

From Hell

Dir: Albert and Allen Hughes, USA/UK/Czech Republic, 2001

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This gruesome, troubling, and latest engagement with Jack the Ripper as a cultural anti-hero is presented for a contemporary Hollywood audience that is both savvy about horror-thriller, crime mystery tropes and preoccupied with the meanings and very real threats of serial killing in late capitalism. Temporal and spatial distance are once again instructive for helping the disgusted, but admittedly fascinated viewer to contemplate the significance of The Ripper and his successors in our time. The Western European colonial climate and the specifics of British imperialism at the turn of the previous century are framed by interrelated themes of sexology, psychiatry, and eugenics via Social Darwinism. These facets inform a cultural hygiene conspiracy that motivates the Ripper's infamous murders.

According to royal physician Sir William Gull (Ian Holm), secondary character Prince Edward (Mark Dexter) has a longstanding "taste" for prostitutes. This "taste" is a part of his aesthetic life of leisure, a familiar one to those who are privileged within the Empire. Locally known as Albert Sickert, the Prince is perceived to be a wealthy painter who regularly travels abroad, and ladies of the evening are favored among his exploited artistic subjects. As prostitute protagonist Mary Kelly (Heather Graham) facetiously says to leading man psychic detective Fred Abberline (Johnny Depp), "England doesn't have whores -- just a great mass of very unlucky women."

Albert becomes lovers with and has the nerve to marry an "unfortunate" woman (Ann Crook, played by Joanna Page). They wed in a Catholic church in the presence of Ann's friends who share her vocation, and the next heir to the crown is not a desirable one from the Queen's (Liz Moscrop) or her affluent followers' points-of-view. In unmistakably sexist terms that perhaps extend transhistorically, Ann's life violates the tripartite feminine archetypes of virgin, mother, and whore. Because she is seen to simultaneously exist within two of these categories, she transgresses their separation and this is not allowable. Ann Crook tells her friends that she loves the baby "to bits," an idiom that is rendered ironic when her life is shattered and her friends literally wind up in pieces.

Crook and her Prince are carted off in the middle of sex, baby Alice and her maternal grandparents vanish, and the women who bore witness to the unholy union are ghoulishly picked off one by one, with the exception of Mary Kelly. We are told more than once that they are being "punished," and this punishment is not just an act of revenge but also an act of censorship. With each murder, the audience is likewise visually punished by being expected to endure increasingly graphic and intimate imagery. This torturous viewing is complicated by a popular cultural obsession with serial killers and the sadistic and masochistic voyeurism that is allegedly intrinsic to watching horror movies. Film scholar Carol Clover asserts that "slasher" and other horror films centering on women's suffering are not merely about reifying victimization, but paradoxically empower spectators to reconsider their relationship to societal violence (Clover, 1992). While the film may be interestingly assessed by using this

are still trampled in its perverse frenzy. The graphic novel's creators indicate that "Jack mirrors our hysterias. Faceless, he is the receptacle for each new social panic" (Moore and Campbell, 2001: Appendix II, 22). He may be seen as a "corporation" of multiple individuals doing "serial murder as a team sport" (Appendix II, 19), or as a commentary on "the dance" of "pussy," "money," "need," and "poverty" in capitalism (Appendix II, 24). Moore and Campbell explicate and question the fixation on The Ripper, saying he is a "complex phantom we project. That alone, we know is real. The actual killer's gone, unglimped, might as well not have been there at all. There never was a Jack the Ripper" (Appendix II, 23).

Moore and Campbell may have intended their remarks to be theoretically provocative. However, like the film, they come across as problematic and as overtly anti-feminist. Asserting that Jack the Ripper cannot be understood as "real," that contemporary serial killers are products of a capitalist imaginary, and that our perpetual captivation with this variety of murderers is predicated upon intricate socio-cultural structures are compelling arguments. Unfortunately, these proclamations accomplish their cleverness by effacing the materiality of victims' already disrespected dead bodies.

References

Clover, Carol (1992) *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Moore, Alan and Eddie Campbell (2001) *From Hell: Being a Melodrama in Sixteen Parts*. Paddington, Australia: Eddie Campbell Comics.