the purpose of each genre”: sentimentality from melodrama; pedagogical function from children’s literature; decoding of central mysteries from detective fiction; fear

from Gothic horror, etc. (Lackner, 2015, p. 3). This recalls Tigges' emphasis of the fact that nonsense "lacks a point or unambiguous explanation" (1988, p. 95), and indeed the blank space that remains behind the excised "central heart" (Lackner, 2015, p. 3) of a particular genre allows the reader room for a self-conscious engagement with not only Gorey's narrative but also the humour that underlies his metatextual nonsense (Lackner, 2015, p. 200).

However, it is important to notice that what connects many of Gorey's works, despite their engagement with and subversion of the conventions of various (and more or less disparate) genres, is their tendency to simultaneously involve an extensive web of references to the silent serials of Louis Feuillade in their establishment of the "tension between meaning and absence of meaning" (Tigges, 1998, p. 5). In other words, Gorey combines the form and aesthetics of Feuillade's silent cinema with a range of abovementioned genres in the construction of different hybrid forms which then provide the parasite of Gorey's nonsense with what Heyman terms a "host form": "some overarching form that gives [nonsense] some recognizable shape and meaning" (Heyman, 2007, p. xxx). On the other hand, there also exists a not inconsiderable number of Gorey's works that do not fit comfortably into the spectrum of genres identified by Lackner. In some such cases, as this paper aims to show, we can identify the frame or "overarching form" as a group of conventions of Feuillade's silent serials rearranged by Gorey into various nonsensical configurations that offer a "host form" for Gorey's nonsense. However, as we shall also see, what makes such works additionally complex is that, due to the occasionally illogical nature of Feuillade's own narratives, whose mechanics resemble certain nonsensical devices, Gorey's nonsense may not, in fact, always be solely working against the restraints of the "host genre". Instead, Gorey's works may ultimately come to echo the nonsensical strain of the French director's originals, therefore revealing a double movement of parasitic infection: of Feuillade's silent serials by Gorey, but also of silent cinema and the genre of crime serials by Feuillade's own brand of nonsense.

## **2. The Emperor of Crime and the Bicycle Bandit**

### **2.1. Villains, violence, and visual aesthetic**

Similarities between Gorey and Feuillade are most readily observable at the level of panel composition and visual aesthetics, and indeed such connections have drawn the attention of most of the critics who have remarked on the link between the two artists. Mark Dery has noted that Gorey does not employ "cinematic tropes (the close-up, the low-angle shot, the aerial shot)", instead placing the reader "in the position of a theatergoer looking at a proscenium stage, a point of view undoubtedly influenced by a lifetime of ballet going but no less the product of Feuillade's tableau-style filmmaking" (Dery, 2018, p. 170). When asked about his composition technique and whether the inspiration was theatrical, Gorey said that his approach was "even more like movies, because I've been going to see movies ever since I could walk, practically" (Pinsent, 2001, p. 190). Of course, at least indirectly, the source for the inspiration does seem to be theatrical, as Feuillade himself composed theatrical tableaux by using "a stationary camera" and "relying on his actors' movements to direct the eye" (Dery, 2018, p. 170). Mirroring early cinema's method of a "fixed camera placed horizontally and frontally, viewing characters and setting from a point that is outside and at a distance from them", Gorey's illustrations sometimes emulate Feuillade's effect of a "screen presenting a surface to be scanned by eye movement" (Finkelstein, 2016, p. 42).

Beyond such structural similarities, Gorey's visual aesthetic also shares much with Feuillade's, but often in an ironic and wryly humorous way. The cover illustration (by Gino Starace, 1859–1950) for the first volume of *Fantômas* shows "a masked man in impeccable

evening clothes, dagger in hand, looming over Paris like a somber Gulliver, contemplating hideous misdeeds from which no citizen was safe” (Ashbery, 1987, p. 1-2). The same image of a masked villain standing over Paris was used on the poster for the first episode in Feuillade’s film serial (but with the bloody weapon removed). Years later, the disturbing appearance of the masked *l’insaisissable* (the Elusive One, as Fantômas is called in the novels) over and under the roofs of Paris would leave traces throughout Edward Gorey’s books. Evoking the era of the *Fantômas* films, Gorey’s characters are often depicted in a “vaguely fin-de-siècle, vaguely British world of claustrophobic interiors and bleak landscapes” (Wilkin, 2001, p. xvi) and seem to be dressed for a gala dinner or a performance in the opera, wearing “things nobody wears anymore – curly waxed mustaches, plus-fours, feathers that erupt from the crowns of their heads” (Schiff, 2001, p. 144). Indeed, Gorey frequently sets his tales in environments often found in Feuillade’s films: shadowy gardens, crumbling mansions, deserted streets, and bedrooms with thick rugs, hung with heavy draperies. And while Gorey retains the dreamlike aesthetic of Feuillade’s films, he also regularly imbues it with his dry, nonsensical humour, particularly in the design of his vaguely “Victorian- cum-Edwardian” characters (Heyman, 2017, p. 60). For example, when the masked Bicycle Bandit, visually modelled on Fantômas, rides on a bicycle through a ballroom “during a ball at Condiment House” in *The Broken Spoke* (1976), a collection of bicycle-themed postcards, his “seizure of the Marchioness of Bunworry’s emeralds” is a humorously reworked echo of the opening scene from the first episode in Feuillade’s serial, *À l’ombre de la guillotine* (1913), in which Fantômas (René Navarre) relieves Princess Danidoff (Jane Faber) of her pearl necklace.

Aside from a shared visual aesthetic, Gorey’s villainous characters also seem to be inspired by Fantômas’ nonsensical absence of a deeper motivation beyond simple greed, impulsivity, and a desire to spread terror and mayhem. For instance, Gorey’s alphabet book *The Fatal Lozenge* (1960) is a catalogue of tragicomic crimes and cruelties told in lullaby-like rhyme: the Cad, “grown weary of his affair”, leaves the apartment of his lover, telling “her just how dreary he thinks she is” – thus recalling, perhaps, Fantômas’ merciless manipulation of Lady Beltham; the Zouave, who “would sooner take a life than not”, “impales the hapless tot” on the point of his sword with little apparent motivation. Another book that functions as a humorous catalogue of tragedy, *Neglected Murderesses* (1980), offers portraits of female criminals whose motivations are equally obscure (“Mrs. Fledaway laced her husband’s tea with atropine in the spring of 1903 at the Locusts, near Puddingbasin, Mortshire”), again evoking Fantômas, the “King of Terror”, who is “characterized above all by cruelty and violence so heartless as to be almost sublime” (Vilain, 2000, p. 172).

However, despite the violence and death present in much of Gorey’s nonsense, its brevity, use of rhyme, and an “enforced distance between his characters and audience” turn his tragedies into comedies (Lackner, 2015, p. 135). This effect recalls Feuillade’s own criminals, including his Vampires, a gang of misfits, and their member Irma Vep (anagram of “Vampire”), played by the French actress, film director, and writer Jeanne Roques (1889–1957, better known by her stage name Musidora) in the serial *Les Vampires* (1915–1916), whose “cheerful contempt for society [...] gains as much from Anarchism as it looks forward to Dada and Surrealism”: whereas villains like Fritz Lang’s Dr. Mabuse are demonic, ugly, and frightening, Thomson calls Feuillade’s criminals “glowing black humorists with all the ambiguous charm of Dracula” (Thomson, 2014, p. 344). Gorey’s construction of his own “black humorists” takes this humour a step further into nonsense through what Hendrik van Leeuwen identifies as “the total absence of moral comment” (van Leeuwen, 1986, p. 78) and instead subordinating any elaboration on the acts of his thieves, villains, and murderesses to such nonsense motifs as irrelevant details and comical compound names (“Mrs. Fledaway”, “near Puddingbasin”). In relation to this effect, van Leeuwen has noticed that some of Gorey’s work is difficult to classify as “pure nonsense”, which he attributes to Gorey’s combination of cheerful nonsense with what he terms

his “ominous nocturnal gleam”, a result of his “nullity of paradoxical emotion” (van Leeuwen, 1986, p. 81-82).

Regarding the similarities with Feuillade’s settings, commentators on Gorey’s style have noted his “pompously furnished interiors” (Wilkin, 2009, p. 16) and his use of densely crosshatched “Victorian wallpaper writhing with serpentine patterns” (Dery, 2018, p. 4) which often competes with multiple other patterns on rugs, furniture, and clothing (cf. Schiff, 2001, p. 144). Especially in *Fantômas* and *Les Vampires*, Feuillade’s scenes are set in rooms with “distinctive potted palms and pattern-on-pattern décor”, which Irwin Terry calls “instantly recognizable Gorey motifs” (Terry, 2011). But Feuillade’s presence in Gorey’s work is found beyond the confines of claustrophobic rooms. When his characters step outside into cobbled streets lined with iron railings and traversed by black touring cars, they enter a world distinctly reminiscent of Feuillade’s. The visual aesthetic of outdoor scenes of Feuillade’s Paris seems to particularly inform Gorey’s *The Sopping Thursday* (1970), where details like iron railings and shoe scrapers feature prominently. One of the parallel stories involves a purloined umbrella, and panel eight (titled “Someone stole Mrs Gumbash’s umbrella”) shows a person drawn completely in black, with only the whites of their eyes showing, scampering across a roof while clutching an umbrella. This image reads as an allusion to a gang member dressed in a black bodysuit from an episode of Feuillade’s *Les Vampires* (*La Tête Coupée*, 1915). Ironically, while in *Les Vampires* the figure in a black bodysuit is a murderer escaping from the crime scene across the rooftops, Gorey’s entirely enigmatic cat burglar seems to be engaged in nothing more serious than a snatching of an umbrella.

## 2.2. Intertextuality and pastiche

At the same time, as one of the parallel stories in *The Sopping Thursday* depicts the efforts of a black dog called Bruno to retrieve his master’s umbrella on a rainy day, the book contains a further ironic intertextual incorporation of another significant example of silent film, *Rescued by Rover* (1905). Directed by Lewin Fitzhamon and Cecil Hepworth, the short British drama film tells the story of a family pet who locates the kidnapper of a baby and then leads her father to the garret where she is being held (cf. Low, 2011, p. 108). In Gorey’s book, Bruno successfully tracks down his master’s umbrella, a significantly less dramatic reason for pursuit, while also commenting on his efforts: “I know I am going to succeed”; this is immediately followed by the potentially ambiguous and less than reassuring “I will not give up until I do”. When Bruno finds that an infant has gotten entangled in the umbrella, he saves it “from being swept down the open sewer”, but in a comical inversion of the canine saviour tale, Bruno does so not out of any desire to rescue the child: the infant is saved, we are told, only “because the dog has recognized its master’s umbrella”. In fact, it is revealed that Bruno left the child where he found it, sitting on the pavement: in a subversion of the convention of a joyful reunion of mother and baby (which also recalls Gorey’s similar treatment of *L’Enfant de Paris* in *The Hapless Child*), a woman, her face obscured by an umbrella, regards the child at a distance, saying: “That was very naughty of you”. Gorey’s book thus dislocates the original tale of Rover’s rescue of the kidnapped baby, effectively separating the story of the dog and that of the lost infant and inserting other disjointed and unresolved parallel stories into the gap (e.g., the cat burglar on the roof; a man exasperatingly attempting to purchase a new umbrella, etc.). Gorey’s version therefore entirely defuses the drama of *Rescued by Rover* and instead emphasizes the nonsensically hyperbolized importance of an inanimate object, the lost umbrella.

To return more specifically to the significance of Feuillade’s work for Gorey’s nonsense, it should be pointed out that some of his books seem to be more comprehensively modelled on the French director’s films. One notable example is *La Malle Saignante* (*The Bleeding Trunk*, 1975), a bilingual homage to silent cinema with titles written in French and English. The front

cover informs the reader that the book is, apparently, the seventh episode in a series entitled “Les Mysteres de Constantinople”. However, *La Malle Saignante* is in fact the only episode in existence and thus ironically replicates the serialization style of French silent cinema. The story begins *in medias res* and in absurdly melodramatic fashion (“Violet was being chased through the sewers by an alligator dispatched by Kafatasi”), suggesting that the previous episode ended on a cliffhanger, perhaps not unlike the one from the end of the second episode of *Fantômas, Juve contre Fantômas* (1913), in which Fantômas is seen blowing up a house being searched by inspector Juve. Violet emerges from the sewer in Sürgü Meydani (Panbed Square, a footnote informs us – a play on the word “bedpan”), where another character, Humphrey, is seen fighting off six legless (and possibly blind) “cripples”. Surviving the attack, Violet and Humphrey are informed that Violet’s father, “the ambassador”, has been lured to Humphrey’s flat. On the way there, he is ambushed by Ahududu, a comically stiff-limbed automaton with no elbows or knees. A woman in an elaborate black dress, “Mme Araba Vapuru” (her dark mystique undercut by the meaning of her name in Turkish, “car ferry”), warns Violet that “Baron Kartpostal has got hold of the purple parcel”, while in the background a man who is later revealed to be Dr. Belki absconds with a magazine left behind by Violet. Following this, the baron and Violet dance the “Waterlily Tango”, and immediately afterwards the “episode” ends on another cliffhanger as Violet and Humphrey are informed about the ambassador’s disappearance. The exotic locales and Turkish or Near Eastern-sounding names, exaggerated gestures, flamboyant clothing, and richly decorated environments all point to narrative and visual conventions of Feuillade’s work, particularly *Tih-Minh* (considering the film’s references to French colonial territories in Southeast Asia), while the “cripples” who attack Humphrey may recall Fantômas’ henchmen, a gang of *apaches* (in the early 1900s, they were “working-class youths who rejected the world of work, dressed flamboyantly, and lived off the proceeds of prostitution and crime” (Cannon, 2016, p. 88)).

Apart from allusions to Gorey’s *The Gilded Bat* (1966), the story contains other intertextual connections, such as a petty thief, Dr. Belki, whose stealing of a magazine is a humorously unambitious version of Fantômas’ grand criminal exploits, while the character of the automaton Ahududu could point to any number of early robots from such silent films as *The Automatic Motorist* (1911), *The Mechanical Man* (1915), *The Master Mystery* (1918, starring Harry Houdini), or Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis* (1927). Piecing together the various strands of the story and identifying the connections between the characters resembles an attempt to watch a serial film starting from its seventh episode, with all the confusion such an approach would probably entail (and which, in fact, recalls Gorey’s account of one such experience of watching “a film that no one ever put together [...] Somebody had thrown it all together in a big box, on reels, and we watched it that way, it took about two weeks” (Nocenti, 2009, p. 19). This would be particularly true if attempted with any of Feuillade’s films, whose plots have been called “convoluted” (Callahan, 2005, p. 48; Rubin, 1999, p. 56; Andrew, 1995, p. 27), at least in part because of Feuillade’s employment of a number of “MacGuffins” pursued by several characters with their own plotlines, which Gorey references with his completely ambiguous and thus preposterously significant “purple parcel”. Therefore, while incorporating motifs from early cinema, Gorey consistently subverts its reliance on sensationalism, cliffhangers, and melodrama through drily reported events that establish total emotional distance from purloined parcels and the supposedly imperilled characters, whose nonsensical names inject hilarity into the most sombre settings. While the plot and its characters’ motivations can be partially pieced together, by entirely removing the context of the preceding six episodes in the series, Gorey creates the foundational tension between meaning and its absence which Tigges locates at the root of nonsense, and which already lurks in Feuillade’s own convoluted and frequently confusing plots.

Before *La Malle Saignante*, however, Gorey wrote and illustrated a different Feuilladeian pastiche, *The Black Doll* (1973), a never-produced screenplay for a silent film. The black doll is a recurring character in Gorey's work, a completely black armless and faceless doll which makes appearances in such works as *The Listing Attic* (1954), *The Willowdale Handcar: or the Return of the Black Doll* (1962), *The Fantod Pack* (1978), and others. *The Black Doll* shares many of *La Malle Saignante*'s silent-film trappings, including its connections with Feuillade: its introduction ("What Went Before") suggests that it may be the final part in a serial; title cards are used to convey description and dialogue; the setting is again vaguely Edwardian ("In the year 1910, more or less" (Gorey, 2009, p. 34)); the role of the vamp is played by Octavia Prong, "dressed with great unsuitability for the country in black satin with a hobble skirt, much jet jewelry, and a toque with coq feathers" (Gorey, 2009, p. 39); a young woman called Daisy is kidnapped in a hearse (and abductions are common in Feuillade); the Fantômas-like Fiend, "an insane international master-criminal" (Gorey, 2009, p. 35), wants to achieve world-domination, and Fantômas himself or someone disguised as him makes an appearance at a bal masqué (Gorey, 2009, p. 64); there is mention of a mysterious Mr. Grandours (French for "great bear", ironically evoking Feuillade's more impressively named criminal mastermind, the Grand Vampire from *Les Vampires*); and the purple parcel's role of the MacGuffin is played by the eponymous Black Doll. In yet another comical inversion of the device, the black doll, somewhat like a matryoshka, holds another MacGuffin, the true centre of attention for the various groups vying for its possession: the PRO (Priceless Religious Object), whose nature or identity, and therefore the reason why it is coveted by so many, is never revealed to the reader, therefore functioning as a true embodiment of the tension between nonsense's presence and absence of meaning.

As is apparent from the comical handling of the PRO, Gorey goes beyond borrowing the appurtenances of silent cinema and establishing allusions to Feuillade's characters, props, and scenery. By "leaving things out, being very brief" (Tobias, 2001, p. 23), as Gorey described his method, he combines his imitation of silent cinema with an exaggeration of Feuillade's tendency towards uncertainty: a profusion of various black dolls are substituted for the titular one until the original seems untraceable; there are two conflicting versions of the death of a character called Jasper; and numerous other mysteries remain unresolved, such as the authorship of the words GULB and BLUG traced on the scenery in various locations. Therefore, when one of the characters says (commenting on a roadhouse), "This is an equivocal place" (Gorey, 2009, p. 54), he might just as well be describing *The Black Doll*, for the screenplay itself eventually comes to assume the qualities of the doll itself, which has been called "a surrealist cypher, a floating signifier haunting Gorey's narrative landscape" (Dery, 2018, p. 367).

Significantly, when asked by Nocenti, "Why did silent films appeal to you?", Gorey replied: "It's what you have to leave out" (Nocenti, 2009, p. 13). Gorey's response is an apt description of his own approach to art and writing generally and *The Black Doll* specifically, for by leaving out such elements as clear motivation and definite resolution, Gorey forms ellipsis into one of the dominant narrative strategies in his nonsense, both evoking and building on Feuillade's own development of epistemological uncertainty. In what would prove to be an open ending of the finale to *Fantômas, Le Faux Magistrat* (1914), Fantômas, disguised as a judge, is led away to prison. However, a closeup of a letter, improbably written by Fantômas in advance under his guise of a judge, absolves Fantômas of all guilt, therefore (in a completely nonsensical move) unleashing his terror all over again. "Society should continue to tremble!", warn the final words of the famous serial, revealing that the end offers no closure, much less a reestablishment of order, despite the illogical conclusion.

When at the end of *The Black Doll* "something without warning happens to the Fiend's limousine" and he becomes trapped, Seth and Daisy "fling open the door" of the vehicle only to reveal that "[t]here is nothing inside but a wax dummy of the Fiend, in its hand the Black Doll"



(Gorey, 2009, p. 70). In the wax of Gorey's dummy, we find imprinted the stamp of the Fiend's heredity: the "equivocal place" of Feuillade's surreal landscape inhabited by the uncertain identity and fantastic escapes of the Elusive One, only now reworked within a simultaneously meaningful and meaningless world of nonsense. Fantômas' absence of clear motivation to inflict senseless harm on others is embodied and further exaggerated by the Black Doll as the central motivating factor because, by the end of the story, it has changed hands so many times that the doll shown in the closing scene may not even be the one holding the PRO. As a result, what the hands of its pursuers may be grasping for (quite literally in the screenplay's final scene of the struggle for its ownership) may be nothing more than a comical gap as emptied of meaning as the never revealed PRO, which thus ultimately reinforces the tension between totality and nothingness as one of the basic nonsense themes and devices.

### **3. The cinema of uncertainty and the aesthetics of the subjunctive**

According to Noel Burch, early cinema (including Feuillade) exhibits what he terms a primitive mode of representation, consisting of autarchy (or self-sufficiency) of tableaux, horizontal and frontal camera placement, long shots, and a decentred arrangement of actors and action, all of which gave the spectator "an awareness that one was sitting in a theatre watching pictures unfold on a screen" (Burch, 1990, p. 206). Vicki Callahan, on the other hand, argues that Feuillade's films operate in the "subjunctive" mode, "motivated by an exploration of the possible rather than what is" (Callahan, 2005, p. 18; orig. emphasis). Indeed, Richard Abel terms Feuillade's style "fantastic realism" (Abel, 2005, p. 336), identifying a "peculiar mixture of the real, ordinary, and everyday alongside the fantastic in his films" (Callahan, 2005, p. 20). In Feuillade, both Fantômas and the gang of Vampires assume innumerable guises, lurking among civilians, government officials, and even members of the police, apparently able to penetrate all levels of hierarchy and move across boundaries of space and convention with total ease while exploiting chance, accident, improbability, and irrationality, all of which seem to govern Feuillade's world. Gorey himself commented on one of Fantômas' more fantastic escapes from the hands of justice (in *Juve contre Fantômas*), evoked in *The Black Doll* by the Fiend's abovementioned disappearance:

In Fantômas, there's a moment when Juve arrests Fantômas in a supper club, and he's wearing a cape, or rather one of those cape coats, with holes for the arms, and Juve and Fandor grab Fantômas and take him out into the street. Suddenly, Fantômas just steps out and runs away down the street – the arms turn out to be fake. It's a wonderful dislocation of reality.

(Nocenti, 2009, p. 25)

#### **3.1. Uncertainty and the fantastic**

A similar "peculiar mixture of the real, ordinary, and everyday alongside the fantastic" (Callahan, 2005, p. 20) can be identified in Gorey's own work, where the fantastic overlaps with the mundane, often by interrupting the staid life of a traditional family and leading to a simultaneously dark and comical crisis of bourgeois mundanity. The title of Gorey's *La Malle Saignante* gestures towards this connection, as it is reminiscent of the many large boxes, trunks, and straw baskets used to transport victims of kidnapping and murder in Feuillade's films. In Gorey's *The Insect God* (1963), Millicent Frastley is abducted by giant insects in a "silent and glittering" black 1910s automobile that "sped away from the city", evoking numerous scenes of automotive abduction in Feuillade which are often written in the fantastic mode. Interestingly, Gorey does not simply imitate Feuillade's fantastic mode in an ironic way, but in fact his darkly

comical tone (clearly evident in the sing-song rhyming verse about the supernatural abductors' sacrificial offering of Millicent to the titular Insect God) parallels Feuillade's own tone of sinister comedy. When in episode five of *Les Vampires, L'évasion Du Mort* (1916), the attention of the newspaper reporter Philippe Guérande (Édouard Mathé) is drawn to his bedroom window, he is suddenly pulled by his neck out of his upper-story apartment by a noose at the end of a long pole, caught by a group of Vampires lurking in the street, thrown into a large costume box, loaded into a car, and driven away. What pushes the scene further into absurdity is that the abductors, while unloading the costume box with Philippe still in it, accidentally drop the box and send it crashing down a long flight of stairs, an ordeal which Philippe successfully, and quite improbably, survives. The effect of the scene is thus both shocking and comical, at least in part because the genre conventions of a crime serial are manipulated to make room for the fantastic mode so preposterous it veers into slapstick comedy. Similarly, Gorey departs from what begins as a cautionary tale (Millicent is lured into a car by "[a]n arm with two elbows" holding out cinnamon balls) and moves into the territory of Gothic fantasy whose punishment for Millicent's naivety (referred to as "a ritual crime") is so absurdly exaggerated that it elicits laughter.

Callahan stresses that, in Feuillade, the fantastic functions as one of the components of his films' "movement toward uncertainty" (Callahan, 2005, p. 18) which reflects a preoccupation with a destabilisation of the belief in an ordered, "linear, rational and teleological world-view" (Callahan, 2014, p. 34). Callahan points out that Feuillade's crime serials appear to revolve around a series of epistemological crises, destabilising certainty by foregrounding obscurity within three formal elements: space, character, and narrative. Firstly, although Feuillade consistently designs his tableaux in an apparently realistic fashion, the films' narrative subverts this impression of transparency by confronting the viewer with the realization that in Feuillade "nothing is recognisable, nothing is foreseeable and nothing is as it appears" (Callahan, 2014, p. 25).

A similar effect can be identified in Gorey's work when his panels emulate Feuillade's composition and apparent visual clarity, most prominently in such books as *The West Wing* (1960), whose perplexing silent scenes of rooms, devoid of any helpful text that would aid in the interpretation of their meanings, maintain a lack of explanation that works to disorient the reader attempting to organize the scenes into a coherent tale or the rooms into an ordered space. Secondly, in both Feuillade and Gorey, the uncertainty that marks their worlds is not confined to places and spaces but extends to the identities of their inhabitants. One of the central themes that runs throughout the *Fantômas* films, forming the fulcrum of the exploits of its villain of a thousand disguises, is the question of identity. When in episode one, Princess Danidoff asks the thief who has just invaded her hotel bedroom, "Who are you?", he answers by handing her a blank card which later slowly reveals the name "Fantômas". However, the identity of the man behind the name will remain a mystery throughout the five episodes (a quality inherited from the novels, where it is said that "[i]t is impossible to say exactly what or to know precisely who Fantômas is. He often assumes the form and personality of some particular and even well-known individual; sometimes he assumes the forms of two human beings at the same time" (Allain and Souvestre, 1986, p. 14)), a gap as blank as his calling card which Gorey will later evoke through the identity of the PRO.

Indeed, almost every book by Gorey contains a blank calling card, usually seen discarded on the ground, which Terry believes is a subtle reference to Fantômas, acting as a trail of footprints that leads back to Feuillade (Terry, 2011). For Michael Heyman, the cards represent "a stranger, concentrated manifestation of nothingness, a nothingness paradoxically made into something by its concrete insistence" (Heyman, 2019). Seen together as a series of clues scattered throughout Gorey's oeuvre, they almost seem to coalesce into "the ultimate key to understanding all of Gorey's nonsense", but this is precisely when "the nonsense effect strikes:

units of concretized ‘silent matter’ arise, things of ‘no-thing’ to be juggled—but of course, we can’t hold on to any one, and how does one hold on to nothing anyway?” (Heyman, 2019). Heyman is here referring to his earlier description of the effect of nonsense, consisting of “endlessly juggling a meaning and its absence” (Heyman, 1999, p. 193), which Alan Levinovitz has extended into a definition of nonsense as “the experience of rewarding sense-juggling inspired by a semantically ambiguous text that resists conclusive interpretation” (Levinovitz, 2017, p. 255).

It is worth noting at this point that a parodic streak in some of Gorey’s works, though certainly not all, contributes to their effect of meaning-making. While Tigges opposes the idea that nonsense can have a parodic effect, claiming that “it is the prime characteristic of nonsense not to make a ‘point’ or draw a moral, not to satirize, to ridicule or to parody, and not even primarily to entertain” (Tigges, 1988, p. 50), I would argue that Gorey’s occasional inclusion of parodic elements within (or alongside) his nonsense acts as the meaning-making counterweight to the equally strong absence of meaning, and that this aligns with van Leeuwen’s assessment of Gorey’s work as other than “pure nonsense” (van Leeuwen, 1988, p. 81). In other words, while it is tempting to think we have discovered a key to understanding a particular Gorey text by, for instance, recognizing parodically reinscribed elements of Dickensian melodrama or, indeed, of Feuillade’s silents through a comical profusion of blank calling cards, Gorey counters this by using equally prominent nonsensical strategies. If such parodic moments produce any meaning, they only further underscore the counterforce of the nonsensical as the two are joined in the process of sense-juggling.

### 3.2. Identity and obscurity

To return to similarities with Feuillade’s employment of uncertainty, we can notice a specific quality of vagueness at the level of Gorey’s characterization. For instance, Gorey’s own vamps equal Feuillade’s in their mysterious opacity, but Gorey heightens this effect to the level of comedy by wrapping his vamps and *femme fatales* in layers of black clothing that usually leave only their kohl-lined eyes visible to peer seductively above their many shawls and veils. The unpredictable inconstancy of Fantômas’s identity is also recalled in Gorey, but again frequently within the genre of nonsense: in *The Lost Lions, or, Having Opened the Wrong Envelope*, Hamish opens the “wrong envelope” and soon becomes a movie star; in *The Retrieved Locket* (1994), the Fibleys easily mistake a dog for their lost daughter, Amelia Emily, and decide to raise it instead of their child; and in *The Unknown Vegetable* (1995), having buried herself alive, Filda apparently sprouts into a vegetable. Sometimes Gorey centres an entire piece on slightly unnerving visual obscurity, as in a recently discovered unbound bifolium: “In her window Flora sitting, / Heraclitus on her knees, / Spied a black-clad figure knitting / Something vague among the trees” (Gorey, 2023). In certain books the theme of explicit (and sometimes fantastic) transformation is reworked into the theme of mutually almost indistinguishable characters, as in *The Water Flowers* (1982) or *The Deranged Cousins, or, Whatever* (1971), the latter a book about Rose Marshmary, Mary Rosemarsh, and Marsh Maryrose, three cousins who lived “in a house covered with roses on the edge of a marsh” (Gorey, 1980c). And perhaps there is no character in all of Gorey’s work more capable of emulating Fantômas’s “extraordinary metamorphic versatility” (Vilain, 2000, p. 175) than Figbash (whose appearance may be an allusion to Max Ernst’s Loplop, but also a possible comical echo of Irma Vep’s celebrated black bodysuit), e.g. in *Figbash Acrobat* (1994), in which the creature contorts its body into each of the letters of the English alphabet, as well as the numerals from 0 to 9.

Furthermore, both Feuillade and Gorey involve objects in their manipulations of identity. In *Les Vampires*, dangerous objects are disguised so that “ordinary objects within the home may carry multiple, illusory, and sometimes deadly functions” (Callahan, 2005, p. 36): a ring is used

to commit murder, a fountain pen holds poisonous ink, a straw basket is opened to reveal a dazed abductee. In his ironic poem “Fantômas”, included in his collection *Le Cornet à dés* (1917), Max Jacob takes Fantômas’s surrealistic mutability to an extreme, turning him into an object: “On the burnished silver knocker of the door, darkened by time, by the dust of time, was a kind of chiseled Buddha with a too-high forehead, with pendulous ears, with the look of a sailor or a gorilla: it was Fantômas” (qtd. in Ashbery, 1987, p. 8).

Gorey injects a similar level of uncertainty into the identities of his objects, at times by blurring the boundary between the animate and the inanimate. In his *Alms for Oblivion* (1978), one of the sixteen illustrated cards depicts a baby seated on a raised platform underneath a canopy. However, the paradoxical title below the illustration (“Emma Lorina or her doll, Summer 1892”) introduces unsettling ambiguity not only by obscuring the identity of the depicted infant but also by subverting the title’s expected purpose of describing or clarifying the image. Elsewhere, Gorey’s apparently harmless objects seem to share in the identity of other, more dangerous objects or living beings. In *Tragédies Topiaires* (1989), the illustrations feature individuals threatened by topiary shaped like objects or creatures: a man lies prostrate behind a 1910s motorcar, as if he had just been run over; a woman cowers under a man with outstretched arms and a prominent erection. On the other hand, in *The Inanimate Tragedy* (1966) and *Menaced Objects* (1989), Gorey’s illustrated postcards imbue cups, saucers, chewing gum, and other objects with human characteristics, so that we observe a “Tray of Calling Cards Threatened by Quondam Coathanger” (Gorey, 2014a, p. 60) or a “Grape in Danger of Falling into Open Drawer” (Gorey, 2014a, p. 62). While such titles are highly suggestive, the contrast with the illustrations’ impassionate depiction of non-anthropomorphized objects establishes a comical tension between meaning and its absence.

Among all of Gorey’s curious inventions, his Q.R.V., or the Universal Solvent, stands out as the object with the most indeterminate identity, yet is hailed as a universal panacea. In *Q.R.V. Hikuptah*, the Universal Solvent assumes potentially even greater significance as a consumerist’s alternative to spirituality (“With God Almighty being flighty, / And absent frequently, / It’s up to you to make it through / The day – with Q.R.V.” (Gorey, 2014b, p. 83)), while its ability to metamorphize is underlined by collages of parts of 19<sup>th</sup> century anatomical illustrations arranged into suggestive surrealist compositions. Although the Universal Solvent seemingly provides an answer to any ailment or problem, its exact nature ironically remains a mystery, as does the exact relation between the verses and their accompanying illustrations. The latter therefore embodies the nonsense theme of arbitrariness and the device of “the collocation of the most unexpected objects of events” (Tigges, 1988, p. 70), the connotations or associations of which ultimately lead to nothing but verbal-visual play and a humorous frustration of expectations (Tigges, 1988, p. 47).

Along with place, character, and object identity, in her list of formal elements that contribute to uncertainty by foregrounding their obscurity Callahan also includes a specific narrative structure based on a “repetition of unlikely events that often move tangentially from the originally stated story line” (Callahan, 2014, p. 32) through “a repetitive spiral of often unlikely, irrational events” which result in a “random and chaotic [...] world-view” (Callahan, 2014, p. 34). Gorey’s worlds are similarly composed of irrational and unlikely events modelled on Feuillade’s scenes and aesthetics that digress from the “originally stated story line”, as in *The Eleventh Episode* (1971), *The Headless Bust*, or the supremely surreal *The Object-Lesson* (1958), but especially in his detective stories, such as *The Other Statue* (1968) and *The Awdrey-Gore Legacy* (1972), which not only obscure the motivations and identities of their criminals (again, reminiscent of Fantômas), but ultimately proceed, by way of digressions, to a deconstruction of the mystery novel genre. This also recalls the effect of Feuillade’s use of repetition of scenes and events and doubling of characters, which ultimately foregrounds the

films' formal structure, as "the repetition leads to simpler versions of itself, or rather to an abstraction of a form" (Callahan, 2014, p. 34).

Such a device is also evidently at play in *The Black Doll*, where repetition does not lead to clarification and revelation but to progressively increasing obscurity of character and object identity. In fact, the screenplay introduces indeterminacy from its opening paragraph about a city in central Asia "called Gulb (or Blug)" (Gorey, 2009, p. 34). After its inhabitants, who worshipped the Bear That Dances, split into two religious factions and the city was destroyed, the Bear "lived on, his nature an *ambivalent combination* of the qualities worshipped by the two persuasions" (Gorey, 2009, p. 34; emphasis added). Palindromic confusion and ambivalent combination are joined by forms of uncertainty created through repetition: for instance, the screenplay instructs that many of the smaller roles are to be played by the same actor; there is the repetition of a doorbell being rung, "but no one is ever seen doing so" (Gorey, 2009, p. 39), and, as pointed out above, the Black Doll is repeatedly stolen and replaced by other, identical dolls, until the multiplication of copies (simultaneously mirrored by a proliferation of bear imagery) finally precludes the possibility of identifying the doll holding the PRO. Therefore, by relying on Feuilladean scene structure, as well the visual vocabulary of his aesthetics and his motifs (such as a masked ball, which evokes the famous scene from *Fantômas contre Fantômas* (1914), in which three characters appear at a masked ball wearing the costume of Fantômas, including the criminal himself), Gorey also replicates his use of repetition while exaggerating such nonsense devices as ambiguity, simultaneity, and arbitrariness (Tigges, 1988, p. 47).

#### 4. *Épater le bourgeois*

The screenplay for *The Black Doll* accumulates a list of signifiers (the bear figurines, the PRO, the ringing of the doorbell, etc.) that remain disconnected, floating from one scene to another like amusing spectres that draw attention to their repetition and, in effect, the structure of the screenplay. However, such comically reconfigured spectres are also disquieting, partly because of their persistent and unresolved indeterminacy and partly because of the incongruity between their dreamlike effect and the bourgeois surroundings in which we encounter them, creating a jarring, even surrealist juxtaposition which is often employed by Gorey. In fact, commenting on his affinity for surrealist thought in an interview from 1978, Gorey said that what appealed to him in surrealism was "an idea expressed by Eluard [*sic*] [...] about there being another world, but it's in this one. And Raymond Queneau said the world is not what it seems – but it isn't anything else, either. Those two ideas are the bedrock of my approach" (Filstrup, 2001, p. 85). Indeed, surrealism is a further point of connection between Feuillade and Gorey: while Feuillade was embraced and even celebrated by some of the surrealists for what they recognized in his films as a shared worldview, Gorey inherited and reworked the visual and verbal language of both Feuillade and surrealism, merging the two in his darkly nonsensical style.

The surrealists themselves praised the *Fantômas* novels, with the eponymous villain becoming "an icon for the literary avant garde in France in the 1910s and 1920s" (Vilain, 2000, p. 170), so that

the litany of surrealists and avant-garde aesthetes who celebrated the series" included "Guillaume Apollinaire, Louis Aragon, André Breton, Colette, Blaise Cendrars, Jean Cocteau, Juan Gris, Max Jacob (who, together with Apollinaire, founded a *Société des Amis de Fantômas*), René Magritte, André Malraux, Ernest Moerman, and Philippe Soupault, among others.

(Walz, "Pulp Surrealism" 43).

In 1914 Apollinaire wrote of “that extraordinary novel, full of life and imagination, lamely written but extremely vivid” (Ashbery, 1987, p. 4); Blaise Cendrars called the *Fantômas* series “the modern *Aeneid*” (Ashbery, 1987, p. 4); Robert Desnos wrote a poem of twenty-six stanzas called *La Complainte de Fantômas* (*Lament of Fantômas*, 1933), set to music by Kurt Weill; Magritte’s *Le Retour de flamme* (*The Backfire*, 1943) is based on the front cover of the first *Fantômas* novel; and Juan Gris’s painting *Fantômas* (1915) shows a *Fantômas* novel on a table among other objects. As the surrealists were also famously enthusiastic about cinema, believing in its “power to alter the meaning of everyday life through the phantasy logic of the dream” (Walz, 1996, p. 51), their fascination was extended to Feuillade’s work, particularly *Fantômas* and *Les Vampires*, which Haim Finkelstein posits exhibited certain qualities of Feuillade’s vision that were “echoed in Surrealist discourse in general” (Finkelstein, 2016, p. 41). The surrealists were attracted to the themes found in Feuillade’s films, “especially as defined within Surrealist lore (love, eroticism, crime, anti-bourgeoisie, revolt)” (Finkelstein, 2016, p. 41), as well as his fascinating characters, in particular the attitudes of his criminals, such as *Fantômas*’s unmotivated and shocking violence, which corresponded with the surrealists’ idea of sublime horror. The “whiff of anarchy” attached to the literary *Fantômas* and his “sheer evil”, the fact that he could “toy with the fate of the whole of the Paris aristocracy, escape society’s restraining measures, its values and its standards” and perform “a function akin to *épater le bourgeois* [shock or scandalize the middle classes]” (Vilain, 2000, p. 182) was extended to his filmic incarnation. For instance, Robert Desnos praises Feuillade’s *Fantômas* for its “revolt and liberty” (Desnos, 1988, p. 398), and Maurice Reynal, in his review of the film, exclaims “What nobility! What beauty!”, describing in elated tones *Fantômas*’s gassing of an aristocrat: “the gas seeps out to fill the room, and the aristocrat is asphyxiated. How simple, how great!” (Reynal, 1988, p. 89).

#### 4.1. Anarchy, spatiality, and surrealist philosophy

Speaking about his attraction to surrealist philosophy, Gorey said: “[Surrealist] philosophy appeals to me. I mean that is my philosophy if I have one, certainly in the literary way” (Filstrup, 2001, p. 84). In fact, Dery has identified a possible connection between Gorey and the very roots of the surrealist movement in Gorey’s *The Fantod Pack* (1966), his “visual lexicon of characters, objects, plants, and animals that recur in his work” (Dery, 2018, p. 250). One of the cards, titled “The Bundle”, shows an image of a package tied with ropes, its outline suggesting a human figure resting its head on its knees. Dery posits that the image is reminiscent of Man Ray’s *L’Enigme d’Isidore Ducasse* (1920), a surrealist object (a sewing machine under a blanket tied with string) inspired by Ducasse’s simile from his proto-surrealist novel, *Le Chants de Maldoror* (1868), much admired by Dadaists: “beautiful as the chance meeting, on a dissecting table, of a sewing machine and an umbrella” (Dery, 2018, p. 252).

Furthermore, Gorey’s earlier work features numerous criminals and evildoers who, like, *Fantômas*, seem to escape the hand of justice. Commenting on *The Fatal Lozenge*, that compendium of the macabre, Gorey admits that “at that date I was not above trying to shock everyone a bit” (Dahlin, 2001, p. 45). If his other works are less directly shocking, many retain the theme of bizarre disturbances abruptly introduced into the placid lives of aristocrats and middle-class families: in *The Iron Tonic* (1969), characters are assaulted by clocks, urns, and bicycles falling from the sky; in *The Sinking Spell* (1964), a mysterious “something” falls through the roof of an Edwardian family’s house, gradually penetrating through all the floors until it disappears under the cellar; and the penguin-like creature in *The Doubtful Guest* (1957) appears one day to disturb the life of an aristocratic family. Years later, like an ironically charming yet hauntingly enduring *Fantômas* (who apparently dies at the conclusion of Souvestre and Allain’s thirty-second volume, *La fin de Fantômas* (1913), only to be given another fictional

return “that same month with Louis Feuillade’s second film in his series, *Juve contre Fantômas*” (Fornabai 2005: 72)), it “has shown no intention of going away”. Indeed, as Gabrielle Bellot points out, it is “just comically, exasperatingly there”, distilling “Gorey’s surrealistic aesthetic into a stark message: that events resist human control, that the mysteries that lie in the mundane cannot be fully solved” (Bellot, 2018). This penetration of the mysterious into the mundane lies at the root of surrealist thought, as surrealism itself “aimed to be a conduit between reality and dream, the rational and the marvellous, the conscious and the unconscious mind” (Stockwell 2017: 41).

Apart from his themes and characters, an element of Feuillade’s work that also seemed to resonate with the surrealists was his method of organizing space and arranging characters and objects within his tableaux. Finkelstein terms this technique “layered depth” or “orthogonal conception of space”, which is “defined by a spatial conception based on layers lying in depth, parallel to the picture plane as well as to the background plane” (Finkelstein, 2016, p. 42-43). This is not only true of Feuillade’s interior spaces, but outdoor scenes as well: “Streets and buildings are more often than not viewed laterally as lying parallel to the projection plane; cars too often move across the screen along such a lateral path” (Finkelstein, 2016, p. 43). As a result, although Feuillade retains “deep-space staging”, his conception of layered depth creates an “enhanced sense of flatness”, as “dominant spatial cues are associated with the flat surfaces that constitute the demarcations of the layers of space” (Finkelstein, 2016, p. 46). Feuillade’s influence on surrealist art is perhaps most strongly felt in Magritte’s paintings, for instance in *L’Assassin menacé* (1927), based on a scene from the third episode of *Fantômas*, *Le Mort qui tue* (1913). Gorey was an admirer of certain surrealists, Magritte in particular (Shortsleeve, 2018, p. 111), and some of Gorey’s illustrations combine Feuillade’s staging in depth with Magritte’s unnerving style, perhaps most prominently in *The West Wing*. Moreover, even when Gorey’s illustrations are composed using layered depth, they retain Feuillade’s effect of flattening due to the fact that diagonal composition is much rarer in Gorey than vertical or horizontal arrangement. This is further underscored by the backgrounds in Gorey’s panels, which are frequently formed by a flat structure, often a wall or a fence, lying parallel to the frame of the illustration. This means that a horizontal line representing the place where the background meets the floor or ground can be seen running across many of Gorey’s illustrations, which reinforces both the stage-like appearance of Gorey’s compositions and their association with Feuillade’s own theatrical framing.

#### 4.2. Space, mystery, and irrationality

Aside from a particular organization of space, Finkelstein identifies another spatial motif in Feuillade that echoes throughout the work of the surrealists: the motif of openings and passages such as doors, doorways, and windows. Finkelstein argues that the surrealists shared a “perception of the mystery and the Marvelous lurking in quotidian reality, in the midst of the bourgeois setting, behind doors or windows or some other hidden and unexpected openings” (Finkelstein, 2016, p. 61). In fact, Gorey himself referred to Feuillade’s films as “cozy, with domestic settings, and they have sinister underpinnings” (Nocenti, 2009, p. 10). In Feuillade (as in Gorey), various kinds of apertures abound, whether as windows and doorways or as gaps that function as uncanny passages between the familiar and the unfamiliar, introducing a sense of dislocation and uncertainty. Such openings, Finkelstein argues, also hint at “what cannot be seen behind them or within the darkness they frame” (Finkelstein, 2016, p. 61), which is an effect often found in Gorey, “whose art is about what isn’t said and isn’t shown” (Dery, 2018, p. 333): in panel 10 of his entirely wordless book *The West Wing* we glimpse a white form, perhaps a sheet or a gown, reflected in a mirror as it disappears around the edge of a doorway; in panel 17 we strain to make out the ghost-like apparition behind the windowpane; hallways open onto

other shadowy hallways, extending deeper into the tableaux; and several doors stand closed or slightly ajar, engaging the imagination but limiting our view of what lies beyond. Such a Feuilladean configuration of space plays an important role in Gorey's nonsense, as it provides both the backdrop for and the main elements in Gorey's nonsensical play with identity and his establishment of a multitude of unanswered questions that push against any meaningful narrative that can be pieced together from the dislocated scenes of the uncanny house.

In the above-cited comment made by Gorey on one of *Fantômas*'s more implausible escapes from justice in which he employs false arms attached to his cape, Gorey calls it "a wonderful dislocation of reality", "preposterous, and one of the great moments" (Nocenti, 2009, p. 25), emphasizing how the highly implausible and even impossible coexists with the everyday in Feuillade. His intimations of "another mysterious and often threatening world" (Finkelstein, 2016, p. 41) lurking behind the familiar involve a portrayal of Paris as an unstable space, perforated by secret compartments, trap doors, and various other openings that seem illogical or appear suddenly, without any indication or apparent planning on the part of the characters. For instance, in *Fantômas contre Fantômas*, the archvillain escapes from the grasp of Juve and Fandor when the two fall into holes that suddenly open in the ground, presumably dug in advance by *Fantômas*, although the film never offers a rational explanation. It seems that everywhere one looks, Feuillade's bourgeois world of ostensible serenity reveals unsettling gaps and secret corridors. Gorey's world is similarly unstable and prone to sudden irruptions of the uncanny, although usually refracted through a darkly comical lens, an effect Gorey often connects with the theme of apertures: in the abecedarium *The Chinese Obelisks* (1970), the Author "who went for a walk" encounters a house "whose foundations were sinking" and a thunderclap which "dislodged from the sky" a gigantic urn that crushes the Author to death (Gorey, 1980b); in *The Willowdale Handcar* (1962), the protagonists embark on a picaresque journey interrupted by disturbing encounters which seem to be vaguely connected, until they enter "a tunnel in the Iron Hills" without emerging "out the other end" (Gorey 1980a); following a scream heard outside her window, the protagonist of *The Eleventh Episode* (1971) falls down a well (perhaps echoing Alice's descent down the rabbit hole), at the bottom of which she discovers a tunnel that leads her "by tram, then train and boat" to indeterminate places "ever more remote" (Gorey, 1980d). Alexander Theroux reports Gorey once saying: "Life is intrinsically, well, boring and dangerous at the same time [...] At any given moment the floor may open up. Of course, it almost never does; that's what makes it so boring" (Theroux, 2000, p. 84).

In the world of Gorey's books, such sudden and bizarre openings indeed occur, evoking both the subjunctive mode of *Fantômas* and the surrealist marriage between the quotidian and the irrationality of dreams. However, Gorey maintains the distinction between surrealism and nonsense (and, consequently, dream and nonsense) identified by Tigges by avoiding that which is essential to surrealism, "the importance of the *image* and of its *emotional* impact", which is simultaneously counter to what is essential to nonsense: "the absence of emotion caused by the impossibility to satisfactorily interpret the images in their connotations and associations" (Tigges, 1988, p. 119, emphasis in the original). By combining Feuilladean tableaux with surrealist irruptions of reality by the impossible or dreamlike without inviting or eliciting emotion, Gorey establishes what Tigges terms "a perfect balance between the presence of humour and its absence" (Tigges, 1988, p. 195). Furthermore, rather than allowing either the tone of mystery or outright comedy to dominate over his verbal and visual texts, Gorey continually places the reader in the complex gap between the unsettlingly uncanny and the comically preposterous, without clearly signalling what the appropriate reaction to such a position should be. In effect, Gorey's texts themselves take on the mask of *Fantômas* and function like one of Feuillade's "glowing black humorists with all the ambiguous charm of *Dracula*" (Thomson, 2014, p. 344): they escape the grasp of our attempts to clearly map out their



shifting, metamorphosing identities so that, like Juve and Fandor in *Juve contre Fantômas*, we find ourselves falling into holes that we never expected were laid for us. Trapped in such an ambiguous situation, we realize that to turn to either horror or laughter is impossible, and that our attention is consequently drawn as much by the verbal and visual discourses of Gorey's work as it is by our own confused reaction to it: the humour of this condition, we find, is directed at our own exasperated and frustrated expectations, and we laugh with the text as it points its finger at us. Indeed, it may be no coincidence that so many of Gorey's illustrations feature characters staring directly out of the panel, returning the reader's gaze.

## 5. Conclusion

When we begin to search for the traces of silent films of Louis Feuillade in the work of Edward Gorey, we seem to find them everywhere: in the choice of his settings (from shadowy gardens to crumbling mansions and cobbled streets), the design of his costumes (elaborate dresses, flowery patterns, pearl necklaces, top hats and fur coats) and Victorian-Edwardian interiors (a profusion of rugs, curtains, and sashes), and in the melodramatic plots and the histrionics of his characters, including his fainting damsels in distress and Fantômas-like villains with absent motivations. We discover Feuillade's influence in the configuration of Gorey's panels, reminiscent of theatrical tableaux observed by a stationary camera, fixed horizontally and vertically at the characters' eye level. We find Feuillade in the (more or less) direct references to his films, such as *Tih-Minh* (in *La Malle Saignante*), *Les Vampires* (in *The Sopping Thursday* or on Gorey's poster for the 1978 stage production of *Dracula*, directed by Dennis Rosa) or *Fantômas* (for instance, in *The Black Doll*, Gorey's own screenplay for a silent film, or in any number of blank calling cards strewn across his entire oeuvre). Of course, we run into Feuillade in Gorey's own candid accounts, given in interviews, of the influence the French director and silent cinema in general exerted on his work.

Importantly, the mechanics of Gorey's nonsense are often built on a foundation provided by Feuillade: a surrealist blend of the everyday and the marvellous and an omnipresent sense of uncertainty which spans from character and object identity to character motivation and narrative resolution. Indeed, we find that Feuillade's own work occasionally recalls the framework of nonsense, particularly in his depiction of Fantômas' improbable and entirely illogical evasions of representatives of law and order, as well as in his characterisation of Fantômas himself as a mask with nothing behind it: no coherent identity or motivation except total, unrestrained play that alternately does and does not make sense (which in itself reads like a possible definition of nonsense). As Heyman points out, since "nonsense texts intentionally baffle meaning within what otherwise seems a sensible context, we may even begin to look at sensical works with a skeptical eye" (Heyman, 1999, p. 193). Examining Feuillade with such a "skeptical eye" through the darkly comical lens of Gorey's nonsense, we may discover in his crime serials their own "incomplete and often tenuous" logic (Callahan, 2005, p. 63) which frequently requires much "sense-juggling" in order to build some illusion of coherence. If Gorey maintains this balance between sense and non-sense by working within "tight structures, that is, with strict poetic form or within the bounds of formal prose" (Heyman, 2007, p. xxiv) and then achieves the effect of nonsense at least in part by withdrawing certain sense-making elements of genre, such as the revelation of the criminal in his crime mysteries (e.g. *The Awdrey-Gore Legacy*), he may in fact be imitating Feuillade's own exasperation of his audience's expectations, which is achieved through an endless postponement of the revelation of Fantômas' identity, or indeed, the expected prevention of his criminal exploits through a series of comically nonsensical escapes.

In many of Gorey's works outlined above we encounter this effect of "pleasurable play" with "meaning and its absence" (Heyman, 1999, p. 193): the readerly effort to fill nonsense gaps

and create the illusion that all the Feuillade-inspired elements can somehow cohere into a logical whole with a clearly defined tone in a particular Gorey text. As Heyman shows, in order to read the narrative of nonsense texts, we must establish such illusions, “yet the defining factor of nonsense is that there is an intentional breaking of these ‘levels of consistency’ of illusion” (Heyman, 1999, p. 193). In other words, “[n]onsense forces us to create illusions we cannot uphold” (Heyman, 1999, p. 193) until they inevitably escape our grasp, an effect dramatized by the conclusion of *The Black Doll*: just when “Seth and Daisy appear to have gained final possession of the Black Doll”, the eponymous manikin is snatched by the Asiatic who “flings it over the cliff into the river” (Gorey, 2009, p. 70). The doll is seen falling through the air until “it vanishes below the frame”, as if escaping the very confines of the screen itself. The words “THE END” that “appear against the empty air” (Gorey, 2009, p. 70) sound deeply ironic within such an open-ended finale. Like Seth and Daisy, we struggle to keep hold of the possible meanings of the bear imagery, the suggestive repetition of scenes, the various roles played by the same actor, and, most significantly, the Black Doll: we attempt to retain the illusion of sense in the nonsense text, but such an effort is confronted with a simultaneous absence of meaning. In its effect, Gorey’s nonsense thus reflects and significantly expands on Feuillade’s own preoccupation with juggling meaning and its absence, and like the question of Fantômas’s identity, his books leave us without resolutions or explanations, substituting instead an awareness of our own efforts at mapping out the impossible labyrinths of Gorey’s books. Embracing the inexplicable, the surrealist, and the enigmatic, Gorey’s work, like the mask of Fantômas or the strings of *L’Enigme d’Isidore Ducasse*, simultaneously encourages and resists prying fingers.

### Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Michael Heyman for providing the unpublished manuscript for his talk “Edward Gorey’s Nonsense Quietude” at the 2019 congress of the International Research Society for Children’s Literature (IRSCL).

### References

- Abel, R. (2005). *Encyclopedia of early cinema*. Routledge.
- Allain, M., & Souvestre, P. (1986). *Fantômas*. Pan Books.
- Andrew, D. (1995). *Mists of regret: Culture and sensibility in classic French film*. Princeton University Press.
- Ashbery, J. (1987). Introduction to Fantômas. In M. Allain & P. Souvestre, *Fantômas* (pp. 1-10). Pan Books.
- Bellot, G. (2018). Edward Gorey and the power of the ineffable. *The Atlantic*. Retrieved May 1, 2024, from <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2018/12/edward-gorey-surrealism-power-of-the-ineffable/579028/>
- Burch, N. (1990). *Life to those shadows*. (B. Brewster, Trans.). University of California Press.
- Callahan, V. (2005). *Zones of anxiety: Movement, Musidora, and the crime serials of Louis Feuillade*. Wayne State University Press.
- Callahan, V. (2014). The cinema of uncertainty and the opacity of information from Louis Feuillade’s crime serials to Film Noir. In H. B. Petter & R. B. Palmer (Eds.), *Film Noir* (pp. 16–37). Edinburgh University Press.
- Cannon, J. (2016). *The Paris zone: A cultural history, 1840-1944*. Routledge.
- Dahlin, R. (2001). Conversations with writers: Edward Gorey. In K. Wilkin (Ed.), *Ascending peculiarity: Edward Gorey on Edward Gorey* (pp. 24-49). Harcourt.

- Dery, M. (2018). *Born to be posthumous: The eccentric life and mysterious genius of Edward Gorey*. HarperCollins Publishers.
- Desnos, R. (1988). Fantômas, Les Vampires, Les Mysteres de New York. In R. Abel, *French film theory and criticism, Volume 1: A history/anthology, 1907-1939* (pp. 398-400). Princeton University Press.
- Dyer, R. (2001). The poison penman. In K. Wilkin (Ed.), *Ascending peculiarity: Edward Gorey on Edward Gorey* (pp. 110-25). Harcourt.
- Filstrup, J. M. (2002). An interview with Edward St. John Gorey at the Gotham Book Mart. In K. Wilkin (Ed.), *Ascending peculiarity: Edward Gorey on Edward Gorey* (pp. 72-85). Harcourt.
- Finkelstein, H. (2016). *The screen in surrealist art and thought*. Routledge.
- Fornabai, N. L. (2005). Criminal factors: 'Fantômas', anthropometrics, and the numerical fictions of modern criminal identity. *Yale French Studies*, 108, 60-73.
- Gorey, E. (2001). *The Doubtful Guest*. In E. Gorey, *Amphigorey*. Penguin Group.
- Gorey, E. (1980). *The Fatal Lozenge*. In E. Gorey, *Amphigorey*. Penguin Group.
- Gorey, E. (1980a). *The Willowdale Handcar*. In E. Gorey, *Amphigorey*. Penguin Group.
- Gorey, E. (1980b). *The Chinese Obelisks*. In E. Gorey, *Amphigorey Too*. Penguin Group.
- Gorey, E. (1980c). *The Deranged Cousins, or, Whatever*. In E. Gorey, *Amphigorey Too*. Penguin Group.
- Gorey, E. (1980d). *The Eleventh Episode*. In E. Gorey, *Amphigorey Too*. Penguin Group.
- Gorey, E. (1983). *La Malle Saignante*. In E. Gorey, *Amphigorey Again*. Harcourt Inc.
- Gorey, E. (2006). *The Broken Spoke*. In E. Gorey, *Amphigorey Also*. Harcourt Brace & Company.
- Gorey, E. (2007). *The Fantod Pack*. Pomegranate.
- Gorey, E. (2009). *The Black Doll*. Pomegranate.
- Gorey, E. (2014). *Alms for Oblivion*. In E. Gorey, *The Betrayed Confidence Revisited: Ten Series of Postcards* (pp. 14-26.). Pomegranate.
- Gorey, E. (2014a). *Menaced Objects*. In E. Gorey, *The Betrayed Confidence Revisited: Ten Series of Postcards* (pp. 54-62). Pomegranate.
- Gorey, E. (2014b). *Q.R.V. Hikuptah: A Dozen Dogear Wryde Postcards*. In E. Gorey, *The Betrayed Confidence Revisited: Ten Series of Postcards* (pp. 87-96). Pomegranate.
- Gorey, E. (2017). *Edward Gorey Coloring Book*. Pomegranate.
- Gorey, E. (2023). Untitled unbound bifolium. Retrieved May 1, 2024, from [www.edwardgorey.org](http://www.edwardgorey.org).
- Greskovic, R. (2018). The man who wanted to be entertained. In E. Monroe (Ed.), *Gorey's worlds* (pp. 51-75). Princeton University Press.
- Henwood, S. (2001). Edward Gorey. In K. Wilkin (Ed.), *Ascending peculiarity: Edward Gorey on Edward Gorey* (pp. 158-171). Harcourt, Inc.
- Heyman, M. (1999). A new defense of nonsense; or, where then is his phallus? and other questions not to ask. *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, 24(4), 187-194.
- Heyman, M. (2007). An Indian nonsense naissance. In M. Heyman, S. Satpathy & A. Ravishankar (Eds.), *The tenth Rasa: An anthology of Indian nonsense* (pp. xix-xliii). Penguin Books.
- Heyman, M. (2017). Pigs, pastures, pepper pickers, pitchforks: Carl Sandburg's Rootabaga Stories and the tall tale. *The European Journal of Humour Research*, 5(3), 57-67.
- Heyman, M. (2019). Edward Gorey's nonsense quietude. Unpublished manuscript presented at the 24th Biennial Congress of the International Research Society for Children's Literature (IRSL) "Silence and Silencing in Children's Literature" in Stockholm.
- Hodenfield, J. (2001). And G is for Gorey who here tells his story. In K. Wilkin (Ed.), *Ascending peculiarity: Edward Gorey on Edward Gorey* (pp. 2-5). Harcourt.

- Hoffman, A. R. (2016). 'A Wonderful Horrid Thing': Edward Gorey, Charles Dickens, and drawing the horror out of childhood death. In J. R. McCort (Ed.), *Reading in the dark: Horror in children's literature and culture* (pp. 61-89). University Press of Mississippi.
- Kennedy, Victor. "Mystery! Unraveling Edward Gorey's tangled web of visual metaphor". *Metaphor and Symbolic Activity*, 8(3), 1993, pp. 181-93.
- Lackner, E. L. (2015). *Genre games: Edward Gorey's play with generic form*. [PhD thesis. Victoria University of Wellington].
- Leeuwen, H. van. (1986). The liaison of visual and written nonsense. In W. Tigges (Ed.), *Explorations in the field of nonsense* (pp. 61-95). Rodopi.
- Levinovitz, A. (2017). Slaying the Chinese Jabberwock: Toward a comparative philosophy of nonsense. *Comparative Literature*, 69(3), 251-270.
- Low, R. (2011). *The history of the British film 1896–1906*. Routledge.
- Nocenti, A. (2009). Writing *The Black Doll*: A talk with Edward Gorey. In E. Gorey, *The Black Doll* (pp. 8-31). Pomegranate.
- Park, E. (2009). The dream life: Edward Gorey's silent screenplay of an unmade film. *Moving Image Source*. Retrieved May 1, 2024, from [www.movingimagesource.us/articles/the-dream-life-20090514](http://www.movingimagesource.us/articles/the-dream-life-20090514).
- Pinsent, E. (2001). A Gorey encounter. In K. Wilkin (Ed.), *Ascending peculiarity: Edward Gorey on Edward Gorey* (pp. 188-95). Harcourt, Inc.
- Reynal, M. (1988). Cinema column: Fantômas. In R. Abel, *French film theory and criticism, Volume 1: A history/anthology, 1907-1939* (pp. 89-90). Princeton University Press.
- Rubin, M. (1999). *Thrillers*. Cambridge University Press.
- Schiff, S. (2001). Edward Gorey and the Tao of nonsense. In K. Wilkin (Ed.), *Ascending peculiarity: Edward Gorey on Edward Gorey* (pp. 136-57). Harcourt, Inc.
- Shortsleeve, K. (2002). Edward Gorey, children's literature, and nonsense verse. *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, 27(1), 27-39.
- Shortsleeve, K. (2018). Edward Gorey, nonsense, surrealism and silent matter. In E. Monroe (Ed.), *Gorey's Worlds* (pp. 101-31). Princeton University Press.
- Stockwell, P. (2017). *The language of surrealism*. Palgrave.
- Terry, I. (2011). Fantomas. *Goreyana*, 12 February 2011. Retrieved May 1, 2024, from [www.goreyana.blogspot.com/2011/02/fantomas.html](http://www.goreyana.blogspot.com/2011/02/fantomas.html).
- Theroux, A. (2000). *The strange case of Edward Gorey*. Fantagraphics.
- Thomson, D. (2014). *The new biographical dictionary of film*. Knopf.
- Tigges, W. (1988). *An anatomy of literary nonsense*. Rodopi.
- Tobias, T. (2001). Balletgorey. In K. Wilkin (Ed.), *Ascending peculiarity: Edward Gorey on Edward Gorey* (pp. 10-23). Harcourt.
- Vilain, R. (2000). An urban myth: Fantômas and the surrealists. In W. Chernaik, M. Swales, & R. Vilain (Eds.), *The art of detective fiction* (pp. 194-200). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Walz, R. (1996). Serial killings: Fantômas, Feuillade and the mass-culture genealogy of surrealism. *The Velvet Light Trap: A Critical Journal of Film and Television*, 37, 51-57.
- Walz, R. (2000). *Pulp surrealism: Insolent popular culture in early twentieth-century Paris*. University of California Press.
- Wilkin, K. (2001). Edward Gorey: An introduction. In K. Wilkin (Ed.), *Ascending peculiarity: Edward Gorey on Edward Gorey* (pp. ix-xxi). Harcourt, Inc.
- Wilkin, K. (2009). Edward Gorey: Mildly unsettling. In K. Wilkin (Ed.), *Elegant enigmas: The art of Edward Gorey* (pp. 9-36). Pomegranate.