

Making Friends with Horror

Essay by Matt Carey-Williams published on the occasion of the exhibition *Mathew Weir - Against the Irreversible*

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Chapter I: Marlon Brando

"It's impossible for words to describe what is necessary to those who do not know what horror means ... Horror. Horror has a face. And you must make a friend of horror. Horror and moral terror are your friends. If they are not then they are enemies to be feared."

(Colonel Walter E. Kurtz, played by Marlon Brando, speaking to Captain Benjamin L. Willard, played by Martin Sheen in Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* [1979]).

The greatest monologue in all of twentieth-century cinema is that delivered by Marlon Brando playing Kurtz in Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979). The whole scene was entirely improvised by Brando because he had not read the script and Coppola couldn't afford to keep him on his set any longer to learn lines or rehearse as the brilliant, but somewhat inattentive actor, was costing Coppola a million dollars a week.

The scene is set on Kurtz's compound in Cambodia. He sits in a crepuscular, umbral space where air, light and reason are suffocated by the madness of heat, hunger and hostility. Shelling and eating nuts, and occasionally wiping the sweat off his big, bald head with his hand, wringing it dry, Kurtz pontificates to his prisoner, Willard (played by Martin Sheen), in a grand, grim stream of consciousness about free will, primordial instinct, passion, judgement and horror. Whilst Kurtz is clearly mad, having created a hellish place that reeks of death and delusion, the subject he muses on - man's propensity for evil - is a reflection of his prisoner, as well as himself. Willard has been instructed by his US Army superiors to terminate Kurtz's command 'with extreme prejudice' because the Colonel's methods 'have become unsound'. Willard has been sent to Hell to unleash Hell on a man who is treated like a god by his followers. Which begs the question: what are you if you're a destroyer of gods and deadlier than death?

With but a few seconds showing Willard's intrigued but terrified face, the whole scene is a portrait of Kurtz's head and, in particular, his mouth. The viewer watches him speak slowly and surely; we can see every word clearly and carefully enunciated, filling the space, aurally and visually. The oratorical mouth of an analyst shedding light in the mouth of Hell. Indeed, Kurtz's head ebbs in and out of waves of sweaty light and damp darkness. One

moment he is completely visible, the next he is engulfed in sublime caliginosity. The disparity of time, place, language and meaning are now all stitched together by Coppola's exquisite chiaroscuro and Brando's ingenious, fearless performance. One that, eventually, sees Brando as Kurtz hacked to death like a sacred cow by Sheen as Willard, only to give a face to horror; his final breath still attempting to communicate the lunacy and darkness which has enveloped him - "The horror! The horror!"

Chapter II: Charles Marlow

"Curious, this feeling that came over me that such details would be more intolerable than those heads drying on the stakes under Mr. Kurtz's windows ... I seemed at one bound to have been transported into some lightless region of subtle horrors, where pure, uncomplicated savagery ... had a right to exist". (Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* [1902]).

Coppola's film is, of course, predicated upon Joseph Conrad's 1902 novella, *Heart of Darkness*; a text that explores the horrors of Western colonialism. The novella's chief protagonist, Marlow, journeys up the Congo river to find an ivory trader called Kurtz. What Marlow also discovers, en route, is the innate ugliness of man; that one's moral compass can be so altered or, even, abandoned upon instruction. It's a tale of "... the devil of violence, and the devil of greed, and the devil of hot desire", with ivory being the signifier of such greed. Rather radically, and controversially, Conrad explores the dynamic between white, oppressive 'haves' and black, oppressed 'have nots'. The further the white Marlow journeys up the black Congo, the more he becomes enlightened to the horrors of white avarice, bloodshed and brutality, with the final Eureka of such despotism delivered by his meeting with Kurtz - Conrad's emblem of primordial instinct, judgement and unadulterated horror.

Marlow enters the mouth of the river to penetrate a heart of darkness as if his journey is through a body. The body of Africa? The body of man? The body of Hell? This bleeding of interiority with exteriority, much like Conrad's use of multiple narrators and an unfolding achronology, lends the novella a striking distrust in the stability of language. Conrad's protagonists employ words that attempt to describe the 'unspeakable' or 'inscrutable'. Language, like reason, sense or meaning, collapses in the novella, amplifying Conrad's prevailing mood of darkness, despair and disarray; the mouth which usually describes and explains is now unable to articulate the horrors that unfold before it. All it can do sigh, whimper or scream.

Brando's methodical mouth; Kurtz's voracious mouth; the mouth of the Congo; Marlow mouthing muffled madness. All of them aghast and open wide in the presence of pure horror. A horror that Brando's

Kurtz says we must befriend otherwise it will get the better of us. Willard tries to eliminate the horror by killing it, only to find that he, in turn, has become part of a lineage of horror. Conrad's Kurtz is killed by the jungle he tried to brutishly exterminate. As Philip Larkin reminds us, man hands on misery to man, just like your Mum and Dad fuck you up. That misery is the horror of our history, our experience. Of our attempts at humanity. That misery is the horror of war, genocide and slavery. The horror is timeless, endless, everywhere. It lubricates history and, still today, informs our current horrors of racism, sexism and homophobia, to name but only a few. The horror is both unmentionable and inescapable and so, in order for it not to destroy us we must not destroy it. Conrad and Coppola both surmise that one does not love horror, but one can learn from it and one does so by making friends with horror. Because the horror is not 'out there'. It's inside us. The horror is played out by both Kurtz and Marlow. Good is bad. Bad is good. Making a friend of horror is to admit to the foibles of the past and appropriately manage the future.

Mathew Weir does exactly that. He makes friends with all sorts of horrors. Getting cosy with the horrors of death, history, greed and slavery allows him to (re)consider our contemporary repugnance of life, politics, capitalism and systemic racism, all of which are magnified today by the Coronavirus pandemic. So it is that this exhibition acts like the mouth of Conrad's Congo or the sulphuric, kaleidoscopic den of darkness that is Kurtz's hideaway on an uncharted Cambodian river. Mathew's show becomes an estuary of effluence; a delta where tributaries of all types of horror meet and flow into one another.

Chapter III: W. G. Sebald

"... nostalgia is an overcoming of the present. Even in the form of regret, it takes on a dynamic character: we want to force the past, act retroactively, protest against the irreversible." (Emil Cioran in W.G. Sebald, "Against the Irreversible: On Jean Améry" in Sebald's *On the Natural History of Destruction* [1999]).

The title of Mathew's exhibition, *Against the Irreversible*, is shared with a gilded cast iron and steel bear trap which, in many ways, is both the beginning and the end of our visual attempt to make a friend of horror. Mathew has taken the title from the German writer and literary critic, Winfried Georg Sebald's essay on the Austrian philosopher, writer and Holocaust survivor, Jean Améry. There is a meeting of minds between the two since Sebald's writing often focussed on the decay of tradition and civilisation which chimes with Améry's exploration of the sadistic nature of man and, by extension, his primal desire for death; his own and that of the other. Both Sebald and Améry, in turn, weave a *weltanschauung* that speaks to Mathew's practice and offers the hand of friendship with

horror. The idea of struggling against history or fighting to remedy our past mistakes is a chief concern of Mathew's in the show. How do we make good our errant past as human beings? What reparations can we make for the horrors of our collective past? How do we disentangle that which is so cemented in our cultural, philosophical, social and political trajectories, crossing hundreds of years?

The bear trap *Readymade Against the Irreversible* (2020) sets up numerous conversations with the other works included in the show and thus sets the exhibition's agenda. It is round, like a ferocious mouth with fangs. It is gilded and, like Kurtz's ivory, the ostentatious displacement of its gruesome, proletarian status into a luxurious object of desire speaks to the subtext of greed and death, further compounded by the Denali Fur and Trade Company disc that sits inside the trap. A gold coin for the Ferryman of Hades, Charon, to pay for the carriage of your soul across the dark waters of the River Styx. It is also an implement used to capture, maim and kill those its entraps. Bears are one thing, but Mathew is interested in the fact that such traps were used to capture runaway slaves. And that is a particularly resonant horror to try and befriend today given the global outrage at the deaths of numerous Black men and women, mainly in America, at the hands of (invariably) white law enforcement officers.

Chapter IV: Billy Waters

"White man, hear me! A man is a man, a woman is a woman, a child is a child. To deny these facts is to open doors on a chaos deeper and deadlier, and, within the space of a man's lifetime, more timeless, more eternal, than the medieval vision of Hell" (James Baldwin, *The White Man's Guilt* [1985]).

For many years Mathew's work has explored the history of slavery and the problematics of racism. The golden bear trap discussed above connects to the subject of Mathew's *The Ghosts of Slavery Ships* (2019-20) in that the subject, Billy Waters (c. 1778-1823) was an American slave who lost most of his right leg after falling from the topsail yard of the British prison hulk, HMS Ganymede, in 1812. Unable to work on a ship, Waters would go on to become a famous street entertainer in London and was elected King of the Beggars shortly before he died in 1823.

Mathew depicts Waters fiddling and he is cropped at the knees where one can just about make out the strap for his wooden leg. As with all of Mathew's paintings, the surface of *The Ghosts of Slavery Ships* is astonishingly intricate. Unnervingly so. His laborious, microscopic brushwork generates a bewildering hyper-reality, slipping between paint and porcelain; music and mutilation like a recurring nightmare. A dream that zooms us from portrait to still

life to vanitas but then dumps us outside the charity shop staring at a ceramic souvenir of an unknown, sadly clownish man playing a violin for anyone; for no-one.

The status of an enslaved Black man, mutilated on a British prison ship and now become some kind of street jester for the entertainment of white people parading London's filthy streets, is disheartening to say the least. The fact that it is deliberately memorialised in this bastardized way by Mathew's clever, kitschy kisses of paint with his tiny, searching brush, only amplifies the horror of Waters' predicament, speaking also to W. G. Sebald's theories of memory and the collective amnesia civilisations engender and experience to help them cope with their past failures as a culture and society. Mathew's painting is thus a portrait of a wretched, lamentable circumstance; one of laceration, deprivation and persecution that speaks to much of the Black experience today. An experience strangulated and pilloried all too often by governments all over the world.

The comedy of life and the tragedy of death underpins Mathew's image of Billy Waters. Those two pillars engage each other in the two paintings, *Black Cat Bone* (2019-20) and *Mother* (2019-20). Death is the ultimate, final horror and is here signified by a laughing skeleton, risen from the grave, set against a background taken from a medieval manuscript in *Black Cat Bone*. Note the stagnant pools of darkness that rest in the emaciated figure's eyes, navel and mouth: eyes that see only death; a mouth that feeds only on our fear; a navel that would have connected it to its mother. Where *Black Cat Bone* is dark and menacing, *Mother* is light and fecund. A large waterfall cascades over a rocky cliff face. *Mother* is here Mother Nature but, in the compositional placement of the waterfall, bifurcating two rather fleshy looking walls of rock, *Mother* could also signify womanhood with the water of the river now the broken waters of a vagina, gushing life upon us. The fall of the water can also be seen as the end of the river; the end of death on the Styx; the end of oppression on Conrad's Congo.

Chapter V: Mathew Weir

"... a mouth is a good metaphor for Hell. If you're in the process of being eaten, you aren't killed outright, your body is transformed bit by bit into edible matter; like the damned, you are alive and dead together." (Tom Lubbock, "Hellmouth" in Lubbock's *English Graphic* [2012]).

Hellmouth I (2019-20) and *Hellmouth II* (2019-20) are inspired by several illuminated manuscripts and, in particular, by Tom Lubbock's analysis of a page from the Winchester Psalter (c. 1121-61, London, British Library) called *The Damned are Swallowed by Hellmouth*.

Hellmouth I depicts a giant ursine creature, mouth impossibly agape, belching flames of hellish fire, protected by demons who have captured all sorts of creatures from the woods and fed them to this horrific beast. In contrast, *Hellmouth II* is less violent, with the flames of fear extinguished by Mother's gentle waterfall returning once more. That being said, this painting also describes another gargantuan beast with yet another enormous mouth seemingly gulping down a group of naked men, women and children. Perhaps the first *Hellmouth* betrays Hell and the second a fallen Eden with that garden of Original Sin carefully deconstructed by Mathew one painterly pathogen at a time, presenting a Paradise perfumed by lies that still cannot hide the stench and horror of the truth. Eden as Earth with both presented as a pretty, pointless purulence of pity.

Lubbock makes numerous connections between the congregation of medieval figures stuffed into the gigantic aperture of the Winchester Psalter's *Hellmouth* and the configuration of slaves on slave ships, with each person packed in as tightly as possible, like cargo. Hell, like those ships, like the mouths of these beasts, is packed to the gills with people.

So it is that the *Hellmouth* paintings bring us back full circle to those golden jaws of *Against The Irreversible*. A round trip taken on claustrophobic slave ships teeming with manacled people, screaming loudly, stinking of fear and death, along rivers that lead us to the mouth of Hell and the heart of an interminable darkness. A place that has existed (yet conveniently forgotten) for centuries but which we must now venture towards for it is only there that we can all truly understand the moral turpitude of our past and thus remedy the sickened horrors of the world in which we currently live today.

Matt Carey-Williams
Sandy Lane, Wiltshire
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