ARGGGGGGGGHAAAA!!! REDUX

The East Coast line of horror comic books, published by William B. Gaines during the Eisenhower era, furnished a dark alternative to the unblushing optimism of the Marvel and D.C. comic lines. I had to sneak the lurid pages of "Tales From The Crypt", "Tales From The Vault", and "Weird Science" past my parents, after Dr. Frederic Wetham declared before the Kefauver Commission that reading this traumatizing kvatch was spawning a generation of Kallikaks, ax murderers and gibbering psychotics. My folks would have been almost as scared stiff as I was terrified by the average E.C. comic, had they known how many midnights I spent underneath the covers with a failing flashlight, poring over the latest Gaines caravanserai of grisly mutilations and putrefactions of the unquiet dead. (1)

Most of my buddies were stoned EC freaks, too. Despite Wertham's burblings, not one of us ever took a sledgehammer to his mom, or wound up baying at the moon from a Bellevue balcony. The doctor was long on dire predictions, but notably short on smarts about the psychological vicissitudes of puberty.

Paradoxically, the surge of adolescenct power is also accompanied by intimations of one's certain mortality -- a potent spur to morbid fantasy. Wertham never grasped the counterphobic
thrust which made us savor the horror comic's idiosyncratic frissons. An EC tale offered perversely corrective reminders of just how vulnerale one's pubescent carcass really was -- radically reversing the delusions of omnipotence fostered by Charles Atlas' advertising (Atlas' body-building promotions regularly appeared on the backpage of the same EC comics which featured a panoply of lurid \textit{momento mori}).

A weird beauty informed the best EC graphics, now commanding impressive prices from collectors both of comics and magazine illustrations. (2) The origins of the EC style are complex, and not unrespectable. Predecessors in high art include the doleful phantoms of Gustave Dore; the Japanese woodblock with its delicate interplay of sinuous line and color; the re-invention of Hiroshige in the drawings of Aubrey Beardsley and other fin-de-siecle decadents.

Another forerunner of EC's extravagant visual sadism is a curious body of theological art, concocted with the avowed function of instructing believers in the transcience of earthly pursuits through unsparing depictions of the triumph of the Emperor Worm. This pious \textit{schrecklichkeit} includes medieval and renaissance Dances of Death; Spanish portraiture of clerics rotting in their sepulchres; sundry \textit{momento mori}, like the skull foregrounded at the feet of Holbein's \textit{The Ambassadors}. Arguably the most appropriate medium to its message is the cache of cadavers in the catacombs of Guanajato (they appear in the title
sequence of Herzog's *Nosferatu* [1979]; a similar ghastly collection of corpses, decked out in their daily duds, is situated in a Capuchin monastery outside of Palermo.

The virtuous premise of these works legitimized hawking the creeps to audiences as eager to be scared witless several centuries ago as today (admission was charged to the Palermo catacombs at a considerable profit, until church edict closed them to the public. Popular cathedral frescoes portraying the agonies of the damned at the hands of their demonic tormentors, or gruesome saintly martyrdoms, bear an uncanny similarity to the EC excesses Wertham decried.

Despite E.C.'s preoccupation with return from the Other Side, the horror comic's soteriology remained cheerfully uncontaminated by any taint of spirituality. The hereafter consisted of the hole occupied by one's rotting corpse, until the latter was retchingly re-animated by its owner's hatred. EC's Weltanschaung was correspondingly rancid. Relationships were pervaded by sadomasochism, greed and exploitation, especially within the bosom of the family. The typical EC clan eagerly awaited the passing of its wealthiest member -- usually a miserly patriarch -- and frequently did not hesitate to hasten his end. Mutatis mutandis, he sought to get them before being gotten, or pursued them relentlessly after his demise.

What goodness that did exist in the EC universe was invariably singled out for savage persecution, and rarely
triumphed except post-mortem. The resurrected, however virtuous and long-suffering during life, identified with their vile tormentors by retaliating in the foulest possible fashion. Tenderness was negligible in the EC mise-en-scene. Romance was eclipsed by raw lust -- usually spurred by a nubile predatory female. EC thus perceptively read the yeasty compost of lubricity and mysogyny bubbling in the collective cranium of a readership largely composed of adolescent males, much given to exuberant masturbatory fantasies.

The campy trashiness of the E.C. format concealed a pessimistic/nihilistic assessment of the human condition which has challenged culturally sanctioned assumptions of a tidy moral order from the shadows throughout history. This dank vision has been acted on the stages of Seneca, Ford, Webster, the Shakespeare of Titus Andronicus, and the Grand Guignol. It haunts the pages of Poe. Revenge is usually the cardinal organizing principle of Guignol fare, a shaky anodyne against the rule of chaos in a Hobbesian universe where man is everywhere a wolf unto man.

As in the Jacobean theater, the imperative for vengeance in the EC canon dictated the most stringent application of talion law. Retribution exacted by the wronged E.C. protagonist is a hyperbolic version of the G & S Mikado's jurisprudence: punishment always gaggingly fits EC crime.

For exmple: in Poetic Justice (3), Abner Elliot is a kindly small town dumpmaster, harrassed by rapacious neighbors who want
to snatch his property. Henry Burgundy and his son, Harold, engineer a hate campaign against Elliott, inciting his former friends to send him a barrage of poison-pen Valentines. Elliot's heart is broken and he hangs himself. On the anniversary of his suicide, his foetid corpus suprises the thrifty younger Burgundy, readdressing the Valentines he received last year. The next frame cuts to the following morning, when Henry Burgundy receives a neatly wrapped parcel containing -- **his son's heart!!**

This kind of talionic object -- or a talionic activity -- is a central trope of most EC tales. At its simplest EC revenge was reflected back upon its source in *quid pro quo* overkill, the persecutor becoming a horrid mirror image of his victim. The reader is typically left to summon up the worst conceivable fantasies of Harold Burgundy's death agony, since one doesn't actually see his living heart being ripped from his chest by the dead Elliot's talons. The father's discovery of his gruesome Valentine will burn the sin against Elliot into his memory forever. Back in the real world, fantasies about the grim actuality of Harold's death haunted my pubescent imagination for post-traumatic days afterwards.

The EC talionic object also comprises a complex blend of metaphor and metonymy. Harold Burgundy's severed heart is a condensation/synechdoche invoking the Burgundy's sinister campaign against Elliot, itself signified by the slanderous Valentines -- as well as Elliot's brokenheartedness over the heartlessness of
his former friends.

Death mocks our paltry aspirations; the skull smile gives the lie to our fondest hopes. Fiction of the macabre (Poe's notably) occasionally reveals an unexpected comedic vein, but gallows humor was a consistent, indeed cherished feature of the EC tale. The commentary of a supernatural guide framed each EC strip. Creatures like "The Old Witch" or "The Vault Keeper" acted as cracked Virgil to the reader's trashed-out Dante. The EC netherworld of fright, spite, and malice was unveiled to the accompaniment of an endless flow of sadomasochistically inflected puns and wretched sophomoric irony:

"Hee hee! Stubborn, eh? Keep comin' back for MORE, eh? Well, there's plenty more... so KEEP COMIN'! Besides, my IDIOT EDITORS just gave me a BOOST in salary! It's a BOOST of a RIVAL PUBLISHER! I get the REST of HIS CORPSE next week!... Yep, it's ME, now! THE OLD WITCH, mistress of THE HAUNT OF FEAR... SHIVER-CHIEF, CREEP-COOKER, and all that sort of ROT! C'mon in! My cauldron's BOILED OFF to a CRUD, waiting for you! Looks like GARBAGE! Hey! There's a yarn! And I'll just TELL it to you! It's about a GARBAGE COLLECTOR! Say, did YOU get any ST. VALENTINE CARDS? Well, THIS garbage collector did! READY? I call this HORROR-HELPING POETIC JUSTICE..." (4)
In the end, the 'guide' underscored the unwholesomeness of the visuals, or would draw a 'moral' which offered no instruction beyond the baleful reality of retribution:

"Yes, kiddies, Harold's HEART was in the neat little package, all BLOODY and STICKY! Well, don't look so shocked! That's what you SEND on ST. VALENTINE'S DAY, ISN'T IT? HEARTS? WHA...? Not REAL ones? Gulp! An' I'VE been doin' it for YEARS! NO WONDER I'M NOT POPULAR!..." (5)

This scabrous levity had the effect of deconstructing the very horrors one had been seduced into attending. The EC tale revealed humanity at its extravagant physical and ethical worst. It laughed raucously at the obscene spectacle, then provided no other rationales than those offered by the World War I trench ditty: "We're here because we're because we're here because we're here..." -- or the soldiers' laconic epigrams after Viet Nam battlefield horror: "It don't mean a thing...Shit happens...sorry about that..." (one would not be suprised to have heard similar sentiments expressed during Cannae, Waterloo, or the Battle of the Bulge).

"Sorry about that" didn't gibe with the uplift of the standard Sunday sermon. Still, one wonders if EC, by exposing a young readership to its absurdist existential Ground Zero, didn't paradoxically spur a therapeutic swerve away from adolescent
nihilism and timor mortis. As we handed around the latest thumbworn edition of *Tales From The Crypt*, my friends would say with a shudder -- "This one is so bad, you won't believe it!"

Ultimately, I think most of us did not...

My remarks are offered by way of an establishing shot for a critical autopsy of *Creepshow*’s gory cinematic Valentine to the EC canon. The EC style and metaphysic have been at least as seminal for subsequent trends in horror cinema as *Psycho* (1959) (6) Yet surprisingly few attempts had been made to translate EC's guilty pleasures into film prior to *Creepshow*. (Of the Home Box Office series based on *Tales From The Crypt*, more presently).

During the Fifties, the British -- notably, Hammer Studios -- began melding gothic elegance with scarifying in-your-face cinematography in remakes of Thirties Universal Studios classics. Taking its cue from Hammer, the English Amicus Studio produced several *Tales From The Crypt* collections during the Seventies (*Tales From The Crypt* [1972]; *The Vault of Horror* [1973]). Although the Amicus pictures were littered with limbs and eyeballs, EC simply didn't play well with an English accent. One particularly missed EC's grotty humor, virtually sacrificed for egregious displays of gore.

Stephen King is the premier author of American horror fiction, and George Romero one of our most able directors in the genre. King states that the EC canon was a decisive influence upon
his writing; it was also an unlikely source of comfort to a lonely child. (7) Romero brought an appalling explicitness worthy of EC to his previous oeuvre; his leftist ideology colors a virulent Hobbesian viewpoint with clear analogies to EC's grim perspective. (8)

If anyone could capture EC's dubious delights on screen, studio honchos clearly thought it would be this duo. Creepshow was expected to generate at least respectable box office, basis of the public (notably the adolescent and postpubescent male's perennial appetite for horror). Sadly, Creepshow quickly disappeared into obscurity, and did not subsequently achieve cult status afterwards. Nevertheless I submit that the film still tenders the most faithful simulacra of the idiosyncratic EC universe, and was vastly more artful at capturing the peculiar aesthetic of the cartoon/comic universe compared, for instance, with the deeply flawed (1978), Popeye (1981), Dick Tracy (1990).

With the obvious exception of animation, comic art still poses formidable resistances to cinematic transformation (even with the advanced special effect techniques of 300 (2008) and Sin City (2007). These reside in the medium's inherent compression, stillness, and flatness. A well-wrought comic frame contains a Barthean festival of signification. The classic EC frame encompasses an especially mysterious frozen density of character, action, speech. Grotesque distortions and fabulous exaggerations
abound, visually and verbally.

Set all this moving in three dimensions and Dolby stereo, and a peculiar potency is vitiated. Superman's swoops are less believable, even _sans_ strings. Popeye's arms, implicitly accepted within the frame as icons of strength and virtue, become swollen monstrosities on the living screen. The frame's urgent, telegraphic language sounds oddly stilted on the tongue of a live actor. No matter how clever the special effects, a glyphic integrity has been violated. The results are always questionable to some degree, even with the advanced CGI techniques in films like _300_ (2008) and _Sin City_ (2007).

_Creepshow_ especially succeeds at surmounting the dilemmas of adaptation during its framing sequences and final episode. The film begins on exterior shots of a suburban house during a gathering thunderstorm. Inside, a father argues with his son about the horror comic he's found the boy reading. The son whines that his magazine is no worse than the ones his father conceals in his dresser. The father slaps him, confiscates the book, and sends the boy upstairs.

In his room the boy sits dispiritedly amidst a jumble of horror movie arcana. A flash of lightning silhouettes a decayed apparition at the window, beckoning with a bony finger. The boy's face is suffused with a rare pleasure: it's the leprous Vault Keeper! He ushers us outside the window to a garbage can, where the comic book, "CREEPSHOW", lies, its pages fluttering in the
wind. The camera scans across the Keeper's printed narration (9) to focus on the frames of the first episode. Each episode begins and ends with this slide between 'real' and 'comic' reality.

Just as the opening of the EC comic's tale quickly etched the salient physical and psychological features of its characters, Creepshow's initial sequences captures the essence of its protagonists by adroit cinematic approximations of the EC aesthetic. The father, unpleasantly acned, reeks with hypocritical rectitude. His brutishness is emphasized by shooting him from his son's dwarfed perspective and by closeups of his swollen face. The boy, Steven King's son Joey, is terrifically ratty; his mother, fluttering at the periphery, exudes mousy incompetence.

The scene is shot with sharp cuts in acutely short takes. Camera angles are intermittently canted. Colors are boldly primary — e.g., the father's sadistic slap leaves a startling rouge imprint on the son's face. Romero's oversaturated lighting and stark color create a bracing hard-edged effect. The deft fusion of comic and cinematic devices achieves added piquancy because the pubertal defiance, so bound up with the original E.C. experience, has itself been incorporated into the screenplay — including appropriate retaliation against parental oppression. After its 'fictive' chapters, Creepshow concludes with the boy torturing his father by proxy, using a voodoo doll purchased from the comic's pages!
Of the film's five episodes, the least effective is "The Lonesome Death of Jordy Verrill", a curiously unfocussed affair which launched Stephen King's acting career. The big author is not bad (although not nearly as good as his son), as a dullwitted Maine farmer who stumbles upon a glowing green meteor. Exposure to its unwholesome energy metamorphoses him into an approximation of a marijuana plant, and turns his farm into a lichenous ruin. The plot uneasily mixes humor spun out of Jordy's loutish perceptions of his decay with pity for his utter helplessness. This isn't vintage King; a Frankenstein-ish attempt to foster compassion for the monstrous Jordy seems misplaced in an EC homage.

The subsequent tales are vengeful meditations in the classic EC mold, liberally strewn with talionic objects, family conspiracies, and climactic gross-outs. Three -- "Father's Day", "Something To Tide You Over", and "Crate" -- are compromised by the obstacles previously delineated, despite continuing efforts to mimic the comic frame with freezes, multiple screens, and matte work. Furthermore, neither special effects nor deliberately two-dimensional performances mitigate problems with pacing, a loss of the framing sequences' agreeable punched-up quality. Whatever the native flaws of the comic medium, boredom isn't one.

First prize for longeurs goes to "Something To Tide You Over", in which a cuckolded husband buries his wife and her lover neck downward before an incoming tide. He's thoughtfully provided each with TV monitors, with which to witness the other's death
throes. In the evening their bloated ghosts break into his beach house to return the favor. The episode recapitulates every zombie cliche. Rolling waves are incessantly pitched in the viewer's face, inspiring terminal mal-de-mer rather than terror.

"Father's Day" and "Crate" move more briskly and contain a few ripe EC moments. In the former, a gaggle of vicious relatives has gathered to feast the memory of the spiteful millionaire whose murder by his daughter has enriched them all. She killed bad old Nathan Grantham just as he was clamoring for a father's day cake. Now he pops out of his grave, horridly the worse for wear, and takes the obligatory shuffle back to his mansion.

After gruesomely dispatching various kin along the way, he surprises the clan's matriarch in the kitchen, and wrenches her head awry like a demented chiropractor. Cut to the decomposing Grantham shambling into the dining room, bearing the head on a serving platter, its hair laced with frosting and merrily blazing candles. "I got my cake," he rasps through shredded lips, "Happy Father's Day to me!!!" The horrified onlookers freeze into their cartoon doubles with those familiar cries of "GAG!!!!" and "ARRRRRGGGGHHHHHHHHHHH!!!!" hanging in the air. (E.C. tales customarily received ARRRRRRGGGHHHH!!! ratings from my fellow adolescent addicts.)

In "Crate", Hal Holbrook gives a wonderfully dry performance as Professor Henry Northrup, a quintessentially meek academic at a small town college. Henry is locked into a Who's Afraid of
**Virginia Woolf** hate-match with his wife Wilma (Adrienne Barbeau), a castrating shrew and a sloppy drunk. "Just call me Billie," she burps into the faces of Henry's scandalized colleagues at a prim faculty lunch.

Henry's oldest pal is Dexter Stanley (Fritz Weaver), a womanizing anthropologist. The janitor of Dexter's department building discovers a crate hidden beneath the stairs, brought back from an 1834 arctic expedition, never subsequently disturbed. When he pries open the lid with Dexter watching on, a toothy apparition roars out, swallows the janitor and a grad student whole, then scuttles back into its lair.

It's Henry and Dexter's night to play chess alone. Gibbering with fear -- Weaver wonderfully conveys mindless panic -- Dexter rushes to Henry's house. After Dexter's gruesome account, Henry drugs his scotch and goes to the lab, leaving a note for Wilma to join him there. When she arrives, he tells her that a co-ed Dexter seduced has suffered a nervous breakdown, and is huddled beneath the stairs. He knows Wilma can help her, because she's so **very** good at drawing people out. "Just give it a drink", he cackles as he pushes her at the crate, "and TELL IT TO CALL YOU BILLIE!!"

"Crate" should have ended here, with one's belief willingly suspended. But the plot is cluttered with two further endings. Henry and Dexter are seen toasting future Billie-less evenings over their chessboard in a superfluous display of midlife mysogeny. Then the monster ditched by Henry into a quarry lake
bursts out of its crate in a concluding freeze-frame. With Billy in the belly of the beast, the familiar trope of the monster's eternal return seems even more perfunctory.

Happily, *Creepshow*'s last segment, "They're Creeping Up On You" is a stunner, serving up EC's rancorous stew of Grand Guignol revenge with a dollop of Romero's quirky anti-capitalism. Upson Pratt (E.G. Marshall) is a foul-mouthed tycoon in the Howard Hughes mold; unkempt; germ-phobic. He directs an international empire from a computer console in his Manhattan penthouse, wearing surgical gloves.

Pratt's high-tech environs are as sterile as his personal life. A paranoid product of the slums, his greatest pleasure is stamping out competitors and bugs. Cockroaches hold a repellent fascination for him, and become the film's summary talionic objects. They swarmed throughout the dismal housing projects of his impoverished youth, and have come to symbolize his envious competitors.

Pratt's latest takeover has precipitated the suicide of its president. While he mocks the widow and insults subordinates over the phone, giant cockroaches invade his antiseptic sanctum until they infest every nook and cranny, cascading over the walls and floor. As the hysterical Pratt tries to raise the police, the lights of Manhattan wink out in a massive power failure. The 911 operator deems him a crank and hangs up. He retreats into his hermetically sealed bedroom -- breathes a sigh of relief -- then
the bedcover shifts...swells -- and a noisome avalanche of roaches pours out!!

Dissolve: one hour later. The lights flicker back on, the computer console chatters away, the apartment appears as pristine as before. Pratt slumps against the wall, his face congealed in a horrified grimace. A single roach crawls between his lips, and then -- the entire filthy brood bursts out of his ruptured torso!!!

Each time I saw Creepshow in its original theatrical release, the audience erupted with double, triple GAG!!!'s and AARRRRRRGGGGGGHHH!!!'s, a reaction not frequently encountered amongst the jaded fans of 2009. I doubt if viewers were responding consciously to Romero's ironic commentary on corporate greed, come loathesomely home to roost. But he has achieved the coup de cinema every director in the genre yearns for -- breaking the screen's frame, attacking the viewer frontally with the flamboyant evocation of some common collective dread. Here it's the archaic horror of engulfment, embodied by those repulsively crunchy creatures with whom most Gotham dwellers unwillingly share their digs.

"They're Creeping Up On You" returns to the staccato visual economy of the comic strip; its final cascando of terror is as accomplished as any terminal gross-out in vintage weird cinema, due to spectacularly noisome special effect work (for those strong enough to stomach an account of how to marshall a cockroach army,
see the reprise in CINEFANTASTIQUE (10). One also credits a bravura performance by Marshall, cast against type.

For all Creepshow's difficulties, it is a worthier, kinder film on repeated viewing than much of the degraded competition which began proliferating after Hitchcock's subversive masterpiece Psycho (1960) opened the door to the explicit show of violence. With the exception of Pratt's dismantling -- a sequence which evokes the famous chest-burster sequence in Alien (1979) -- Creepshow's mayhem is generally brief, inferential, or so highly stylized, so pervaded with typical EC gallows humor as to make the film relatively palatable for ordinary moviegoers.

And there are still plenty of horrific nuggets to justify abiding the dross, for those who affectionately recall the questionable delights of EC -- particularly for that band of hardy deliriants who will awaken a dismayed spouse for an hour-of-the-wolf televising of Caltiki, Immortal Monster (1959).

If Creepshow does not consistently translate the EC canon to one's satisfaction, it is still infinitely better than the Tales From The Crypt series produced by Home Box Office cable network.(11) The total resurrection of EC's universe one had hoped for has been accomplished -- most appropriately -- in the fine comic derived from the movie, with artwork by Berni Wrightson and Jack Kamen (12), not easily found these days. In either case, Romero and King should be commended for guiding the uninitiated back
to their source -- an unfairly maligned, unique American popular art form.

REFERENCES:

1. Wertham's overheated imagination would eventually doom EC and other explicit horror comics. As a result of his frenetic denunciations in *Seduction of the Innocent: The Influence of Comic Books on Today's Youth* (New York: Rinehart, 1954) and also in his appearance before the Kefauver Commission, the comic industry decided to police itself before possible government prosecution. The EC horror lines were halted, and Gaines turned to Freud in aid of conferring legitimacy upon his tarnished enterprise. A new series entitled *Psychoanalysis* flopped after four issues, to be replaced by Gaine's wildly successful MAD magazine.

2. Much EC fare is now widely and cheaply available in reprint volumes. Ironically, *Seduction of the Innocent* itself has achieved a certain vogue amongst collectors.


7. King states that his father abandoned his family during the author's childhood, leaving behind a box of horror-related literature which King greatly treasured throughout his youth. (King, Stephen: Danse Macabre. New York: Berkley Books, 1981, p. 34.)

8. E.g. the director's deployment of cannibalism as a trenchant symbol of capitalist rapacity in the original "Dead" trilogy.

9. The Vault Keeper's sardonic commentary, crucial to the EC ambience, has been inexcusably eliminated from the film, saving these glimpses of the printed page.

11. The HBO series accurately reprises EC's vengeance-ridden Hobbesian vision and Grand Guignol tropes. The rotting Vault Keeper (a puppet) narrates each tale with the odious sophomoric jokiness of the original. Little if any attempt is made, however, to capture the corrupt vitality of a typical EC frame.