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Violet City: Fantasising Liverpool in Song, Story and Film

*Look where Violet City sprawls for miles
Exotic creatures on their secret tasks
What do they hide behind those distant smiles?
Oblique expressions, alabaster masks?*

*Cathedral Mountain penetrates the clouds
Lightning crackles at the interface
Rain slides down in sullen shrouds
Over Violet City's populace*

*A key turns to a padlocked attic room
Batwing shadows slice into the moon*

*Airships ride their moorings at the docks
Jack leans over a gondola rail
As the jagged chimes of civic clocks
Rip the constant roar and banshee wail*

*First taste of this haunted home of dreams
Twitches deep and dark roots of desire
Twists him towards a pulse of light that gleams
Over the rooftops from a distant spire*

*A sweet scent calls him down a rain-drenched street
He swaggers forth on over-eager feet*

*Where the torture garden in full bloom
Seduces victims with exotic musk
Exhaled into the purple evening gloom
Lures to poison thorn and cactus tusk*

*A despot at a window in a tower
Exults in each exquisite squeal of pain
Indulges an unearthly will to power
Obeyes a signal from a reptile brain*

*And offers tribute to the lords of lies
Infernal sparks ignite slit-pupil eyes*

(Jackson 2010) ¹

ABSTRACT

Violet City exists as a fantasy novel and a micro-budget feature film. The film was shot entirely on green screen and is due for digital release in 2016. It uses hundreds of composited

¹ 1. Headland Press published a book of my song lyrics entitled *Songs from Violet City* (2011). This song, Cathedral Mountain, is from the 2010 album of the same name.

images and mattes, merging locations as disparate as the warehouses and streets of Liverpool with the canals of Venice, the Himalayas, the Liver Buildings and the Giant's Causeway to create a dark fairy tale ambience. Airships and hot air balloons soar above paddle steamers and luxury barges in the shadow of Cathedral Mountain. I adapted the screenplay from my novel, written as part of my doctorate by practice, investigating the personal and cultural mythologies that informed my imagination, growing up in Liverpool, and filtered through the work of various pre-1980s fantasy writers. Mediadrome, an independent US publisher will be publishing the book to coincide with the film release, and I have provided much of the soundtrack, using recordings by my various Liverpool-based bands from the 1980s to the present. This article discusses ways in which these symbiotic creative works reimagine my home city through the lenses of fantasy fiction and how memories of Liverpool's past landscapes have affected my creative processes over the years.

INTRODUCTION

I have been fascinated by storytelling songs ever since I first heard 'Ghost Riders in The Sky' in my Grandmother's parlour when I was three-years-old, and have written and recorded songs all of my adult life. I also write screenplays and prose fiction and live and work in close proximity to Giles Gilbert Scott's Anglican Cathedral in Liverpool's Georgian Quarter.

Violet City is a symbiotic multi-platform project - a series of songs, a fantasy novel, and a micro-budget feature film. While researching and writing a reflective commentary on the novel for a PhD by practice, I became aware that, though set in an alternate reality, Violet City was striving for the feel of the fiction I read between the ages of 11 and 18. But set in versions of the landscapes in which I read it. Much of its geography, architecture, inhabitants and story elements derive from my experiences of Liverpool during the 60s, 70s, and early 80s, together with local and familial histories. These memories, along with personal and cultural mythologies of my youth, formed the 'poetics' of Violet City's creative strands - refocused and adapted to the generic requirements of song, fantasy fiction and screen narrative.

Retracing influences that informed the novel enabled me to collect reference material that would prove an invaluable dramaturgical resource for the film. Shot entirely on green screen, its sets were composited and animated in Photoshop. In the street scene below, the Liver Buildings overlook a canal in Venice, while the Himalayas loom in the background – almost a snapshot of the imaginative landscape of my youth.



The novel and feature film are due for publication and digital release in the autumn of 2015 and songs set in the story world or included on the soundtrack have been released on several albums, including *Cathedral Mountain* (Jackson, 2010), *Twin Evil Stars* (Dead Cowboys, 2005), *Indoor Fireworks* (The Room, 1982) and the forthcoming *Red Fin Sunset* (2015).

PROCESS

The lyrics at the front of this piece represent my earliest vision of Violet City's story world. They strive for cinematic effect, influenced by pre-1980s writers of fantastic fiction. Michael Moorcock, H.P. Lovecraft and Mervyn Peake were major influences on me, along with early Marvel comic books, the androgynous stylings of 70s glam and punk rock, painters such as Max Ernst and De Chirico, German Expressionist films and Universal horror movies. The lyrics hint at a story set in an imaginary version of Liverpool distorted through images of 'the weird'.

The ability to immerse one's self in alternate worlds is an important part of the fantasist's art. We walk in parallel realities, intersected by dreams, memories and reflections, using recollections of real people, objects and environments as models and triggers for stories. The storyteller's task is to forge meaning out of disparate elements, finding connectivity, resonance, structure and plot.

I remember reading and swapping US comics in back alleys and waste ground dens - or traipsing behind a zip-booted grandmother through palatial and now defunct, art deco department stores to be rewarded with a visit to the Tatler Cartoon & Newsreel Cinema - while coveting a Dracula model kit glimpsed in Jack Sharpe's window. I remember performing Kafka and J. G. Ballard-influenced songs with The Room, while supporting Pete Burns' Dead or Alive, at the Royal Court - an old music hall theatre, favoured by Ken Dodd - on the night the Toxteth riots started. In my songs and stories, the camp melodrama of old horror films and effete rock star aesthetics meet the thrill of urban rebellion against backdrops of soot-blackened Georgian splendour, World War II bombsites and rhododendron infested floral gardens.



Associative thinking helped create the supernatural creatures that haunt my story. In 1975, I saw an immaculately weird and shaven-headed young woman working as a receptionist in a trendy St John's Precinct hairdresser's. This was a time when most men had long hair, and shaved heads were associated with thugs rather than arty outsiders. The woman turned out to be Jayne Casey, who with Holly Johnson (Frankie Goes to Hollywood), Bill Drummond (KLF), Budgie (Siouxsie and the Banshees) and Ian Broudie (Lightning Seeds) formed one of Liverpool's seminal punk bands, Big in Japan. She was a protégé of Roger Eagle, a legendary local promoter, and manager of Liverpool's Eric's club, where my first two bands (051 and The Room) played debut gigs. A photograph of Jayne and Holly from that period shows them kohl-eyed, bald-headed, wearing white face powder and black lipstick.

I tweaked and remodelled Jayne's look via the airbrushed centrefold of David Bowie from *Aladdin Sane* and Jack Kirby's Silver Surfer from *Fantastic Four*, but the thrill of seeing such a self-possessed and exotic creature in the 'real world' provided the main model for the androgynous race of energy parasites that glide the thermals of Cathedral Mountain - 'exotic creatures' with 'oblique expressions, alabaster masks'.



These are brief descriptions of Empusa from early in the novel:

'Katherine's pale face and cloud of hair blurred in the watery shadows. Aaron struggled, lungs bursting, trying to haul her free. Then, from behind her ballooning skirts, another white face loomed and rushed upwards. Bright purple eyes stared into his, their pupils vertical slits. Luminescent fingers slashed from the murk, raking his face.' (*Violet City*: 7)

'The shadow sloughed from its head to reveal a complexion like alabaster. With its long neck, high cheekbones and smooth white skull, the creature resembled an animated, androgynous statue.' (*Violet City*: 51)

The screenplay describes these two scenes in the following ways:

He makes an extra effort and grabs Katharine by the waist. Suddenly, a WHITE FACE looms from behind her billowing skirts. Purple, slit-pupil eyes blaze and a clawed hand slashes.
(Scene 8: 3 original emphasis)



Dorina stands petrified, as the indistinct shape materialises on the balcony - a flickering androgynous shadow that THRUMS with electric power. GANYMEDE, an Empusa, watches the garden below and we briefly see its beautifully stylised feminine face. Eyes closed, it grins pleasure.
(Scene 65:32 original emphasis)

Structures force connections, whether using melody rhythm and rhyme to shape the meaning of a song lyric, or using notions of plant and payoff to make narrative sense of a group of disparate images and vague thematic ideas.

Along with the Cathedral Mountain lyric, these are the other creative key triggers for *Violet City*:

- A white-faced, hairless androgyne stands in a cluttered antique shop, spinning a vase on the end of an extended finger.
- A mountain of black glass, in the shape of the Anglican Cathedral tower, looms above a fantasy version of Liverpool.
- Under a full moon, a drunk in a glass-bottomed boat dangles waterproof lamps and searches for his drowned wife - watched from shore by his violet-eyed son.
- Man-eating plants go into a feeding frenzy in a botanical garden.
- A female 'van Helsing' flies home aboard an airship with a precious book.

These springboard images were pieces of a puzzle for the narrative to solve by connecting them into a story with internal plausibility. I developed a short screenplay about Flynn, whose

mysterious violet-eyed mother had drowned in a ferry disaster. Reaching young manhood, his eyes change colour to violet and a false friend lures him to Violet City, where the ruling houses are in thrall to the androgynous Empusa that live in Cathedral Mountain.

All the trigger images were incorporated into the story, even the antique shop, which I based on an old independent book shop called Atticus that existed in several bohemian city centre locations during the 70s and 80s, and where I bought a Penguin copy of Peake's *Gormenghast* and, later, had William Burroughs sign a copy *Cities of the Red Night* when he came to read with Adrian Henri. Zimmer Antiques is a key location, where a sought after object arrives, only to be stolen by a youth gang led by the hero's false friend.



I wrote a song describing the short film's opening sequence from the point of view of the drunk in the boat, recalling the day his wife appeared to drown, and decided to use the first screenplay as the basis for a novel that I developed for a Ph.D. in creative practice, extending the story, fleshing out characters and adding new plotlines. I had just completed the Ph.D. version and written extensively about the creative process in relation to personal and cultural mythologies when my colleague John Maxwell suggested turning the novel into a feature-length screenplay.



Our production involved filming costumed actors in front of a massive green screen in a derelict factory canteen. The script developed in response to the limitations of the photo-shopping process used for background scenery, our miniscule budget, and SFX capabilities. For instance, I used canals and barges as the main form of transport within the city through practical considerations in terms of animation. We couldn't have horse-drawn carriages. But this added an extra dimension, as we began to incorporate images of Venice amongst Liverpool's docklands, Georgian Quarter and Three Graces.

LIVERPOOL PAST

There was a monochrome look to Liverpool city centre in the 1960s before its buildings were sandblasted. I recall great soot-blackened department stores and the eight-horned Anglican Cathedral – a gothic structure to this day - but an ebon mountain to the infant eye. These monochrome memories seem to reflect the black and white of that era’s television - blurry images of early *Dr Who* (1963) or of Winston Churchill’s interminable state funeral the day I had my first hallucinatory taste of dentist’s gas.

These memories became refocused through the later reading of Mervyn Peake’s descriptions of Gormenghast’s dank contiguous sprawl, Moorcock’s *Evil Empires*, and the nightmarish labyrinths of Kafka’s *The Trial*. And, in turn, became models for Violet City and the Cathedral-shaped Mountain that looms above.



I have lived within sight of the Anglican Cathedral for most of my adult life, but in my imagination it is still the black structure I saw as a child, one side rearing over a sunken public garden, once a quarry and then a cemetery before its headstones were cleared or used as paving. The other side overlooks the river down a slope that was once waste ground with a few crumbling terraced houses before it was built on in the 90s. Mendlesohn and James discuss the influence of the ‘cult of medievalism’ that ‘manifested... in architecture across Europe’ and ‘most contributed to the look and feel of the fantasy that would dominate in the bookshops of the later twentieth century’ (2009: 15), specifically this very Cathedral:

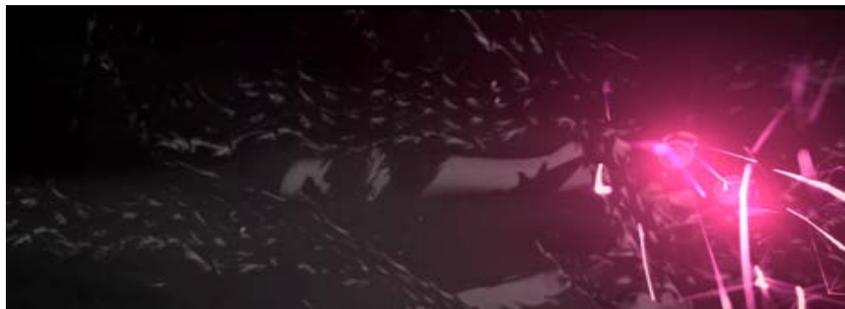
‘The Anglican Cathedral in Liverpool, which we both independently christened ‘Gormenghast’ and which was designed by Giles Gilbert Scott, whose grandfather, George Gilbert Scott, designed the fantasia that is St Pancras railway station.’

(Mendlesohn & James, 2009) p.20.

For ten years, I studied and worked a few hundred yards from the Cathedral and its presence seeped into my psyche.

My novel is set in an exploded and distorted Mersey estuary. If you picture a massively widened and lengthened Mersey with Liverpool relocated to the tip of the Wirral peninsula and the Anglican Cathedral tower stretching into the clouds, you have a rough model for the location. Having stowed aboard an airship, Flynn arrives in Violet City and becomes

embroiled in a confrontation between the androgynous Empusa and a darkness rising from the acid depths of Cathedral Mountain's central pool.



The greasy Pier Head gangways and landing stages of my childhood are reconfigured in my novel to service paddle steamers and airships that bring travellers to Violet City - their interiors based on the Mersey Ferries and *The Royal Iris*, a locally famous 'drinking vessel' where The Room once performed during a 1980s fresher's week. I took innumerable trips aboard ferries to Wallasey and New Brighton, and the putrid stink of the river before it was cleaned up still lingers in my memory, as does the acid sting of chlorine in the various public bathing pools of my youth.

New Brighton had an enormous art deco lido with a landscaped outdoor pool that diminished to a concrete beach. This is present in my depiction of Cathedral Mountain's acid pool with its sloping glass shoreline. I recall queuing for hours for the ferry on the way back from New Brighton baths in 1970 because a yacht had collided with the incoming ferry. All but one of the yacht's passengers had drowned. Years later, a woman working in a Lark Lane wine bar told me she was the survivor. Still traumatised by the events of that day, she subsequently committed suicide.

This became conflated with the image of Shelly Winters sitting in her car on the riverbed in *Night of the Hunter* (Lawton, 1957). I originally saw that clip as a four-year-old in my grandmother's sitting room. The black-and-white image made an indelible impact, long before I ever saw the full film, and blended with the real ferry disaster to inspire the opening scene, where Katherine's paddle steamer overturns and she's snatched from her husband's grasp by an Empusa.



Living in Liverpool's Georgian Quarter provided me with a stage set I could tour daily. A popular location for films set in Victorian times, the area has retained its cobbled streets and terraces. When developing ideas, I would wander local streets, climb the cathedral tower or sit and write in its sunken garden overlooked by the mercantile mansions of Gambier Terrace.

The cobbles, terraces and faux gas lamps of Falkner, Catharine, Huskisson and Percy Streets form the basis for descriptions of Black Street and the more salubrious areas of Violet City. Since well-heeled professionals and students have moved into our area, the extensive alley systems, through which I once ran to escape a gang of would-be assailants, have been gated. In recent years, the gentrification of what was once a low rent and somewhat bohemian area has grown apace. In Violet City, the merchants have armed bodyguards posted on their doorsteps, warding off the disenfranchised.

The parks, gardens and Palm Houses of Liverpool's 'green belt', with their lakes and floral clocks contributed to the creation of the fictional Serenity Gardens where Lord Splaine's horticulturalists cultivate carnivorous plants. Many of the huge Victorian greenhouses and palm houses have fallen into disrepair, been dismantled or converted into venues for 'events', but the thrill of wandering in those miniature jungles a-drip with condensation lingers in my depiction of the torture garden.

I was fascinated by snapdragons - the name itself - and the disappointment that the flowers didn't actually snap of their own accord. Family walks in the botanical gardens of Liverpool triggered childhood daydreams in which deadly blossoms waited to pounce on unsuspecting strollers. Rhododendron bushes held a particular allure because of their dense clusters of reptilian-looking foliage and the vivid colours of their flowers. I was especially fond of the darker and bloodier hues. The *Floris Diablos* were gestating in the palm houses of Calderstones and Sefton Park. Crocodile Weed festooned New Brighton's promenade walls at low-tide.

The overgrown brickfields and derelict warehouses where we played became Dog Town, where Violet City's marginalised communities huddle together in fear. Memories of riding on buses through Liverpool's soot-blackened landscapes still colour my perception of those areas in the present. There were jagged, freestanding shells of bombed buildings and rubble-strewn waste grounds in Kensington, Everton, Bootle, Parliament Street and Walton.

I recall walking along the central reservation between Prince's Avenue's great Georgian terraces with my father. I was aged five and seeing the multicultural community of Granby Street for the first time. Having lived in mono-cultural Walton in my early years, Toxteth, with its West Indian and African communities, made an exotic impression, as if I was entering a new country - a country that from my late-teens I would inhabit.

My father was a merchant seaman during his teens, in the latter days of casualised labour. Ordinary seamen were often picked on the spot, meaning he could just as easily return home, unchosen, or be off on a trip across the world by tea time. This psychic memory informs my depiction of Flynn, leaving his mining village home on the spur of the moment aboard the airship he's been helping refuel.

I was the son of a man whose daydreams were nuanced by myths of his youth. He had re-enacted schoolboy battles from *Just William* in the parks of Allerton during World War II and

would regularly regale me with the fist fights he never lost and tales of catapult and .22 rifle shootouts between his gang and others. These stories are present in Violet City, filtered through my own experiences of Liverpool's 1970s boot gang culture, before right-to-assembly laws were changed, when hordes of youths would battle in parks and on waste grounds.

My father had a photograph in which he stands beside the 6-foot Grey Nurse he'd caught with a butcher's hook. The image of that powerful shark, reduced to a white-bellied trophy, haunts my depiction of the dissection of a dead Empusa.



My father had a naïve John Wayne moral code that cost him the sight in one eye. In the 1970s, he confronted a gang arguing with a woman on the door of Speke Community Centre, where he taught weightlifting. He went down under the weight of numbers and an unlucky kick collapsed an eye.

Speke, a deprived and dysfunctional post-war estate, seemed dangerous territory back when each area of Liverpool had its own Dr Martens-clad gang. The gang-ruled wastelands of Dog Town in the old warehouse districts of Violet City have their roots in that period and place. My father's insistence on standing up against overwhelming odds informs the character of Nolte, Flynn's one-eyed father substitute, who eventually sacrifices himself while holding out alone against hordes of Raven guards.



At 19, I rented a flat opposite Prince's Park Gates, where my bands rehearsed, and where, after playing a gig at the Royal Court supporting Pete Burns' Dead or Alive in the summer of 1981, I arrived home to find riot police gathered for the first night of the Toxteth riots. The riots, the razing of The Rialto (a former dance hall where my parents met in the 1950s) and the atmosphere of dangerous carnival abroad during those weeks informs the failed rebellion centred on Serenity Gardens in Violet City's later chapters. The boulevard leading to the portcullis of Serenity Gardens is a fantasy version of Prince's Avenue, leading to Prince's Park Gates.

Teenage explorations of the city included aimlessly wandering the business areas and Pier Head, amongst the Georgian, Victorian and Edwardian palaces, plateaus and arcades, daydreaming of underground cultural takeovers of St George's Hall, the Cunard, Liver and Port of Liverpool buildings. I recall fleeing from boot boy gangs, protective of their territory, through parks and golf courses or searching through the ruins of Stanley dock warehouses. I climbed with friends up onto the roof of the Albert Dock, a few years before it was converted into a tourist arcade and Tate in the North, and gazed out over our decayed hometown at the Cathedral on the hill above the city.

In my imagination Peake's Gormenghast and the cathedral became conflated with Hydra's huge domed sea base in a *Strange Tales* episode of 'Nick Fury Agent of Shield', Spectre's volcano hideout in the Bond film, *You Only Live Twice* (1967), and Tolkien's Mount Doom. The idea of a vast enclosed space with arcane purpose, hiding in plain sight, produced an especial frisson. At the centre of the vast interior of Cathedral Mountain, there is a fantasy version of New Brighton's landscaped lido, filled with acid. To my childish imagination, the notion that a liquid could dissolve a human being was incredible. Older boys had talked us through Dr No's death-slide into a vat of acid and we'd re-enacted it at various Victorian pools and art deco lidos. I was seduced by the flickering reflections on tiled walls and their echoing spaces. These too have contributed to Cathedral Mountain's interior, its glass beach, reverberating heights and fizzing depths. Even an image that appears in the film of Empusa drifting beneath the acid lake, folded up in foetal balls, is based on a childhood game we used

to play, competing to see who could hold their breath longest while clutching our knees and rotating beneath the surface.

I would sneak US superhero comics into the house because my father objected to these, preferring I read UK comics. In one of the English titles was a series called *Britain in Chains*. It involved a struggle to overthrow a fascist state whose troops dressed in chainmail but carried contemporary weapons. This surreal anachronism stayed with me and emerged in the portrayal of Splaine's beak-masked Raven guards, but recombined with the riot police who gathered outside my flat in the summer of 1981.

Liverpool's Chief Constable was responsible for shutting down Liverpool's legendary punk club, Eric's (site of two of my bands' debut gigs) a year before the riots took place. His force was notorious for abusing the 'suss' laws in and around Toxteth - one of the factors that triggered the riots. This draconian behaviour morphs into the lawless Ravens in my fantasised version of Liverpool.



Liverpool's youth culture accelerated in the mid-to-late seventies. In Matthew Street, the Cavern had been turned into a car park. But the Armadillo Tea Rooms was a Mecca for artistic types, influenced by The Velvet Underground, David Bowie, Carl Jung and William Burroughs. Jayne Casey had a clothes shop called Aunt Twacky's beneath the original café, where Ken Campbell staged afternoon performances of his *Science fiction Theatre*.

In 1977, I quit a Fine Art degree to write and perform songs in a new wave band. The punk era, with its do-it-yourself aesthetic, offered the opportunity to launch a music career from scratch, and within two months of forming a band, I had played *Eric's*. Punk's speed-fueled, back-to-basics approach stood in opposition to the fantasy stylings of progressive rock. It was an urban phenomenon, intrinsically opposed to the pastoral medievalism of epic fantasy and that genre's hippy culture associations. Compare Roger Dean's record sleeves for bands like *Yes* to the Xeroxed Dadaist collage of Buzzcocks *Spiral Scratch*.

For a long while, I drifted away from fantasy fiction, but The Fall's Mark E Smith showed a way forward. He wrote songs, set in a grotesque alternative North of England, filtering working class social realism through the horror of H. P. Lovecraft. This inspired me to use my local environment as a starting point for 'weird tales' told in song form and to create a personal mythology in response to the Liverpool of my memory and imagination.

Flynn reads the history of the Empusa in Cathedral Mountain's stained-glass panels - gigantic, flickering comic book windows on the past. If you look up at Liverpool's old buildings you'll see scores of arcane symbols moulded into the upper storeys of buildings, mysterious glyphs hinting at secrets - the Liver Birds, themselves, mythical beasts that may one day fly away.

'...landmarks constantly draw us toward the past. Certain *shifting* angles, certain *receding* perspectives, allow us to glimpse original conceptions of space, but this vision remains fragmentary. It must be sought in the magical locales of fairy tales and surrealist writings: castles, endless walls, little forgotten bars, mammoth caverns, casino mirrors.' (Chtcheglov, 1953 original emphasis)

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John Maxwell. The novel *Violet City* is due for publication in 2016 and the film of the same is due for digital release through Indie Rights.

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