

## **Bad For Good** **William D. Rount**

### **Beyond good and evil [1]**

Even before Tim Burton made a movie based on his life, almost everyone knew two things about Edward D. Wood, Jr. The first was that he directed "the worst movie ever made", *Plan 9 From Outer Space* (1956). The second was that he was a transvestite. The two things seem to be linked in some way - or, at least, they often crop up together, as they did just now. And, when you think about it, that is strange.[2]

But then, reactions to Ed Wood do tend towards the strange. I remember when I first saw *Plan 9*. It was on television. In fact, I cannot imagine seeing an Ed Wood movie anywhere else but on television; they were made-for-TV, direct-to-video, before such forms were invented. It was late at night (of course). I was tired and the experience was a hallucinatory one. The film did not seem to have a plot. It opened with "Criswell Predicts", for God's sake! Now and then there were shots of Bela Lugosi *stalking* with his cape over his eyes (not Lugosi at all, as I later learned) and *Vampira staring* through creepy branches and Tor Johnson *menacing* with his arms raised and his mouth open. Cadillac hubcaps (or paper plates or plastic models - anyhow, not flying saucers) spinning across the sky. A tremendous amount of stock footage. Meandering pointless dialogue. *Nothing* happened: it was a movie of pure effect.

For years afterward I described this film of my imagining, whose title I had forgotten, to people who were not interested. Alone, I pondered the experience and tried to understand what had so fascinated me about it. *Plan 9* became for me an icon of *le cinéma maudit* of which Cocteau had written - only Cocteau had meant the avant-garde, and I meant a truly damned cinema, the movies everyone knew were trash. It seemed to me that accepted ideas about films were being challenged by such movies, and that in them diametrically opposed aesthetic values collided skull to skull. In some ways they seemed to go beyond (or before) cinema into another place, a place I privately called "paracinema", in order to mark its radical difference without prejudice - that is, to make it sound good.

### **Trash criticism**

There are at least two points to this confessional anecdote. One is obvious: that it supports the claim that *Plan 9* can make a serious impression on viewers quite apart from any knowledge they may possess about the director's sartorial preferences.[3] For me, and for those like me, the question concerning Ed Wood is a question of accounting for a certain schizoid fascination, and this essay will make some attempt to do that in a more or less traditional academic fashion. But for others, stories like mine raise a different question, and that question demands our attention first. This is the question of taking the films and their deep divisions seriously at all.

And it *is* hard to know how to take such films seriously. Seriousness itself is one of the values in question here. *Plan 9* is, after all, "the worst movie ever made", the ultimate derisory object for the kind of people who need desperately to feel superior to something. A certain attitude, conveyed very well in some of the writing about Wood and his films, attempts to direct all of the possible responses to "trash" into a single smug channel where everyone feels secure in their tastes, confirmed in the knowledge that they know what is bad, at least. For various

reasons having to do with the status of the arts in contemporary Anglo-American culture, it seems to be much harder to overcome this sort of negative prejudice than it is to resist, for example, the prejudice that *Citizen Kane* (1941) is the greatest movie ever made.

Put more directly: what other people have written about Ed Wood is important to my fascination - if only as impedance - because what other people have written has created "Ed Wood", the character that Tim Burton made his film about, and "Ed Wood films", those defining instances of trash.

Of the writing that created "Ed Wood" probably the most important of all is in Harry and Michael Medved's book, *The Golden Turkey Awards* (1980), for this is the book that proclaimed him "The Worst Director of All Time" and *Plan 9 from Outer Space* "The Worst Film of All Time". *The Golden Turkey Awards* is also the book that "discovered" or "broke" Ed Wood into a common item of cultural literacy. In addition, the way it represents Wood and his work is both typical and intriguing.

Typical, because a considerable amount of space is devoted to the way Wood lived: the transvestism, strange acquaintances, alcoholism, pornography. Most of this material is introduced through the words of Charles Anderson, "one of Wood's closest friends" (Medved and Medved, 1980: 180), as the payoff-*cum*-rationale for the Medveds' having chosen this filmmaker above William Beaudine, Hershell Gordon Lewis or Phil Tucker as history's worst director. This is the way Wood's life tends to be used even today - in a kind of bonehead auteurist fashion where the badness of the life is taken as evidence for the badness of the work.<sup>[4]</sup>

Typical also in what has been chosen to characterise the badness of Wood's films: their dialogue, narrative, unprofessional technique, pretension to seriousness. The Medveds' essay explaining their choice for worst film first recounts *Plan 9*'s story in a kind of exultant amazement. Then it deals with the film's lamentable special effects, sets, lighting, and its use of a mismatched double for Bela Lugosi. Beginning with Lugosi, some of the other people appearing in the film are described, mainly in terms of their pathetic performances or their weird lives (Dudley Manlove, Joanna Lee, Mona McKinnon, Gregory Walcott, Tor Johnson, Criswell). The piece ends with another quote (possibly from Anderson) picturing Wood on the set in womens' clothes, directing with a megaphone, and enjoying every minute.

This description of *Plan 9* suggests why Wood's life may be important in his promotion to "all-time worst" status. There are two strands of condemnation in the Medveds' essays on the director and his film. One is a catalogue of unprofessional conduct. It plots out a series of "mistakes" in writing, scripting, film making, casting, performance. The other is a strand of personal weirdness: behaving which is really Being. This seems to be invoked as a means of linking the disparate errors together. It acts in place of a style, imparting wholeness and connection by implication. The bizarre aspects of Wood's life, then, sign "Edward D. Wood, Jr." to a discordant badness that might otherwise defy homogeneous characterization.

*The Golden Turkey Awards* does not make this argument explicitly. Instead, it uses the weirdness of Wood's life as the endpoint for its list of his sins as a director and again as the finale of its list of the sins of *Plan 9*. Although later writing has attempted to create the links missing in the Medveds' treatment, the structure I have just described may be read differently from the way I have just suggested. Perhaps Wood's life is just another of the unprofessional errors the Medveds' list - not an explanation of anything, but merely the last instance of a

series. That is, although I think the book says that Wood directed badly *because* he lived badly, perhaps it only intends to say that he directed badly *and* he lived badly.

In either case, it fails to make its case. That is, either the Medveds are grounding their claims of Wood's pre-eminent badness on a connection between his life and his art which they have not explicated, or they are just throwing in the bad life to jazz up a set of gaffes and blunders no wilder or more egregious than many others which their books record. And this is where the typical becomes intriguing - because surely recognising someone's badness assumes a certain goodness, however transient, in the eye of the beholder. Yet the Medveds have written what most people would call a bad argument in the service of demonstrating the badness of what they are criticising. By so doing, they tend to forfeit a measure of their superiority by descending to the badness they despise, and their criticism of trash becomes, itself, trash criticism.

This is kind of like an academic's excuse for a joke, but it gets funnier. The Medveds have Ed Wood's birth year wrong (Medved and Medved, 1980: 176).<sup>[5]</sup> Their list of "six major films" misdates *Bride of the Monster* (produced 1955; released 1956), *Night of the Ghouls* (produced 1958; perhaps not released) and *Necromania* (produced and released in 1971), which is also misidentified as *Necromancy* <sup>[6]</sup>. A production still showing pillows placed to cushion an actor's fall is captioned as though the pillows can be seen in the film (Medved and Medved, 1980: 177). Dialogue about the incomprehensibility of certain circumstances in *Plan 9* is misquoted and taken out of context, which renders it more "elusive and obscure" than it actually is. The Medveds say that "Wood frequently uses a narrator", but in fact a narrator is used in only three of the ten or so features he directed. They claim that there are "studio floodlights above his haunted cemetery set" visible as such in *Plan 9*, but there are not (Medved and Medved, 1980: 178). On page 178 they claim that an actor causes a cardboard tombstone "to bend notably" in *Plan 9*, and on page 206 they say that "a policeman accidentally knocks over" a grave marker in the film - neither of which happens. But then, no secretary picks up any telephone before it rings in *Bride of the Monster* (no secretary picks up any phone in that film); Bela Lugosi clearly says "Don't be afraid of Lobo, he's as harmless as a *kitten*", not "kitchen" as the Medveds claim, in the same film; and the rubber octopus upon which various actors lie and scream was obtained from Republic Pictures, not Columbia (Medved and Medved, 1980: 178).

I am trying to be fair here. For example, there is no particular reason why the Medveds should have known that *Plan 9* was made in 1956, not 1959 as they have dated it; and perhaps in their opinion the six features Wood directed after *Plan 9* did present only a "few opportunities to use his incomparable skills as a director" (Medved and Medved, 1980: 179). <sup>[7]</sup> But surely it is a wee bit reprehensible to assert that the flying saucers in *Plan 9* are hubcaps and then that they are paper plates - on the same page (Medved and Medved, 1980: 205).<sup>[8]</sup> And there is no good reason at all for making a complete hash of the plotline of the film, leaving out bits, characters and motivation, changing the order of some events, and compressing two sequences in which a woman is menaced into one (Medved and Medved, 1980: 204-205).

Surely it is very funny - in the sense of peculiar - that a type of criticism that depends so strongly on the identification of gaffes should itself be so riddled with them. What is even more peculiar is that the Medveds are in this, as elsewhere, typical. Danny Peary, J. Hoberman, Bill Warren, Gary Indiana, Tim Lucas and Mark Carducci each adds at least one blunder to what has gone before.<sup>[9]</sup> It is as though trash criticism were insensibly moulded by its object, reproducing in its

expression the very unprofessionalism of the films for which it professes such contempt.

My point is not wholly a trivial one. In some sense the mistakes of trash criticism are fated, inscribed in the gaze such criticism engenders. I suppose the attitude might be termed "paranoid" since it presumes that there is something bad to be found, if only we look long and hard enough. But clinical labelling does not begin to evoke the kind of seeing involved here: the alertness, patience, disengagement and self-reliance directing eyes and mind. One must be vigilant, like a detective or a psychiatrist, anticipating a revelatory moment, ready to catch one's subject off-guard. Calling such a thing "paranoid" is a way of suggesting that trash critics, like Oedipus, carry the seeds of their undoing within; but you don't have to be a Freudian to know that it is tempting fate to dedicate yourself to the pursuit of error. Consider what I have just been about in nitpicking the nitpickers. Surely this too is trash criticism; and it would be foolish of me or you to imagine I have made no mistakes.

Yet on some level this kind of criticism mirrors its object well. Indeed, a sense of encountering something "beyond all reason", which broadly characterises many people's positive responses to trash, also applies to the wildly unreasonable criticism written by the Medveds and their ilk. In its emphasis on and celebration of what it deems mistakes, the Medveds' criticism does (mis)identify a key element of Wood's films and of bad movies in general. Most of all, the paranoid obsessiveness of trash criticism neatly counterpoints the schizoid oleaginity of so-called trash film at the same time that it so singularly fails to capture or convict such films of the unnameable crimes those critics are dreaming.

There is a way in which trash criticism is just another name for one kind of criticism we all practice, or one way of seeing we all tend to adopt from time to time. Trash criticism is different from the norm only in that its object is trash, and thus there seems to be no need to treat that object with any respect (the respect of checking one's "facts", for example). The badness of the object of trash criticism is so evident that it does not matter how extravagantly or erroneously one writes about it. And, of course, the vulnerability of trash objects can act as an irresistible temptation in just the way that a cowering animal escalates the attacks against it.

### **The worst movie of all time**

Which is to say that it is time for this essay to abandon trash criticism for its cowering object, and engage in a more or less traditional enquiry into the fascination of "the worst movie of all time": *Plan 9 from Outer Space*.<sup>[10]</sup>

The first question that traditional scholarship (in this instance more paranoid than trash criticism) asks of its object is, "What are we looking at?" This is a question about material, and it is more germane than may seem apparent at first, so bear with me.

At least two different prints of *Plan 9* are in current circulation (and may have been around from 1959 or before), and these are supplemented by a published screenplay advertising itself as "uncensored and uncut".<sup>[11]</sup> There is a 13 minute discrepancy in running time between the two versions I have seen of the film, and the effect of the cutting is to make the shorter version slightly less coherent.

The results are clearest in the two opening sequences. In the longer version (and the screenplay), the film opens with a graveside ceremony where an old man (Bela Lugosi) is mourning the death of his wife. Two gravediggers are killed after

the mourners have left. Shortly thereafter we see the old man in front of his house where he picks a flower before being killed off screen in a street accident - implied by sound effects and a swish pan of an ambulance speeding down a city street before the screen fades to black. Then mourners leave the old man's crypt after his burial and discover the gravediggers' bodies.

The shorter version omits the shots of the old man leading up to the ambulance, the sound effects and the narration that accompanies them. Only one line of narration and two lines of dialogue establish the old man's death, and this is often not enough for first-time viewers. Spectators get confused about just exactly who died and under what circumstances. By the omission of five shots events are presented in a manner almost guaranteed to make the storyline hard to follow.

The cuts may or may not have been made by Wood himself. Three years elapsed between the film's completion and its eventual release, and during that time apparently it was taken out of his hands. At least two people have been identified as having been involved with the editing as well as Wood, who is the only one credited on the titles (Grey, 1992: 85, 203). But whoever made the cuts, the cultural result has been a kind of stunted twinning, two aspects of the same reflection, each distorted and each distorting the other. The situation is grotesque in a way that the existence of two versions of, say, *Red River* (Howard Hawks, 1948) is not.

For if the shorter version of *Plan 9* is less easy to follow, it is only *slightly* less so. Trash critics have been particularly delighted with the way the longer version represents the old man's precipitous demise by the sound of brakes, a scream, and the shot of the ambulance. And neither the shorter nor the longer version explains why it has taken until after the old man's funeral to discover the fate of the gravediggers who died after the wife's funeral, or why they have not joined the ranks of the living dead. The screenplay is no help here: this unreasonable discovery appears to be exactly what is intended (Wood, 1990: 7).

Mistakes like these, if we must call them mistakes, are more interesting than all the wobbling crosses and doubtful flying saucers in the world. They are interesting in the first place because they are opportunistic, in the sense that they are determined by immediate circumstances rather than by verisimilitude or narrative logic. Existing Lugosi footage and the budget for shooting *Plan 9* determined the way the accident was represented in the longer version and even dictated doing away with the old man early in the proceedings. The gravediggers' deaths following the first burial clearly is what determined the shot of their corpses as a horrific revelation following the second burial, regardless of that revelation's plausibility on any level.

Ordinary films come together as you watch. In an extension of the "phi phenomenon" which makes smooth movement from the separate frames of a projected film, the separate sequences of an ordinary film find links before and after; and the whole thing seems to be one story or show. This doesn't quite happen in *Plan 9*. Instead it keeps coming apart. The movie begins with a notoriously bombastic prelude from the professional psychic, Criswell, that confuses past, present and future and tells us nothing much except that we should steel ourselves for what is to come. Then it begins again with a credit sequence in which the credits are in two distinct styles. The film's title, apparently announced by Criswell in the pre-credit sequence as "Grave Robbers from Outer Space", comes up on screen as *Plan 9 from Outer Space*. Finally some kind of story starts with the burial of the old man's wife, only to start again in the cockpit of an airliner (later the film will lurch without warning into a montage of saucer sightings and start a new, military subplot).

In such an atmosphere of frangibility the mistakes skewered by trash critics take on a new significance. They are another way in which the film breaks up before our/their eyes. The cockpit of the airliner is one of the least likely sets in movies [12], and when it appears with the onset of the second story, it is a shock that destroys connection as it destroys verisimilitude, directing attention to the separateness of this particular sequence. This effect is intensified when the crew says the saucers they encounter during this sequence are cigar-shaped, but the ones we are shown on screen are round. Each segment of this montage divides (cigar/round) as much as it joins (looking/seeing), so that the segments call attention to themselves rather than dissolving into the sequence as a whole. When a cross wobbles in the graveyard (which is the only time I can see anything like tombstones bending in the film), or the same furniture is found in different parts of the same house [13], it breaks up a shot into separate elements (setting, actors) in much the same way.

Since the effect is so consistent, perhaps it is deliberate. This kind of fragmentation is sometimes said to be a sign of avant-garde practice; and it is a short step from that to the notion of unrecognised genius. In *Re/Search #10: Incredibly Strange Films*, a text as influential in its own way as *The Golden Turkey Awards*, Andrea Juno and V. Vale seem to suggest that Wood's films are like others they praise which display "unfettered creativity . . . eccentric - even extreme - presentations by individuals *freely expressing their imaginations*" (Juno and Vale, 1986: 5). The same volume contains a testimonial from Ray Dennis Steckler, no less, which might have served as an epigraph to what I have written about *Plan 9*: "maybe they should re-evaluate his work a little more, because I don't think they *see* all the underlying currents there" (Steckler, 1986: 52).

Several times Wood experimented with filmic structures. *Glen or Glenda* is famous for mixing documentary, narrative and "experimental" (dream) modes. The soundtrack of that film is exceptionally dense, and the whole is somewhat more like a radio program than a movie, with the visual track acting as illustration rather than furnishing much narrative impetus of its own. Less remarked is an extraordinary narrative transition in *The Sinister Urge* (1961) in which police Lt. Matt Carson's hypothetical story about "Mary Smith" enters the diegesis to become the central narrative line, or the astounding climax of *The Night of the Ghouls* in which Criswell, who has been narrating the film, suddenly appears as the leader of the dead and puts matters right, finally addressing the camera from his coffin ("and now we return to our graves"), in the process utterly obliterating the distinction between narrator and actant.

Oddly enough, there is some evidence to support the idea that Wood made at least one repeated "unprofessional error" in *Plan 9* on purpose, just as a practitioner of the avant-garde might. A couple of times in the film a shot taken at night is placed in continuity with a shot clearly signifying day - the most obvious kind of mistake. Yet the screenplay of the film, ostensibly published "untouched, as Wood originally conceived it" (Mason, 1990: iii), actually does specify the night/day disjunction, and in two different places (Shots 175-176 and 226-228 in Wood, 1990: 37, 55). If the manuscript of the screenplay contains such a notation, it would seem that Wood intended to do something quite bizarre at two unimportant moments in the film.

Personally, I am not convinced. The mistake is too good to be true. Besides, if the night/day contrasts have actually been added to the screenplay on the basis of what occurs on the screen, it would not be the first time that transcripts from films have masqueraded as scripts of films. Perhaps I do not trust the screenplay's editor, Tom Mason, because he calls Wood "the most inept of

auteurs, the low-budget filmmaker and transvestite" and says the film "a 'bad' movie that has proved a must-see for everyone", and he insults Lugosi, Vampira and Tor Johnson, as well as mentioning hubcaps and lawn furniture. Suspiciously (if you are in paranoid mode), he takes the time to note that "in several scenes the *movie* jumps from daylight to nighttime and back" (Mason, 1990: iii, my emphasis) just before he says he has not done anything to Wood's original screenplay.<sup>[14]</sup>

On the other hand, I don't want to claim that Wood was incapable of writing such a disquieting set of instructions into a screenplay. After all, *he* was the main source of the story that the saucers in the film are Cadillac hubcaps. He also started the rumour, which the Medveds cite as fact, that Lugosi said "kitchen" for "kitten" in *Bride of the Monster* (Grey, 1992: 63, 84; Grey gives no source for his quotes from Wood). It is even a good thing that we do not know a lot for certain about precisely what Wood did or why he did it. Pragmatically speaking, uncertainty about the event of writing is a condition of any kind of film viewing, and learning to forget intention is part of learning to experience things aesthetically. In Wood's case the uncertainty is overpowering.

### Seeing, writing labour

Consider the one moment in *Plan 9* which almost everyone agrees is "good": when Tor Johnson "is risen" from the grave.<sup>[15]</sup> The combination of Johnson's massive presence, the intense hot lighting from below, and our recognition that this person is dead give this shot an iconic, nightmarish quality. A great deal of the force the image possesses depends upon a monumental impression of tremendous weight and bulk. Yet this shot is not isolated in the film. It is preceded by one of the least convincing model shots in movies, intended to show Johnson's grave from above as the earth around it begins to tremble. What appears on screen, however, is a tiny block and shifting sand: an impression of a miniature world, as if ants are preparing a foot trap for one of the heedless wanderers in the cemetery. When this shot first occurs (sometime before Johnson is actually shown getting out of the hole), we don't know what it signifies. What is that on the ground? Did someone drop something? Only when Johnson levers himself up does its intention seem manifest: oh yeah, that was meant to be his grave. At the film's peak moment of horror its *frisson* is deflected into a shock of another sort and screaming turns to giggling. The contrast between the two images is the contrast of night and day, a conflict of opposites, of polarities (little and big, meaningless and meaningful, absurd and scary). And in the end, neither is quite what it was because of the effect of the other.

Thus even in its "best" moment, *Plan 9* brandishes its uncertainty, its inability to decide between stark contrasts, its unwillingness to assert unequivocally. This hardly seems like "unfettered creativity". Indeed and indeed, the fetters are all too apparent in Wood's work. Johnson's resurrection is in some ways the perfect image of the filmmaker himself - and, as though Wood sensed this, he imagined the scene with a striking and evocative phrase: "It is a labored thing to see as the giant climbs from his grave" (Wood, 1990: 33).

The poetry of this statement is inadvertent, a poetry in which language has proved intractable. The writer has chosen the wrong words (or they have chosen him), and he has made our seeing as difficult as the giant's climbing. But in so doing, he has said more, and better, than he probably intended. Materialised labour congeals within his description; our identification with the rising behemoth is asserted as no "correct" use of words could; some transcendent truth about how hard it is to see anything is postulated, ever so fleetingly; and a brute thingness is manifested even in the evanescence of seeing. More than all of this

significance: the words themselves sing. They have a cadence, a musicality: they chant in "aahs" and "oohs" and "ees". Not bad for fourteen words set down on paper probably in just about as much time as it takes to read them.[16]

### Authoring, writing, quilting

But the effect *is* inadvertent. Alison Graham, an academic "cult" critic, has written explicitly about the fascination of the filmmaker's inadvertence.

It is the *appearance* of Wood's intentions that so engages cult audiences - the perceived distance (foregrounded in *The Sinister Urge*) between his desire to create compelling narratives and his inability to do so. In that embarrassingly wide gap between intention and act, every spectator sees the painted cardboard monster that fails to horrify, the strings and plastic of the dinner-plate UFO that fails to amaze, the misapplied makeup and faded allure of a blonde "bombshell" who fails to arouse. And it is in this perceived gap that cultism reveals its peculiarly postmodern aesthetic. (Graham, 1991: 109-110)

Unfortunately, Graham assumes, like a trash critic, that the "gap between intention and act" is apparent only in what is bad about Wood's movies - as though unconsciousness must always lead to badness. The gap of inadvertence is "embarrassingly wide" in Wood's case; and "it is his very lack of talent that ensures his place in the cult pantheon" (108).[17] This is a particular pity, for Graham has opened her piece with the only insightful reading in print of *The Sinister Urge*, in some ways Wood's last "legitimate" feature. By subjecting the film to a fairly standard auteurist interpretation, Graham is able to point out its relevance to the circumstances of Wood's life and to her own topic, the banality of the 1950s (107-108).

But she also claims that *The Sinister Urge* is "a rare exercise in reflexivity" for Wood (107), and this is not the case. On the contrary, *Plan 9 from Outer Space* is a rare exercise in looking outward. Most of his films contain fairly explicit references to himself, his life and/or his other films. This is most obvious, of course, in his first feature, *Glen or Glenda*, in which he plays one of the leading roles and into which he injected some autobiographical detail. Angora, which he loved to wear, is a noticeable presence in more than one Wood film. But the filmmaker also took care to have the same actor (Paul Marco) playing the same policeman (Officer Kelton) in three films, including *Plan 9*, and to make one of these (*Night of the Ghouls*) explicitly refer to another (*Bride of the Monster*). Footage from the uncompleted *Hellborn/Rock and Roll Hell* (1956) appears in *Night of the Ghouls* and *The Sinister Urge*, which then, perhaps inadvertently, refer to each other because of the similarity of their JD sequences. There is a sort of "stock company" that works on Wood's films, contributing to the impression that each one at least partially reflects the others. One of these people, the actor Timothy Farrell (*Glen or Glenda*, *Jail Bait*), physically resembles Wood, much as Lionel Atwill in *The Devil is a Woman* (1935) resembles Josef von Sternberg. And (sign of the enunciator!) Wood himself seems to have appeared in all the features he directed except *Bride of the Monster* and *Necromania*.

Considered together, all of these different circumstances make up what might be called a *prima facie* case for traditional authorship analysis. There does seem to



be a reason, more convincing than his award-winning badness, for treating the movies he wrote and directed as a self-consciously constructed *oeuvre*. Still, only a few of those who have written positively about the filmmaker have done much more than presume authorship, in much the same way that the trash critics have made the same presumption negatively. For example, Ashley O'Hara (who deserves a medal for deliberately not referring to Wood's transvestism in a fan publication) can only conclude lamely that "he was at least always in there trying", a disappointingly weak payoff for an article dedicated to the filmmaker's defence (O'Hara, 1982: 12).[\[18\]](#)

One of the earliest strong assertions of Wood as an *auteur* comes from Bill Warren, one of the most balanced and careful of those whom I have accused of "trash criticism".

Ed Wood had a vision: blurred, grotesque and cross-eyed, but a vision nonetheless. . . As bad as Ed Wood's films are, it's not likely that, once having seen one, anyone would ever mistake one of his films for the work of anyone else. (Warren, 1986: 155) [\[19\]](#)

Warren never gets down to the business of describing Wood's "vision" in any more detail than this, and the hyperbole in that second sentence claims a great deal that cannot ever be demonstrated, but he sees something that many of those before him apparently did not. Later commentators, like Jim Morton, Mark Carducci, Bill Krohn, Frank Henenlotter and Rudolph Grey, are both more positive about Wood's talent and more specific about how it manifests itself - and, like the trash critics, these auteurists tend to pay a great deal of attention to Wood's use of verbal language.[\[20\]](#)

One of Wood's best known lines of dialogue occurs in *Plan 9* just after Jeff, the hero, has remarked that Solaronite will make the United States stronger. Eros (!), the visitor from space, loses his patience and shrieks, "You see? You see? Your stupid little minds! Stupid! Stupid!". Trash critics find this line stupid. However, Jim Morton cites it as evidence that Wood's dialogue is extraordinarily "candid" and that it "grabs you" (Morton, 1986: 159; unfortunately, most of what "grabs you" in the rest of Morton's piece is taken from the narration, not the dialogue, for *The Violent Years* (1956), a Wood screenplay).

Now if this line of dialogue is being candid, it is being candid about inadequacy - either the inadequacy of normal language or the inadequacy of those using it (the character and/or the writer). Repetition and cliché candidly stand for tumultuous outrage; openness and frankness are candidly blocked by the necessity for using words. In a sense this structure reverses what happens in the "labored thing to see" line, where bad language says more than it intends. But both lines are intercepted by their words; both foreground their words more than what those words refer to. The same can be said for other memorable Wood lines, like "when you have the Solaronite, you have nothing" (*Plan 9*) and "pornography - a nasty word for a dirty business" (*The Sinister Urge*).

Morton, like a number of other Wood fans, also claims that Wood's work is never boring, but it seems to me that this claim is misconceived. It assumes that something fascinating, like Wood's work, cannot be boring. But the contrary is the case: fascination and boredom are Janus aspects of our mesmerism by images. In the everyday sense of the word, Wood's dialogue can be - and often is - "boring", and when it is, it is so because of his uneasy relationship to language. Here is an exchange from *Glen or Glenda*:

*Inspector Warren:* Laws are written. The policeman is hired to see that those laws are enforced. We have a job to do. As in most jobs, there is always somebody who doesn't want that job to be done. In most factories today the employer has put up suggestion boxes. Even the employer needs advice once in awhile. I think in the case we're referring to, I need advice. Maybe it shouldn't have happened as it did, but it did. Perhaps the next time we can prevent it.

*Dr Alton:* Let's get our stories straight. You're referring to the suicide of the transvestite?

*Warren:* If that's the word you men of medical science use for a man who wears woman's clothing, yes.

*Alton:* Yes, in cold, technical language, that's the word, as unfriendly and as vicious as it may sound. However, in actuality it's not an unfriendly word, nor is it vicious when you know the people to whom it pertains.

One of the things that is "boring" in everyday terms about this passage, and about many similar exchanges in Wood's films, is how prolix it is. Inspector Warren wafts from topic to topic but what he says adds nothing to the narrative, the mood or his character, besides being intrinsically uninteresting (except, perhaps, for the paranoid *non sequitur* about somebody who doesn't want the police to do their jobs). Dr Alton is no better. He pretends not to know what Warren is talking about evidently only in order to condemn, and then affirm, the usage of the term "transvestite" in an argument which thoroughly mixes up words and their referents.

One of the things that happens a lot in Wood's films is that two people sit down and ramble on at one another. Very often these people are policemen, and even when they are not, what they say seems to have been inspired by the stylised banality of the dialogue from Jack Webb's television series, *Dragnet* (1951-56). But *Dragnet's* dialogue is also a model of semantic parsimony in which a phrase like "just the facts" can stand for masculinity, the ethical administration of justice and the quality of mercy simultaneously.<sup>[21]</sup> Wood's dialogue substitutes words for meaning: it extends time instead of compressing it. It really is as though the words have written themselves in chains of associations, rather than having been written, chosen, fitted into place.<sup>[22]</sup>

The exchange between Warren and Alton is also remarkable because of its generality. Warren talks about the policeman's lot, employers, suggestion boxes and medical men. When Alton wants to get specific, he mentions "the suicide of the transvestite", and then discusses connotation and referencing. Neither gets down to cases, although the conversation is supposed to be about Warren's specific dilemma and one specific death. There is a problem here about levels of meaning: one set of indications points in the direction of abstract ideas, while another refers to concrete narrative instances. Probably Wood intended to draw general conclusions from particular cases, which is what happens in *Dragnet*, but that isn't how this dialogue works. Instead, there is an eerie sensation of having been cut loose from all referents and set adrift in a dead calm of abstraction. The effect echoes through the film every time Alton says "the transvestite" when he is referring to transvestites in general. This usage not only matches the definite article with an indefinite referent, extending the confusion between specific and general, but applies "cold, technical language" to Wood's personal life, which is very disquieting indeed in an partly autobiographical text like *Glen or Glenda*.

The visuals in Wood's films are like the dialogue in their banality and generality. There seem to be as many shots of cars in these movies as there are of policemen talking: cars moving, cars parking, people getting into and out of cars. The cars in these shots are photo-realist images which look as if they might have been painted by Ralph Goings. And the settings of the films have the same perfectly mundane attributes as the cars. They are banal offices and apartments - not flamboyantly banal or kitschily banal, but really, dully ordinary. Even the interior of the spaceship in *Plan 9* is rendered with stolid literalness, more like a basement workshop than the product of superior alien technology. Yet, as in the case of photo-realist painting, the effect is iconic rather than indexical. By this I mean that one always has the sense that one is seeing an example of something, rather than something itself. [23]

The strongest presences in Wood's films (Tor Johnson, Bela Lugosi, Criswell) are iconic in this sense, rather than individual. Most of those who appear in Wood's films do so as roles rather than characters. They are there blatantly to fulfil narrative functions, and they do so typically in very general, culturally-defined categories like "policeman", "reporter", "killer". Again, the effect is abstraction and isolation rather than individualisation and linkage. A certain kind of immobility allows sense to slide over the characters without ever engaging them. In *The Bride of the Monster*, the fatherly Chief of Police, Captain Robbins, has a bird, a parakeet or budgie of some sort, that perches on his shoulder from time to time and to which he addresses some remarks. The bird is oddly out of place, to the point of not being identifiable as a bird at first. It is a sign which stands for Robbins' personality, perhaps even a certain eccentricity, but it only stands for it: the character that rates the bird is never manifested. Bird is the word.

Signs which are iconic evoke a sense of separation as a kind of by-product of their abstraction - and this sensation brings me back again to the idea that Wood's films seem to be coming apart as they unfold. I am not alone in this perception. Indeed, I believe that it may have been a recognition of this quality of Wood's work that prompted Rudolph Grey to construct his 1992 biography of the filmmaker, *Nightmare of Ecstasy*, out of separate interviews montaged together. The result pays homage to Wood in its structure, and presents an appropriately disjointed and unfinished picture of its subject. Partly because of this compositional strategy, Grey's book is not only the most authoritative writing we have on Wood's life, but is also particularly attuned and sympathetic to the man and his films.

The most succinct assessment of Wood's *oeuvre* that I have read does not occur in Grey's book, however, and is not beholden to the perspicacity of a recognised critic. It is contained in a quotation from Maila Nurmi, who appeared under the name of "Vampira" in *Plan 9*.

Ed wrote like decoupage . . . He had some stock footage of Bela, stock footage of army tanks and \$6000 to make this movie. It's like making a patchwork quilt, and you sew it all together. Ed never started with a master design. He grabbed what was handy, and stuck it onto something else that was available, and so it grew. (Quoted in Carducci, 1994a: 35)

"It's like making a patchwork quilt". Nurmi is referring directly to the *bricolage* that makes Wood's fictional films rather like the compilation documentaries of Esfir Shub and her spiritual progeny. But clearly, she is also reacting to the bits-and-pieces character of the footage and the soundtracks that Wood himself directed. And, most clearly of all, she sees the result as a special kind of whole: a crazy quilt. Any patchwork quilt is an improvisation made of the cloth on hand. It

is likely to look unbalanced, and to feature dull areas running into garish ones. Each patch and each section of the quilt attracts and holds the gaze because of its intrinsic interest, and the wholeness of the whole is often simply a matter of function: the craziness stops because a quilt only has to be big enough to cover a bed.

What happens when you look at a crazy quilt that often does not happen when you are looking at more traditional quilts is that you become aware of all the different scraps of cloth in it. The *material* of the quilt imposes itself upon your attention, the quilt itself seems to be *about* its material and about sewing it together. What I have been saying in various ways throughout this piece is that Ed Wood's films also seem to impose their materiality upon their viewers. They are "cinematic" in substance more than form: the "stuff" of film seems to intrude on whatever is intended to have been represented on screen.

That sense of the cinema as material is also conveyed in Wood's own description of the script of *Plan 9* as a list of disjointed topics ("spaceships, a space war, weird people, supersonic grave robbers, and the destruction of Hollywood", Wood, 1998: 128). It is conveyed in John Wooley's observation that Wood had a "meat-packer approach to Film making - he used everything, right down to the skin and bones, metaphorically speaking" (Wooley, 1990: v). And I think it even lies behind Bill Warren's perception that "as with some great directors, perhaps the only thing that mattered to Ed Wood was *making* movies, not *having made* movies" (Warren, 1986: 164). Ultimately, it may be said best in Bill Krohn's characterisation of Wood as "he whose mastery of the cinema (as producer, scenarist and director of all his films) is expressed by his lack of mastery of all the elements of *mise en scène*" (Krohn, 1994: 56, my translation). The materials of the cinema lured Wood and then overpowered him, so that he was possessed by them as he was overcome by verbal language - not as we imagine "great artists" are, intoxicated by their power over the medium; rather, shanghaied and then ravished by the medium's power over his will for expression.<sup>[24]</sup>

### **Material madness**

I want to stress that what I am calling "the materials of cinema" are part of "the language of cinema" and not opposed to it. The material side of cinema opposes a certain kind of *communication*, not language. Often language and communication are thought of as the same thing, as though the stuff of language - letters, sounds, shots - is an unfortunate and contingent phase in the transmission of meaning. But language without material is not language; and indeed, purely immaterial communication is impossible. The ideal of communication, nonetheless, tends to direct our thinking about language. "Good" language is whatever transmits meaning efficiently, while "bad" or "poor" language is presumed to interfere with that transmission in some way, like static. Yet there is nothing inherently "bad" about the material side of language. Some ways of using language which emphasise the material side (certain kinds of poetry and Soviet montage, for example) are even considered "good" in their own right. And some very material ways of using language, like screaming or shock cuts, can also communicate very efficiently - although perhaps not quite in the way that the transmission model of language assumes.

The two-headed model of language is discussed at length and with much greater clarity by Jean-Jacques Lecercle in *Philosophy through the Looking Glass* (1985). That book is concerned with a number of texts which evince what many people would call "madness" (Lecercle's word is *délire*). They include writing by Raymond Roussel, Ferdinand de Saussure and even Gilles Deleuze, as well as people recognised as "insane" like Daniel Paul Schreber, Louis Wolfson and Antonin

Artaud. Lecerclé associates *délire* with the material side of language, with the body, and with the unconscious. And his final point is that none of us can escape *délire*, for it is a part of the language in which we live and think. Along the way, he even mentions patchwork.

The paranoid practices of trash criticism are a species of *délire* invoked in a kind of frantic denial of it - or an obsessive-compulsive ritual, if you are into that kind of thing. And the inevitable fall of trash critics into the hell they are so intent on avoiding is merely the revenge of the material side of language they have refused to recognise in themselves. Wood provokes a particularly intense response from the likes of the Medveds because his work is particularly delirious, particularly caught up in the materials of his medium. He is like a goofy kid whose nose is running and whose hands are filthy from mud pies, and they are all the aunts with spotless houses barring the way to the bathroom. Those I have called "auteurists", on the other hand - the new critics sympathetic to Wood - understand that we are all crazy now.

At one point in *Philosophy through the Looking Glass* Lecerclé remarks parenthetically, "a transvestite does what no woman can do; he *makes* a woman of himself" (Lecerclé, 1985: 73). Of course he isn't referring to Edward D. Wood, Jr. - he is discussing the theories of Judith Milner - but the insight is productive nonetheless. Accepting Lecerclé's account of cross-dressing suggests that, on levels considered significant by society and by his own psyche, Ed Wood can be construed as challenging a frontier that for most of us is impassable: altering his bodily identity by rewriting himself in anagorá.

It is interesting that when Wood dealt directly with cross-dressing in *Glen or Glenda*, he further blurred the lines between bodily identity and language. The producer's original idea had been to make a film exploiting Christine Jorgensen's highly publicised "sex change" operation (Grey, 1992: 39-40). *Glen or Glenda*, which was known as *Transvestite* and *I Changed My Sex* during production, first tells the story of a man who dresses in woman's clothing, then of a man (also a cross-dresser) whose sexual identity is medically altered. Wood plays Glen/Glenda, the protagonist of the first story, but the story of the operation includes details from Wood's own life. It would seem, then, that medical intervention is being treated as a continuation of the rewriting of bodily identity initiated in putting on the clothing of the "opposite" sex. That is, "physical" or bodily masculinity and femininity are used in the film as sub-categories of the manipulation of language (of the identity we make). And in this way the film scandalises "commonsense" views of the disjunction between the sexes in which biological distinctions are absolute.

Lecerclé argues, building on Milner and Deleuze among others, that absolute difference, besides being "commonsense" sexual biology, is a foundation of language as communication (Lecerclé, 1985: 62-74). People who actually *make* their bodily identities, then, would seem likely candidates for understanding and using language in a way different from the way it is commonly used - which is just what Ed Wood does in the cinema. But at the same time, the impetus to rewrite oneself in such a way was not Edward D. Wood, Jr.'s passport to freedom. What one can do and how one sees oneself are two distinct things; and the other side of communication is only difference again. You or I as viewers may *use* difference to change the way we see; but difference can abuse those who live within it as well.

The aliens in *Plan 9* cannot communicate effectively with the people of earth. Their attempts to warn us that we are on the threshold of destroying the universe are met by violence or silence. Finally, their desperation leads them to try to

speak through the material medium of dead bodies (this is called "Plan 9"), but by so doing they doom themselves - and, ultimately, us - entirely. Summarised in this way, *Plan 9* becomes a parable about the shackles of difference, and its awkward, fumbling diction, its *délire*, one of the most appropriate means of relating such a parable.

### **Angora through the looking-glass**

Wood's especial passion was for angora, which was, with cashmere, the banal epitome of furry fifties femininity (the index to Grey's biography lists 14 citations under "angora"). The figure of angora in several of Wood's films marks their, and his, difference in a sensual, experiential dimension beyond normal language, even beyond normal seeing (for one cannot see how it feels). On that level, angora on film is like a scream or a purr in speech. But, ominously, angora and monstrosity are directly connected in two Wood films. In *Bride of the Monster*, the monstrous Lobo appropriates Paula's angora cap as a token of his passion for her. In *The Bride and the Beast* (1958), for which Wood wrote the screenplay, Laura's passion for angora is an outward sign of her repressed past as a gorilla (she is both bride and beast).

There is an uncanny, doubtless inadvertent, resonance in the names here. Lobo. Laura. Paula. Gorilla. Identities congealing and separating as the fur slides over and between the brides and the monster-beasts. Lobo desires Paula, thus her angora. Laura is a gorilla, thus wears angora. Angora is identity, is femininity, is bestiality, is masculinity. Where does it stop? How do you get out? [\[25\]](#)

The narrative dilemma of the first story in *Glen or Glenda* is Glen's perhaps understandable reluctance to tell his fiancée about his cross-dressing. The film finds it difficult as well. As Glen speaks earnestly to Barbara, Dr Alton's narrating voice conveys to us the substance of what he is saying - and also informs us of his overpowering desire for her angora sweater. Soon Glen's - or Wood's - *délire* has vanquished the scene and the issue is not Glen's conduct but whether or not Barbara will surrender what he wants: not Glen's abasement, but Barbara's. At the end of what Bill Krohn calls "a scene of apotheosis" Barbara "takes off the angora sweater he dreams of wearing and gives it to him in a stylised gesture of love, submission and tragic consent".[\[26\]](#)

Glen is so imprisoned by his difference that he cannot make the distinction between asking for understanding and begging for an erotic thrill. It is the most pathetic, as well as the most tragic, moment in the film. Throughout *Glen or Glenda* the exploitation genre's combination of prurience and purity degrades Wood's self-display until all of his pride is overwhelmed with shame. The filmmaker is supposed to have claimed, with some pride, "if you want to know me, see *Glen or Glenda*, that's me, that's my story" (Phil Cambridge, quoted in Grey, 1992: 86), but the film exposes him as a freak and his story as a psychiatric case history. Similarly, the point of *The Sinister Urge* is not that Johnny Ryde/Ed Wood has betrayed his talent by making porno films, but that the porno films Ryde/Wood makes are the direct cause of "sex mania" and the crimes, "worse than kidnapping or dope peddling", that eventuate from that condition ("Show me a crime and I can show you a picture that could have caused it"). Again self-reference has become the occasion for self-debasement.

Sooner or later you will meet Mr. Sleazy - probably sooner! He's got a fast line to convince you and an even faster technique to get your clothes off and get you onto his casting couch. Strange as it may seem, a few of these characters will let you just stay on your back, nude, while they try on your clothes. Your panties, warm with the

heat of your body, your sweater of an expensive and, usually, a furry nature are hot items to these characters. You could end up doubling, even tripling, your ten-dollar offer if you'll give them the desired articles. However, be prepared to watch as the producer practices weird rituals of self-gratification. (Wood, 1998: 112)

Missing in Rudolph Grey's compiled account of Wood's life is the supportive network of cross-dressers depicted in *Glen or Glenda*, most or all of whom were played by cross-dressers (Schaefer, 1999: 213). There is a blank in the life where one would expect to find at least one or two like-minded acquaintances - "those characters" to counterbalance "these". On the evidence of what has been written about Wood, we would have to believe that he threw parties for cross-dressers but otherwise did not know them. There is a shame here amounting to repression - a shame that flaunts Wood's personal display but denies the community that we would expect to have in some measure underwritten it.

The silence of those who dressed as he did is perhaps one of the most distressing things about Wood's life. That silence may have many explanations. It may be protective, designed to conceal those who wished not to be seen by the world at large. It may merely be omission, a line of enquiry not yet pursued by those interested in the life. But, no matter what its reasons, that (un)written silence suggests conflicts exhibited both explicitly and implicitly in the films themselves. [27]

However, I do think a person has the right to choose how he wants to live, dress, find his way in life. But that doesn't give him *carte blanche* to the point where he won't find himself in trouble sooner or later. It is still the masses that control the patterns of our existence. The courts are blamed for all things, but the courts and the laws are designed by the demands of the multitudes. If you live as a beast, you become a beast. (Wood, 1998: 114)

Within Laura there is a gorilla. Within Glen there is Glenda. Within Dirk Williams, a psychotic killer, there is Johnny Ryde. Within Don Gregor, the repentant murderer of *Jail Bait*, there is Vic Brady, a sneering gangster. Within the menace of the dead, the desperation of Eros. So much embedding, doubling, so many stunted reflections, and finally no one in the fuzzy mirror but one's self, the living beast, the dead man, no connection at all, only echoes and silence.

At the end I am standing on the tail of a hoopsnake, *lecercléd* back where I started. There are two things that almost everyone knows about Edward D. Wood, Jr., and they are both bad . . . for good.

He made trash . . . but trash may only be a word for a kind of film that allows viewers no escape from the delirious materiality of language: no good stories, no soaring emotions, no art, no dreams, no safe self. Trash movies are ugly and dirty and messy: stupid, stupid, like plays by Alfred Jarry or paintings by Arshile Gorky.

And he lived trash . . . but trash may only be a word for the dangerous life that some of us lead who interfere with the materiality of our social inscription: the ones who rewrite themselves in different sexes, different ages, different weights, different faces, different cultures, different drugs. If in the end Wood's films speak sometimes of self-loathing, the loathing they inspire in trash critics seems inappropriate as well as tasteless. What those critics loathe, and what the newer auteurs have come to value, is the specific madness in these works, their insistence upon materiality - and ultimately, their (inadvertent) refusal to

communicate along the channels and in the manners prescribed for communication, that is to say, the sound of their screaming.

**William D. Rount** does pretty much what he likes.

## Notes

[1] I am extremely indebted to Carol Abbott and the library staff of the Australian Film Institute for their help in research for this piece; to Eric Schaefer for allowing me the initial opportunity to write it, and for his help and criticism, and for pointing me in the direction of Sinister Cinema and Something Weird Video; to Jim Steinman for the title; and to Diane, as always. However, "Bad for Good" is for Michael Denny, who was no help at all. [back](#)

[2] The conjunction occurs in Medved and Medved 1980 (180); Hoberman 1980 (10) and Hoberman 1991 (265); Peary 1982 (266); Warren 1986 (154); Mason 1990 (iii); Indiana 1993 (52); and even in Carducci 1994a (21) - among others. [back](#)

[3] I note with some satisfaction that my initiatory experience of Wood was similar to Rudolph Grey's (see Grey, 1992: 8-10). [back](#)

[4] The apotheosis of this sort of treatment of Wood occurs in one of the major articles about trash cinema, J. Hoberman's "Bad Movies". Hoberman mars his article's balanced and intelligent assessment of issues of taste when he starts to write about Wood, whose work he finds "objectively bad". This section climaxes with the revelation that "the unconvincing magic, crackpot logic and decomposing glamour of Wood's films are in fact a mirror of his own fate" (Hoberman, 1980: 10). Virtually everything that is wrong with a certain kind of writing about film is contained in the two words, "in fact", in that sentence. This being said, readers familiar with Hoberman's essay will note the influence of his treatment of Oscar Micheaux on my treatment of Wood. [back](#)

[5] All the corrections of dates and titles in this paragraph are taken from Grey 1992 (197 *passim*), who says that Wood was born in 1924. However, Grey actually gets the title of one feature film wrong. *Jail Bait*, appearing as two words on the film and in all the existing posters, is written *Jailbait* throughout his book. [back](#)

[6] Spelling is not the Medveds' strong suit. They refer to "'Plan Nine: Ressurrection of the Dead'" on the first page of their essay on the worst film of all time (Medved and Medved, 1980: 204). [back](#)

[7] In an interview with Frank Henenlotter, Grey adds *The Young Marrieds* (1971) to the list of features Wood directed (Henenlotter 1994, 74-77). [back](#)

[8] The hubcaps are invoked in the first paragraph on the page, the paper plates are described in the fourth, and no link is established between the two. Actually, the question of what was used for this "obvious" special effect is still debated. (And what kind of obvious are we talking about if people are still not sure of how it was done?). The currently accepted account - that there were models involved (Carducci, 1994b: 31) - only rehashes a part of what Grey quotes from Wood himself in *Nightmare of Ecstasy* (Grey, 1992: 83-84), here as elsewhere the most reliable research on Wood we have. [back](#)

[9] Danny Peary claims that police cars are always travelling in one direction in *Plan 9* and misidentifies one character as "Officer Calvin", but he is most famous



for one of the great achievements of another level of trash criticism: the argument that *Plan 9* is actually a "subversive" film (Peary, 1982: 266-270). In *Midnight Movies*, J. Hoberman claims that Wood "fills" *Glen or Glenda* (1953) "with dream sequences", when there is only one (Hoberman, 1991: 266). Bill Warren thinks that "the Solaronite" in *Plan 9* is a bomb and that its effects will be confined to the solar system (Warren, 1986: 158). Gary Indiana credits Wood with 31 features, claims that his "most protean period" was the forties (when he made one 30 minute film), and identifies as Wood's a still from a sequence directed by Merle Connell (Indiana, 1993: 52). Tim Lucas is adamant that "Ramblers are Fords" in his criticism of the video documentary, *Look Back in Angora* - although, to be fair, this is a "mistake" of quite a different order from the others cited here (Lucas, 1995: 48). Mark Carducci makes the most satisfying mistake of all - so satisfying, indeed, that it may not be a mistake - by spelling the name of one of the director's most bitter detractors "Gregory Wolcott" throughout his article, "Ed Wood: Cult Legend" (Carducci, 1994a: 35 *passim*).  
[back](#)

[10] It is time also to come clean about the limitations of the *corpus* this piece purports to investigate. I have made the most use of the first six feature films directed by Edward D. Wood, Jr. (*Glen or Glenda* 1953, *Jail Bait* 1954, *Bride of the Monster* 1956, *Plan 9 from Outer Space* 1959, *Night of the Ghouls*, 1958 and *The Sinister Urge* 1961) and of one film for which he wrote the screenplay, *The Bride and the Beast* (Adrian Weiss, 1958). Most of the "sex features" (*Excited* 1970, *Take It Out in Trade* 1970, *Necromania* 1971, *The Only House* 1971 and *The Young Marrieds* 1971) proved too difficult for an unadventurous academic living in Australia to find. Although some copies of films with other Wood screenplays are sometimes in circulation, the only one I regret not having been able to view is *The Revenge of Dr. X*, attributed to him by Henenlotter and Grey (1994: 76). For this note, I have supplemented what I have learned from Grey with information from the Internet Movie Database. For a detailed and valuable critique of the Wood material available at one time on video, see Lucas, 1995.  
[back](#)

[11] Two prints available on video were used in the preparation of this piece: a version which runs some 62 minutes, bearing the opening title "A Distributor's Corporation of America Release", appearing under the Hollywood House label (No. 149); and a version included in Gremlin's *Plan 9 from Outer Space* video game which runs about 75 minutes, copyright 1992 by Wade Williams Production Limited and featuring a Wade Williams logo at the beginning. Rudolph Grey gives the running time of the film as 79 minutes and lists it as a D.C.A release (Grey, 1992: 203). The screenplay appeared in 1990 under the title *Plan 9 from Outer Space, The Original Uncensored and Uncut Screenplay*. [back](#)

[12] However, as might be expected from the foregoing, exactly what is unlikely about it is the subject of differing opinion. See, for example, Medved and Medved 1980 (205), Peary 1982 (268), Morton 1986 (159), Warren 1986 (159), Gregory Walcott, quoted as "Wolcott" in Carducci 1994a (39). [back](#)

[13] Here there is rare agreement: patio furniture doubles as bedroom furniture (Medved and Medved, 1980: 206; Peary, 1982: 268; Warren, 1986: 159). I think so too. [back](#)

[14] I do not know for certain that this Tom Mason is the same person credited as Lugosi's double in *Plan 9*, who also worked with Wood on other projects (see Grey, 1992: 79, 203, 205, 216; Grey does not mention the screenplay in his list of Wood's published work). [back](#)

[15] For example: "The scene where Tor Johnson rose from the grave was the only good five seconds in the whole film" (the director Joe Dante at age 13, quoted in Warren, 1986: 163). [back](#)

[16] Compare Rudolph Grey on a reissue of one of Wood's novels: "whoever put the book out corrected all of Ed Wood's grammar and made it totally boring and uninteresting. They thought they were improving it and they just destroyed it" (quoted in Henenlotter, 1994: 76). [back](#)

[17] Graham's list of Wood's badness is quite the most damning catalogue of sins in the literature, but she inevitably confronts her own trash reflection as well, with remarks like "in the case of the terminally addicted Lugosi, lines are misread to render pathetically personal Freudian slips" (108). Name one. [back](#)

[18] Mark Carducci makes the same assertion more positively (Carducci, 1992: 34). [back](#)

[19] Lest we confuse this perception with a genuine lack of taste, Warren draws a clear line between Wood's awful vision and Tim Burton's real art in *Fangoria* 137 (Warren, 1994: 34-37). [back](#)

[20] This practice apparently has its origin in a monograph by Randy Simon and Harold Benjamin that I have not seen - *Edward D. Wood, Jr.: A Man and His Films* (Los Angeles: Edward D. Wood, Jr. Film Appreciation Society, 1981), referred to by both O'Hara and Warren. The best examples of the newer auteurist criticism sympathetic to Wood that I have read are Carducci 1992, written as a promo for his video documentary *The Plan 9 Companion* (1992); Henenlotter 1994, some of which appears as a preface to Something Weird's video of *Necromania*; and Krohn 1994 which is the best piece of critical writing on Wood's films I have read. [back](#)

[21] On this point, compare Grey: "whenever you hear something like, "But this is fact!," or "More to the fact," or "I'm with the fact," *anything* about fact . . . That's about as standard Ed Wood as angora" (quoted in Henenlotter, 1994: 76). [back](#)

[22] An intriguing example of what I am getting at occurs in Shot 129 of the screenplay for *Plan 9*. The pointless dialogue for this shot extends over several pages and has been pointlessly amended by Wood in no less than four places (see Wood, 1990: 28-31). [back](#)

[23] William C. Thompson photographed the six features with which this piece is most concerned, and he has been blamed for their visual style (see comments by Harry Bederski, John Andrews and Roy Reid in Grey, 1992: 46, 68, 99). Thompson's cinematography for *Dementia/Daughter of Horror* (John Parker 1953) would tend to belie such accusations. [back](#)

[24] In the interests of completeness, I feel I should mention an article about Wood that appeared in an issue of *Film History* devoted to "Auteurism Revisited" sporting a publicity still of Wood on its cover. The author explicitly denies that Wood brought "a personal vision to his projects" (Birchard 1995, 451), invoking criteria quite different from those I have used and relying on many, many fewer citations. For some reason he spells *Jail Bait JailBait*, and fails to distinguish Don Sonney from his Dad, Louis (I am indebted to Eric Schaefer for this last point). [back](#)

[25] Bill Krohn seems to have been the first critic to recognise the significance of *The Bride and the Beast* to interpreting Wood's other work. However, as you have now learned to expect, Krohn calls the film *The Bride of the Beast*. [back](#)

[26] Compare the first take of the scene as it appears in *Ed Wood: Look Back in Angora* (Newsom, 1994) in which she tosses the sweater to him. [back](#)

[27] It seems reasonable to me that Wood might have employed cross-dressers regularly in his films, using them as he used himself in the unfinished *Hellborn* (see Brooks, 1992: 31-32). I would like to say that I "see" them in the films because I do, but who could - who would? [back](#)

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