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on the Continent: An Interview with Leslie Megahey,
Director of Schalcken the Painter**

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10 “Look into the Dark”

A Ghost Story for Christmas on the Continent: An Interview with Leslie Megahey, Director of *Schalcken the Painter*

Michael Newton

Through the 1970s, the BBC produced a series of subtle, unnerving period ghost films for Christmas. For the most part, these confined themselves to a darkly nostalgic view of the English past. However, the last—and perhaps the best—of them, Leslie Megahey’s *Schalcken the Painter* (1979) frames a refracted vision of Holland, a world of the interior, fabricated from Dutch art, a relation to money, and a sinister image of exchange. Megahey’s film proves to be a masterly evocation of a specifically Dutch spirit, a troubled vision of a continental elsewhere, broadcast into the home on that most domestic and inward-looking of occasions, the British family Christmas.

Though *Hamlet* is, among other things, a Christmas ghost story, it is Charles Dickens’s *A Christmas Carol* (1843) that sealed the bond between Christmas and the spooky. From then on, the link was a matter of course, one of the nation’s ongoing pieties, deeply linked to the preservation of traditions and the sense of place. The Christmas ghost story contrasts jollity with terror, invites a specter to the feast, and traces the anxiety within the festivity. There’s the strong disparity too between the darkened world without and the brightened home within; but, above all, there’s the suspicion that there’s something restless inside that home, something unappeased. The image of the nation here was also a haunted one. Moreover, there lingers around such tales the fact that Christmas celebrates incarnation as such, even as the stories themselves draw our attention to the dis-incarnated, the lingering remnants of the dead, or the never-embodied presences beyond the veil.

Inspired by Jonathan Miller’s Freudian-tinged short film, *Whistle and I’ll Come To You* (1968), for a number of years each Christmas the BBC embodied these unembodied spirits in a series of marvelous short ghost films, brought together under the title, *A Ghost Story for Christmas*. Largely directed by Lawrence Gordon Clark, the best of these were adaptations of works by three masters of the Victorian and Edwardian ghost story: Dickens’s “The Signalman,” Sheridan Le Fanu’s “Schalcken the Painter” (both written and directed by Leslie Megahey),

and, above all, a series of versions of M. R. James's well-mannered ghost stories, those inconsequential masterpieces of agitation and doom. (M. R. James's ghost stories themselves found their origin in a ritual festive reading at King's College, Cambridge, an all-male, annual immersion in sophisticated fear.) The first of Clark's films, *The Stalls of Barchester* (1971), was well-reviewed, and its success led to the production of the next Christmas film, *A Warning to the Curious* (1972). At this point, the BBC's drama department took official control of Clark's original enterprise, with Rosemary Hill acting as producer. As well as giving up his role as producer, from now on, though he continued to direct, the writing credits were also no longer Clark's. *Lost Hearts* appeared in 1973, then the following year came *The Treasure of Abbot Thomas*, and then in 1975, *The Ash Tree*. Breaking with M. R. James, when initial plans to do a version of "Number 13" began to look prohibitive—as it would have meant filming abroad—, Clark instead turned to Dickens in 1976 for *The Signalman* (scripted by Andrew Davies), and then to the present-day for *Stigma*, in 1977. With a different director, Derek Lister, another contemporary story, John Bowen's *The Ice House* appeared for Christmas 1978.

A yearning homesickness for the past permeates these brief films, first of all for the Victorian and Edwardian worlds they resurrect, but now also for the seventies when they were screened. One of the pleasures of these films is seeing such fine work by an especially gifted generation of actors: Denholm Elliott, so irritably unsure in *The Signalman*; bluffly apprehensive Robert Hardy in *The Stalls of Barchester Cathedral*; in *A Warning to the Curious*, the usually threatening Peter Vaughan at his most vulnerable.

With their enchanted and poetic engagement with the English landscape—the cathedral closes, the railway junctions, the bare fens—these films are close to "heritage TV," though it's an inheritance marked out as troubled and uneasy. Englishness captivates them, not the continental. It is noteworthy that David Rudkin, famous for his marvelous TV play, *Penda's Fen* (1974), a work enraptured by the English countryside and committed to the fertility that imbues the parish, also scripted the last of Clark's M. R. James adaptations for the BBC, *The Ash Tree*. Here in these films, characters who disinter objects from the island's past quickly find themselves beleaguered, oppressed. The nostalgic viewer should perhaps take care; old times were perhaps a dark place. When we engage with ghosts, we are also inevitably engaging with history. In *The Stalls of Barchester*, a pagan Britain infects the life of the modern, rational Anglican cathedral, as oak-wood from a sacred grove of sacrifices is put to use in carving a church pew. There are other yesterdays summoned up in these films, both the national past and the self's, the dread conjured up evoking the barely suppressed fears found in childhood and the childhood home. These tales are home-grown, imbued

with the land, set against Europe. In *A Warning to the Curious*, the ghost specifically persists in order to guard against continental invasion, a bulwark against the foreign.

Toward the end of Gordon Clark's run, the attention turned to the present; these last two films (*Stigma* and *The Ice House*) are arguably the weakest in the sequence, the ones unredeemed by the charm of the middle-distance. The ghost film of the period that most successfully takes the contemporary for its subject is instead Nigel Kneale's wonderfully disconcerting *The Stone Tape* (broadcast on Christmas Day, 1972), a film that happily combines elements of science-fiction with the Victorian-style tale, as well as intimations of the horrors of a persisting evil abiding from antiquity.

After *The Ash Tree*, Lawrence Gordon Clark bowed out, though he went on to make an updated version of James's *Casting the Runes* for ITV (1979). However, on the BBC, the strand would find a magnificent coda in Leslie Megahey's *Schalcken the Painter*. It was only now, some four years after the referendum that gave the nation's blessing to the UK's membership of the European Economic Community, that one of these films turned its attention to the shared cultural inheritance of mainland Europe. The film was broadcast during the first Christmas of the new Conservative government headed by Margaret Thatcher. In the period of monetarism, Megahey was to make a ghost film ominously preoccupied by money transactions, and the distortions brought about by financial exchange.

Both Lawrence Gordon Clark and Leslie Megahey had made a prior reputation in documentary, especially in Clark's case for his 1966 series on one Islington locale, *Six Sides of a Square*. Indeed *Schalcken* and Jonathan Miller's seminal first film in the sequence found a place on screen as part of that excellent arts documentary series, *Omnibus*. The relation to documentary is not fortuitous; the classic ghost stories vivified in these films all depend on a sequence of the slight disturbances in the everyday world, a crescendo of unease.

Born in Belfast in 1944, Leslie Megahey began a distinguished career with the BBC in the late 1960s. In 1968, he made a rare film with J. R. R. Tolkien at Oxford, a process about which Tolkien himself was skeptical, though he was also ready to praise the "very young" director as equipped with intelligence and insight. Megahey worked as both a producer and director at the BBC for a number of years, before making his writing debut with *The Savage* (1977), a TV film about Gauguin. He was the editor of the BBC arts documentary program *Arena* from 1977–79 and again from 1982 to 1983, and in 1980, he won a BAFTA for his editorship of *Omnibus*; over his career, he has written, directed or produced a number of films about painters, including documentaries on Rodin, Stubbs, Landseer, and Rouault, among others. As producer, among many others, he put together a documentary on Orson Welles

(Arena, 1982) and a docudrama on Leonardo da Vinci, starring Mark Rylance as the painter, *Leonardo* (2004). He wrote and directed the TV play, *Cariani and the Courtesans* (1987), with Paul McGann playing the painter, Giovanni Cariani, and also the wonderful absurd comedy film, *The Hour of the Pig* (in the United States named *The Advocate*) (1993), starring Colin Firth, Ian Holm, and Donald Pleasance. (Earlier Megahey had written a script for a version of Le Fanu's "The Room in the Dragon Volant" that would have starred Firth as the naïve young hero of the tale, though very sadly, this project never reached the screen.) In 1998, he collaborated with Jana Boková (Megahey's wife) in writing the award-winning *Diario para un cuento* ("Diary for a Tale"). In 2007, he was one of the writers for the documentary nature film, *Earth*. He continues to be active as a filmmaker and writer.

Sheridan Le Fanu's "Strange Event in the Life of Schalcken the Painter" (May 1839 in the *Dublin University Magazine*) reappeared in the collection, *The Purcell Papers* (1880), and in-between in slightly revised form in *Ghost Stories and Tales of Mystery* (1851). In this short story, Le Fanu traces an imagined tale about the real-life Dutch painter, the Leiden-based Godfried Schalcken (1643–1706), the pupil of Gerrit Dou (1613–75). It was some quality of mystery in Schalcken's works that first seems to have engaged Le Fanu; the artist's portraits are notable for their sitters' air of challenge, of mischievous confrontation; they engage with us, flirting, all but cajoling. Later in his life, Schalcken came to London to paint, a continental artist in one of Europe's great capital cities, working at a time when Britain had a Dutch king. In Le Fanu's history, Schalcken falls in love with Dou's niece, Rose Velderkauk, though his own poverty as an apprentice mean that the two of them cannot marry. Before Schalcken can propose to Rose, a mysterious elderly and uncanny stranger, one Vanderhausen of Rotterdam, visits the house and asks to marry Rose, in return for a casket of perfect gold ingots. Dou greedily accepts the bargain, and, much against her will, Rose is taken off to be married to the dismal stranger. Schalcken devotes himself to the dreary task of amassing money through his painting. Some time later, Rose suddenly returns to the house, alone and in a wild state, attempting to flee her dreadful husband, and declaring that "the dead and the living can never be one." However, Rose vanishes again, and is only seen once more by Schalcken, in the great church of St. Lawrence (the "Laurenskerk") at Rotterdam, where a muffled female figure leads him toward the vaults; he follows her down there, when she turns and from the shadows a lamp illuminates her arch smile, as she pulls back the curtains around a bed, where her aged, dead lover sits bolt upright. Schalcken passes out, and is found the next morning lying by a large coffin. Ever after in his paintings, the artist returns to an image of a woman, illumined by candle-light, beckoning the viewer into the darkness.

Le Fanu engaged with continental subjects in several of his tales. In *A Glass Darkly* (1872) has its Germanic physician, Dr. Hesselius, as its presiding spirit, as well as the Styrian vampire tale, "Carmilla" (considered elsewhere in this book by Rahel Schmitz) and a long story of conspiracy and living-burial set in post-Napoleonic France, "The Room in The Dragon Volant." In "The Haunted Baronet" from *Chronicles of Golden Friars* (1871) (a very much adapted version of the earlier "The Fortunes of Sir Robert Ardagh" [1838]), the fated Sir Bale Mardykes hankers for the European freedom he has given up for the sinister roots that his family have put down on his Northumbrian estate. However, for the most part, Le Fanu's tales take his native Ireland as their source or are set firmly in England (particularly in the north). Ever since 1947 and Elizabeth Bowen's ground-breaking introduction to Le Fanu's novel, *Uncle Silas* (1864), it has been common critical practice to see all Le Fanu's settings as so many masks for the Ireland that was in fact his primary concern. For "Schalcken" and for "The Dragon Volant," such identifications feel spurious; in particular, the Leiden of Le Fanu's tale is certainly an attempt to engage with a mainland nation.

Megahey's adaptation actually improves on Le Fanu's already excellent original tale, deepening and expanding the story into a pregnant meditation on love, money, and art. In spirit, it's more of a folk-tale than a ghost story, a fable of patriarchy and power. In Robert Muller's portmanteau series, *Supernatural* (1977), both Jeremy Clyde (who plays Schalcken) and John Justin (who takes the part of Vanderhausen, the spirit) had already appeared together in another (very loose) adaptation of a Le Fanu story, "Dorabella," an echo of his vampire tale, "Carmilla." A comparison between the two programs brings out the particular excellence of Leslie Megahey's film. *Supernatural* confidently leaps over-the-top; there's an intense amount of cackling, quothing, and scenery-chewing; it's all very unlike the understated disquiet of the Christmas ghost story films.

After the entranced landscapes of Gordon Clark's films, *Schalcken* turns to the interior. It is hardly surprising that a film that depicts two great Dutch masters, the elderly Gerrit Dou (played by the ever-testy Maurice Denham) and his pupil, Godfried Schalcken, should be so painterly in style. Visually, it's an affair of shadows and luminescence, of perspectives and doorways, replete with tributes to the still realism of Dutch art, evoking the becalmed domesticities captured by Vermeer or Pieter de Hooch. The film self-consciously enacts what Schalcken himself would do, transforming living people into the immobility of art. Women here are "property," purchasable commodities, like the paintings—and perhaps the films—that frame and preserve them.

Here again, the tale's aged ghost offers his casket packed with unalloyed gold in exchange for Dou's young niece, Schalcken's unattainable beloved. Megahey's version brings into touch the deadness of money

with the living human being, stagnant gold with a woman's animated presence. There's something truly perplexing about Vanderhausen, the weary, mahogany-colored, unbreathing ghost, his hang-dog hideousness both disgusting and curiously fascinating. Vanderhausen visits the house from another interior, a space hidden within the great church in Rotterdam. It's to this unlocated, placeless place that he drags Rose.

Asked to pose with a pair of scales that weighs a dead bird against a string of pearls, one of Schalcken's models inquires, "What's it mean?" "It's only a story," the artist stolidly informs her. Sometimes it's best to remind yourself that the worlds imagined in these ghost films are also only stories, for who would want to reside in such entrapment and strangeness?

The Interview [9 June 2016, at Leiden University in The Netherlands]

LESLIE MEGAHEY (INTRODUCING THE FILM): There's something rather nice, which is nothing to do with the film, and it's that this whole idea came about through a collaborator I worked with for many years, called Paul Humfress, who's the film editor on *Schalcken*, and who actually found the story [Humfress was also the co-writer, editor and co-director of Derek Jarman's movie, *Sebastiane* (1976)]. He sent it to me in the early 1970s, having typed it out, while he was living in Holland. Paul sent it to me to London, showing me the story, and so I wrote a script of it. Before I came here to Leiden, I told Paul, who now lives in Australia, and is in his eighties and runs a smallholding, and chops down trees, and drives tractors, and breeds horses. I told him that I was coming to Leiden, and he said, "well, go to number 3, Sterrenwachtlaan, and just tap the wall—because that's the house where I typed out 'Schalcken'." And I now found out that that's just a block or two from here. Well, if you know Edgar Allan Poe, "The Mystery of Marie Rogêt," he begins that story by speaking of "scarcely intelligible *coincidences*," and nothing more. I hope you enjoy the film!

[After the screening]:

MICHAEL NEWTON: The last thing we see when watching *Schalcken the Painter* is the word "*Omnibus*" – the name of a very resonant program for people of my generation, but much more so for you, of course, who worked for the BBC making programs for *Omnibus*. It's extraordinary to me that *Schalcken* was produced under the aegis of such a documentary series. How did that come about?

MEGAHEY: The BBC had done their Christmas ghost story films. The first of these was Jonathan Miller's fully-dramatized version of the

M. R. James story, “‘Oh, Whistle, and I’ll Come to You, My Lad’.” That was eleven years before *Schalcken*, and that was also done for *Omnibus*, which was indeed an arts and music documentary strand, always of one-off films, made by directors who were trying to push the boundaries of documentary making. *Whistle and I’ll Come to You* is certainly one of the great ghost stories on film. They remade it, a few years ago, with John Hurt, and they updated it, and jazzed it up. But the Jonathan Miller version is such a fantastic and simple story, with such a simple ghost. When you see the ghost, you know how it’s done, and yet it’s utterly, utterly chilling. So Jonathan started something off with that. I was there at the time, because I was making arts documentaries, biographies of artists like Goya and Rodin. But then ten or so years later, Paul Humfress and I had been talking (Paul had edited all my early films) about doing for an arts strand like *Omnibus* an arts documentary that goes wrong, a program that “goes bad,” as it were, and doesn’t fulfill the expectations of a biography but goes off into some weird world of its own, and keeps trying to pull you back into the biography, but then keeps subverting the rules of that form. We didn’t know how to do this, but we thought that it would be a wonderful thing to do.

Then it was Paul who found the Le Fanu story. He sat and typed it out, and sent it to me in London as a typescript. After that, I tried to get the BBC to do it in an arts slot, because I was working for the arts department. The first thing that happened was that my head of department liked the idea, and was quite open to the odd, experimental aspects of it. But he assumed that I had written it for a drama director to direct, because the script clearly looked like a drama. And so he suggested that the man who had done all the BBC Christmas ghost stories up to that point, who had just stopped the year before *Schalcken*, Lawrence Gordon Clark might be a good director for it. Whereas I had written it—although I didn’t say so to my head of department—for me to direct. So for a while it slightly fell by the wayside. And then, as luck would have it, I just happened to be appointed the series editor for *Omnibus*, a couple of years later. And so *Schalcken* was my present to myself, and I could now direct it, because now I was in charge!

So that’s how it came about and how it got done outside the aegis of a television drama department. The arts department was an incredibly adventurous department that had included people like Ken Russell and John Schlesinger—at one stage, John Boorman did films for it. Lawrence Gordon Clark had started doing his ghost stories entirely on his own, as director and often as writer and editor as well. Later on, when the BBC drama department realized that they had something good going here, they insisted on taking over the Christmas ghost stories. And I believe that Lawrence himself has

publicly said that as soon as he had a drama producer foisted upon him, some of the life, some of the pleasure, went out of the films. I had the great joy of being the producer on *Schalcken* as well as director and writer.

NEWTON: Were you a fan of Lawrence Gordon Clark's ghost-story films before you came to write *Schalcken*?

MEGAHEY: I was aware of them; I didn't watch them, so to speak, religiously, but I was a fan of them. I have DVDs of several of them and still look at them with pleasure. I didn't have quite the same concern with the Victorian or Edwardian aspect of the ghost story. A lot of *Schalcken* is shot by candlelight and so forth, but because it's imitating Dutch seventeenth-century painting, there's deliberately an incredible clarity in it. When it comes to films of Victorian ghost stories, I'm always expecting something to happen, because it's so dark, and there's a bit of red there, and it's shaky and flickery. So in a sense I'm not so surprised by whatever it is that turns up. My view was always that perhaps the most frightening ghost would be the one who appeared by daylight. That doesn't really happen in *Schalcken*, but I feel it has a touch of that with the domestic setting, and the ghost as someone that just dropped in and comes to dinner, someone with whom you can make an appointment.

NEWTON: Watching it again, I wondered is it a ghost story?

MEGAHEY: I don't know. I always assumed that he's Death personified, or the devil, or whatever. Someone wrote something about it that's very interesting. They said it could be death, or a ghost, but he could also simply be a very nasty husband. In a way when Rose comes back, she looks to me like a wife who's been badly abused, as opposed to someone who's been living with the undead. Directors do this thing when they say, "I didn't know what the film was about until I just saw that review." I think such a director is lucky, and the wonderful thing is when people find things in your work, because I don't think a director should be that conscious of what things actually mean, of what things "equal."

NEWTON: Clearly one thing that's present in *Schalcken*, as throughout your career, is your passion for painting. As a filmmaker, what is it about painting that attracts you?

MEGAHEY: I think what attracts me to painting in its potential for a ghost story is something rather different to what interests me in it as a documentary maker. In the latter case, apart from simply loving paintings, it's finding the visual source materials for it, finding the ways an artist discovers their subject. One of the things you get when you see great paintings is the traces of that discovery. Picasso said of Van Gogh, that when he saw how Van Gogh painted a group of potato-eaters, he remarked how absolutely wonderful it was to find a new subject: Van Gogh had found a subject in such an

everyday thing as peasants eating potatoes. I love the idea of putting together a film with images and words that engage with the kinds of sources that push a painter in a certain direction. I sometimes employ a narrative voice that gives plain facts, but I try to avoid having one that makes judgements or connections for you. Those are for you to make yourself.

With *Schalcken*, because it's such a cold story, I was fascinated by our voyeurism, by how we look at a painting, and how there's no way we can enter into that two-dimensional space. I was very intrigued by the fact of shooting a drama where if I were filming two of you here in the audience, I'd have a wide shot of you with the people behind, but if you start to engage in a conversation, automatically the filmmaker will construct shots from first your perspective, and then from yours, cross-cutting. And I thought since this is about a painting, and it's such a cold eye, so baleful an eye, for the whole of the first half of the film, when you're on a wide shot with several characters in it, and you cut in to focus on a single character, you cut in from the same angle. If they're in profile in the wide shot, rather than showing them full-face, then you stay in the same viewpoint as you cut in, so they remain in profile. That's unusual and ungrammatical in filmmaking. But it added to the feeling that the whole thing had, that you can look at this, but you can't get inside it. You stay looking *at* the thing. That seemed to me a style of shooting that was absolutely in keeping with the subject. Later on, as you see slightly more homely scenes, like the fake Vanderhausen, the chap who turns up and wants his daughter painted, that's almost the first time you have conventional cross-cutting, a deep two-shot.

NEWTON: With regard to the voyeurism, the film appeared only a few years after Laura Mulvey's celebrated essay on "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." Were her ideas on your mind in making *Schalcken*?

MEGAHEY: Well, no, because I read Laura Mulvey much later. Someone wrote recently that because it's a 1970s film, it had to shoehorn in a few female nudes. The thing that I take enormous pleasure in (and don't take this the wrong way) is that there's a shot of the actor who plays Lesbia, Val Penny, and that I think is the most overtly...I don't know..."glamorous" shot. And I always thought that this is such a glowing image, and she seems to me to be glowing with life and health, and then she's going to be turned into one of these rather chilly, Schalcken-factory, classical nudes. So I thought that was absolutely the right image. But otherwise, with Laura Mulvey, which I read a few years ago, I'm actually very interested in that idea of "the male gaze," at least I think she invented it, because, yes, I'm a male, and I gaze, in order to make these films. I've certainly done a few films that have featured the body. She does a rather honest job

on Godard, and on Godard's use of the female body, that showed an even-handedness in her approach.

NEWTON: When *Lesbia* is being washed and prepared to be painted, it reminded me somehow of the transformation scene in Hitchcock's *Vertigo*.

MEGAHEY: When *Schalcken* chooses the model from the group of women, one of those women is Cheryl Kennedy, who plays Rose. I put her in thinking this might be a clever idea if someone just happens to glimpse her and thinks "hang on a minute." But I don't think a single viewer has ever spotted her.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: Watching it, I was struck by how you don't slip us the heavy-handed cues that you find in a lot of contemporary horror films. What do you think about the pacing of *Schalcken*? Do we have a stricter short-hand structure now in Gothic films?

MEGAHEY: I think so. I have to confess that though I've just watched *Schalcken* again now, I don't normally sit in to watch the film. That's in part because having made it, I know what's going to happen. I think we pushed that idea of nothing apparently happening, but something brewing to its absolute limit. One of the people who has written about the film said that it begins with grueling real-time for about half an hour, and thereafter time speeds up, and it's almost vertiginous at certain moments. But that is an intention of the film. The aim was to show this pristine, neat Dutch interior, and to deal with it in a drama-documentary style, but just to worry people the whole time that something must be about to happen—you know, for God's sake, let something happen! And then when it does happen, apart from the low hum that comes in whenever Vanderhausen appears, but at no point is there ever a sudden stab of music to make you jump. It's all in that measured style, and even when the most terrible things happen—and in fact when the worst thing of all happens, at the end, when she gets onto the bed, the music plays as an ironical, little ditty, which I think makes it even worse, more frightening, and more terrible.

A classic thing now is that you tell the audience what is going to happen, you tell them what's happening while it's happening, and then you tell them what just happened. So you lead up, and the music builds, and then you get frenetic music when the horror comes, and then you have the downsweep afterward. I didn't want to use that at all. I wanted to use as little music as possible. A friend of mine said that the most frightening thing in *Schalcken* is when the heavy curtain swishes across the door, and you feel the heaviness of that curtain. It's those kind of details that I was after.

AUDIENCE QUESTION (FROM LAWRENCE JACKSON): Le Fanu's original story is so dense, so literary, what decisions did you make about visualizing such a tale?

MEGAHEY: Well, Lawrence, you've adapted quite a few works yourself, including "Schalcken" for radio, so you know how it is! I brought in the Le Fanu narrator, and I obviously added huge amounts of narration to it, but within that style. The narrator starts the story as though it were an art lecture, and I think he declares that some ancient relative actually owned the painting, and heard the story from the painter himself. So he turns it into an anecdote that kind of becomes a part of the art lecture. And in my version that becomes very much to do with the fact that it's television, and that you can see.

But there was something that I was most concerned about. I added all the brothel scenes—and those are based on me going to The Hague, to the Mauritshuis to look at paintings, and I'd already decided to have certain scenes in a brothel to be based on those Dutch paintings of men offering women money. And when I went to The Hague, to my surprise I found that Schalcken had actually made such paintings, the ones I'd described in the first draft of the script, and that he'd painted very much as I had set things out. And also in Dutch art of the time there are countless pictures that deal with a man, often a man in uniform, a military man, offering a young woman money. And you possibly know also that there was this extraordinary thing that happened to these works a hundred or so years after they were painted, which is that people started changing the titles to make them appear to be an innocent domestic scene. And you look at a painting by Gerard ter Borch, that's called "The Paternal Admonition," and it's a typical example of the genre, with a beautiful back-view of a young woman in fantastic robes, and the beautiful nape of her neck, and the hair up. And there's a man sitting while the woman is standing, and his finger is raised, and then there's an old woman sitting between them. And Goethe mentions this painting as a father telling his daughter how to behave. Well, it is now pretty much agreed by art historians, that originally it wasn't that at all, it was another of these pictures of a man presenting money for a young woman's honor, for her virginity. The old woman is the procuress. There are thousands of these paintings, and some are now presented as the return of a wandering son, or of a soldier back from the wars, and he's come back with his earnings. I don't know if when they were first painted it was coded, so that some people could feel they were in on it, or was it perfectly clear to everyone, and was it then some later puritanical reaction that made people seek to revise these works, changing them into domestic subjects. But it's interesting that they have that ambiguity, that you can read them both ways.

Later I did a platform event at the National Gallery in London with the keeper of Flemish art. Of all those paintings—and I've looked at hundreds of them—I only found one where the young

woman not only doesn't acknowledge the presence of the man, but is actively ignoring him, sternly sewing and not registering his advances. And it's by a woman painter!

So the brothel scenes were all added to Le Fanu's tale. The thing I wanted to do most was to keep Le Fanu's rhythms, so that even when I was writing something which might sound like a much more modern part of the lecture, that somehow those rhythms remain. Apart from the absolutely new bits there, there's still a significant amount of Le Fanu in it. That's why I call it an adaptation, even though I added a lot to it. Because there are direct quotes from the story in it. So, throughout it, even though I've brought in material of my own, I believe he's informed the rhythms of the speech—as does Charles Gray's voice, which similarly has that wonderful urbane worldly quality.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: Also regarding the adaptation, I notice how in *Schalcken* you show us how Schalcken himself transforms reality in his paintings, producing something quite unlike what he sees before him. How much was your film consciously about the remolding of real life to produce art?

MEGAHEY: I think a lot of it is intending to say—and does say at some point—that a lot of these mythological and fantastic subjects that Schalcken paints, that they were done for money, and it's just a production line, really. But, as I read it, the more personal paintings, the theme of the woman with the candle in particular, that there's some quality to them that seems entirely different. I rationalized that for the drama, by saying, "well, it is different," because they come out of this terrible experience Schalcken had. Well, he didn't have it in real life, but there is something very particular about those paintings.

For the rest, I think I'm selling the idea that he sold out. Yet there was a part of him that was still capable of art, and possibly there was a part of him that was still capable of love, though you don't see much evidence of it there, as the social *mores* worked against that. Because he had no money, and therefore couldn't keep her, she was the property of Gerrit Dou. The film is meant to say that everything is for sale, and if you subscribe to that belief, then you actually lose everything. And for me, there are only two living creatures in the film really, one is Cheryl Kennedy who plays Rose, and the other is the model, Lesbia. Lesbia asks some questions that are not at all daft, but are perfectly sensible questions. She's meant to be Mary Magdalene, and then she wonders why she has one breast bare. And then she wonders who Ceres is, as she's in another erotic pose. It seems to me the two women are the living creatures. And the poor cat, of course!

By the way to set the viewer's mind at rest, that cat in the film was perfectly cool and happy! The scene where the cat is mishandled

is based on another Dutch painting of students playing with—or rather perhaps torturing—a cat.

AUDIENCE QUESTION (FROM LENNEKE MAAN): During the film I was wondering if Vanderhausen was in some sense Schalcken's own ghost, a double for him? That's, in part, because I thought the actors rather resembled each other. Was this just my fancy, or was this something you intended?

MEGAHEY: I think that's a completely wonderful idea! It wasn't my intention at all, but it is a fantastic idea. Because Schalcken is indeed selling himself into death, a creative death. But those roles weren't cast because of any supposed physical resemblance. Jeremy Clyde as Schalcken was chosen in part because he does rather look like Schalcken, and John Justin, who plays Vanderhausen, was cast because he was a one-time *matinée* idol and had such a powerful face. I worked with John on radio long before that, and I really got on with him.

I've learnt much more about my film, and about the whole business of selling out, or selling your soul, or whatever, from what other people have said about it. You put things in unconsciously or subconsciously, but you don't ever when you're writing a script think, "well this has to demonstrate this metaphysical idea or this philosophical notion or this social intention, or whatever." You just don't do that. You write a story, and the rest of it is your instinct. And also it's informed by the research you've done, and the paintings you've seen.

NEWTON: As you say, John Justin was a very handsome young man, and a big British star, appearing most famously in *The Thief of Baghdad* (1940). I know this is a bit silly to remark upon, but it's central to *Schalcken* that he should appear to be repulsively ugly. What did Justin make of that?

MEGAHEY: Oh, he was great! That performance, well, he just turned up with it. If you think about it, it's not clear how Death should speak. I wrote a screenplay for an American version of *Faust*. We updated the story, and my instinct there was to make Mephistopheles fantastically articulate and suave, and smart and funny. Not the most original Mephistopheles in the world, it is true! But with Vanderhausen, I was really worried until the first day we shot with John about all these small things, such as how does Death—or the Devil—or your double—how does he speak? And when John turned up, and we were to begin rehearsing on set, he said, "I've got this voice!" And he did it, and it was immediately absolutely the voice. That voice sounds like John, but it sounds like John having gone through some dreadful trauma.

NEWTON: Was the voice done in post-production?

MEGAHEY: No, apart from Charles Gray's voiceover, there was no post-synching at all. So, John turned up with the voice, he turned

up with that stance, that stiffness, and he just worked it out from the very beginning. The only problem I had with John was that he kept mistaking his own character's name, Vanderhausen, with Cheryl Kennedy's name, Rose Velderkaust.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: I was struck by the repetition of the phrase, "You will not pledge yourself unnecessarily," that Vanderhausen says to Dou. Was that in Le Fanu's story, or was it something that you added?

MEGAHEY: In Le Fanu, I think it's in once. In that moment, he seems to read Gerrit Dou's mind, that's all Le Fanu. The next times, I put it in—it's spoken in the brothel, and when the other visitor comes for a painter, and neither of those scenes are in the Le Fanu text. I wanted that line to be the tolling of three bells.

What strikes me in looking at some of the Dutch paintings that inspired my film is that sometimes when you look at them there's nothing there. There's a painting by Samuel van Hoogstraten in the Louvre, called "View of an Interior," or sometimes "The Slippers." And it looks as though it's a picture of a pair of slippers on the floor (we referenced them in *Schalcken*), and it's just an empty room, and then another empty room beyond. There is no one there, but there's a bunch of keys in the door. And you look at it, and you see there's a painting beyond, in the farther room. And that painting is of a beautiful woman, seen from behind, in a beautiful gown, her hair up so you can see the nape of her neck. And it's the painting I was talking about earlier, the Gerard ter Borch painting that ended up being renamed as "The Paternal Admonition." Hoogstraten, who presumably was a friend of ter Borch, and who certainly knew him, has painted this totally empty interior, but he's placed in it another man's painting on the wall. It's an interior, and it's beautifully painted, and yet there's nothing there. I tried to capture that feeling of nothing happening, and yet the eye is drawn by those details—by the keys, by the slippers, by the painting on the wall beyond. And something is going to happen, I'm not sure what. I wanted that wonderful freezing of action—and that emptiness.