

THE DISTURBED WEB.

adapted by Niall Leonard

Draft II

Ten minute puppet animation by J . Ashworth. NF&TS 1983.

## THE DISTURBED WEB

A STORMY NIGHT. Wind and rain lashes a castle wall, as we close in on a gargoye. We hear a voiceover:

Here is no love, just mindless slavery;  
H'ere is no passion, but joy in treachery;  
Here, webbed in despair, trapped within the past,  
Spawned in the depths of madness, lies GORMENGHAST.

The gargoye is a beautifully carved skull, winged like the corpse of a cherub, and lovingly crowned with thorns. Rainwater dribbles through its nose and teeth down to its chin. We close tighter and tighter, onto its left eye; in a flash of lightning we find a fat black spider sheltering there, burping obscenely like a bullfrog. It flinches and scrabbles further into the darkness, and we follow it as it scrambles down a long narrow passage to emerge in Gormenghast.

Shots of Gormenghast, a decaying Gothic citadel: its hollow corridors, its musty attics, its desolate courtyards and blighted gardens, in the night and the rain. In every nook and cranny spiders skitter and flit, from shadow to shadow; one spins in the high arch of a mullioned window, and as the moon glints off the thread, we hear a long eerie shriek in the distance, as of a nightbird, or a human being in anguish.

A SPIDER emerges from another gargoye's nose, inside a huge and grubby kitchen.

SEQUENCE ONE: NIGHT INT KITCHEN.

The spider swings down from the garoyle on a long thread and runs across a chopping board; a huge cleaver comes down and splits it in two. We hear stertorous, repulsive breathing as a fat hand picks up the wiggling halves and flings them into a bowl.

The hand is SWELTER's. Huge, fat and greasy, dressed as a chef, but in filthy garments that burst off his bulging flesh, swings a mighty cleaver as if the effort is almost too much for him, but he relishes the power of it. His eyes are burnign with delight, his fat jowls quivering, as he pulls a squawking <sup>TURKEY</sup> ~~rooster~~ from a nearby basket and with one swipe of his cleaver, beheads it on the board. He throws the head into the bowl with the twitching spider and lets the body dance to the floor, where more headless <sup>TURKEYS</sup> ~~roosters~~ dither and flap.

Swelter takes the bowl up to a large cauldron and flings in the contents. He takes up a metal spoon and stirs it up; when he pulls the spoon out again the bowl has shrivelled away. Swelter stares at it; then he starts to laugh; his whole body wobbles with great snorts of laughter, and he wipes the dribble from his lips with the back of his snotty sleeve. Suddenly he freezes, and looks to the doorway of the kitchen, through which we glimpse stairs ascending into the darkness. From the stairwell comes a steady sound: Click-tink-click; click-tink-click; like knuckles cracking, or dry twigs, with a strange metallic clink between each click.

Moving quickly, Swelter snatches a squat, ridged bottle from a shelf; he pulls out the stopper and dips the bottle in the cauldron. The click+ tink-click is growing louder, we can now hear the shuffle of feet. Swelter tries to hide the bottle under his clothes, but there's no loose space. Frenziedly he shoves it under his hat, and whirls to the doorway to see emerge FLAY.

FLAY: Immensely tall, thin, and bony, dressed as a butler, save for the sword at his side, so long it trails along the floor. His shoulders are stooped, his manner mean, jealous, and mindlessly cunning. He stands in the doorway blocking access to the stairwell and watches Swelter with suspicion bordering on hatred.

Swelter seems eager to please; he snatches up a tray laid out nearby with a bowl of gruel, a flagon of wine, and a bunch of grapes. He waddles up to Flay as if expecting him to step aside. Quicker than we can see Flay has whipped out his sword, and the tip now hangs poised at where Swelter's Adam's apple would be were it not buried under cascading folds of fat.

Flay picks a grape from the tray; chews it thoughtfully; spits it out at <sup>the escape</sup> a spider ~~sitting on a gargoyle over the saucepan rack (which scrambles for cover.)~~ Swelter wobbles and scrapes sycophantically. Flay scrapes a long finger through the gruel and pops it into his mouth; salivates awhile and ponders. Then he pours a taste of the flagon and drinks it. He nods and steps aside. Swelter, bowing and scraping, precedes him up the stairs. *a spider watches their progression from above*

SET ① SEQUENCE TWO: Stairway and corridor

Swelter and Flay ascend long, shadowed corridors. Rats' eyes glint from the darkness; tapestries trail rotting on the walls like festering ivy. Swelter halts before a huge oak

door; he is about to barge in when Flay pushes him aside and knocks quietly, almost reverently on the door. Silence. Flay turns the handle and pushes the door open.

SEQUENCE THREE: The Earl's bedroom.

A madman's pale, pinched face screams in out faces: the two at the door flinch back, but Flay, gathering his wits, barges in.

A regal bedroom lies in ruins. Tables, books, statues lie scattered and smashed, portraits are ripped, tapestries hang in shreds like they'd been clawed by a cat, and among it all, screeching, flits the EARL, small and thin like a sickly nun, dressed in a flapping nightshirt. His eyes bulge hugely from his head, at the sight of a large hairy spider stalking him around the bedroom. As flay approaches, the Earl flits up to the torn velvet canopy above the four poster bed. Flay runs the spider through with relish, and lifts it squirming on his sword to drop it out the window. The Earls shrieking subsides to coos and nervous twitches. His wide eyes are no longer insane with fear but nervous and tired and infinitely sad.

Swleter's face is cunning and evil as he watches Flay coax the Earl down from the canopy where he is perched, cooing and twitching. He raises the tray and approaches the bed, as Flay sits the Earl on feather pillows, and arranges the tatty golden blankets around his lap. Hearing Swelter so close behind Flay turns suddenly. Swelter flinches and looks servile; Flay glowers; he takes up the tray and starts to feed the Earl. His actions do not speak of love but of dogged mindless loyalty. Swelter watches. His face is twisted in simple hatred.

Gruel dribbles on the Earl's chin. Flay reaches froward with the napkin to wipe it, adn Swelter nimbly pops from under his hat the squat ridged bottle, and sprinkles a pinch in the flagon. To his horror, the flagon foams up and seems to bo il; Flay turns from the Earl but just misses seeing the wine subside.



Swelter chews his fat lip and sweats. The Earl is growing tetchy, he dribbles and he spits. Flay pours out a goblet and proffers it. The Earl shakes his head. Flay insists, but the Earl knocks it from his hand. The wine spills on the bedspread and burns like acid. The Earls shrieks again. Flay stares in horror and whirls on Swelter, who backs off, spitting and cursing. Flay kicks the tray aside and whips out his sword. The Earl shrieks and whimpers. Swelter backs towards the doorway, Flay lunges, but Sweleter stumbles on a piece of broken statue, and tumbling, scrambles obscenely for his life to the doorway and down the stairs. Flay races after him, but he has gone; all that comes from the dark is a long hoot of gurgling, gargling laughter.

SEQUENCE FOUR: the Earl's bedroom, later.

The Earl lies asleep, quite still, but with <sup>one</sup> eye wide open. Flay wipes the corners of the Earl's mouth, and tidies up his bed. He has already tidied up the room as best he can. He pulls his sword from its sheath, and polishes it; whips it through the air; kisses it and resheathes it. He goes to the door, opens it, and poised on the threshold listens. We can hear, far away, the sound of metal being sharpened. He steps out and down into the darkness

SEQUENCE FIVE: CORRIDORS AND PARAPET OUTSIDE SCULLERY WINDOW. *suddenly he is outside*  
*Set D I* Flay follows the noises through corridors and courtyards; he sees the windows of a kitchen storeroom, and creeps up on the parapet that runs along outside the windows. Through the windows he can see a room hung with knives and cleavers and steels and sieves and crushers and stoners, etc etc, but the largest nastiest cleaver is the one Swelter sits sharpening on the grindstone at the centre of the room, gurgling while he grinds, Flay cranes his neck as he watches Swelter get up and waddle to the main kitchen, where stands, with a broom for a sword, an unmistakable effigy of himself, in butler's uniform, but with a pig's head. Swelter lolls and insinuated and shambles up to

it from behind, silent but for his gargly breathing, and with one massive yet speed y movement cleaves the effigy so that it falls like the two halves of an apple.

Flay flinches, and scrambles along the parapet outside the the window, but no longer hidden by the sound of the grindstone the clicking of his knees betrays him, and looking up, Swelter sees him at the window. Swelter screams imprecations and flings saucepans at the fleeing figure as he flicks past each window. Swelter rolls his eyes and ponders; then going to a table he pulls a sheet from a heap of bread dough.

#### SEQUENCE SIX: THE EARL'S BEDROOM.

The Earl in bed is growing restless; he keeps craning his bony neck to glimpse the moon through the shutters as if afraid of it. Flay soothes his brow as he whimpers, but in vain. The rain beats down and thunder rumbles distantly.

Flay rises from the bedside and goes to a linen cupboard; he takes out a long white sheet and starts to tear it into strips and bind his knees. As he finishes the job he hears the sound of muttering on the stairs. He tests his leggings; the cracking of his knees is almost completely muffled. He creeps to an arras and hides behind it, and hears the door creak open, and the gurgling breath of Swelter. Then silence. Flay pulls aside the arras. Standing at the foot of the bed is the fat white shape. Striding forward Flay runs it thorough between the shoulderblades.

Nothing. Flay is horrified. The figure starts to fall, he tries to retrieve his sword, but it is stuck, the figure falls over backwards, it's an effigy of Swelter made of dough. The door burst open and Swelter comes barrelling in. cleaver held high. Flay rolls aside; the clever slices the dough and frees his sword. Flay bolts for the door: Swelter, gasping, heaves the cleaver free. He looks from the door to the Earl to the door, as if deciding which it is he hates the more. Finally he approaches the door slowly, ~~pulls a lantern from the wall and~~ goes out.

The Earl blinks twice.

SEQUENCE SEVEN: CORRIDORS AND STAIRS

The thunder grows louder. Swelter, ~~bathed in the light of his lantern~~, nervously descends the stairs to the first level, a long corridor lined with suits of armour and hunting trophies. He is wary. Suddenly a lightning flash throws Flay's face into relief as he lunges forward. Swelter staggers and drops the lantern. the two men lose each other in the darkness.

Suddenly a thin, pale shape appears in the doorway. It is the Earl, moving in a trance, his steps imperceptible, as though he were floating. He carries a lamp that lights the two men.

As he passes Flay steps behind him and starts walking backwards; Swelter follows, cleaver held high; they drift, stride, and tiptoe forwards in strange procession. Flay stumbles, Swelter lunges. The Earl floats on oblivious as the two men dodge and parry and swipe at each other around him. Suddenly the Earl disappears up a narrow passage, and the light of his lamp vanishes. With a yell Swelter lunges forward but his only reward is sparks from stone.

SEQUENCE EIGHT: THE HALL OF SPIDERS

Flay ducks for an ancient doorway. The door is marked "Hall of Spiders", but lies open, rotten and collapsed, and strung with cobwebs. Flay plunges into a solid wall of cobwebs that festoons a junk-strewn hall with a sloping roof and tall mullioned windows. Light flickers feebly from candles up above, and every so often the room is lit by lightning flashes and rocked by thunder.

In one flash of lightning we see sitting up in the rafters one huge hairy puscoloured grandmother of all spiders. She crouches farting in the darkness; her glistening, evil eyes sullenly watch the two adversaries stalk each other through the room.

Sex ①

Swelter waddles in, cocky but cautious. At first he sweeps aside the cobwebs with his cleaver and pauses to wipe the blade; but as Flay watches, he lifts cleaver and starts to make his way forward across the junk that litters the room.

Cobwebs gather on his grinning, obese face like a caul. The two men, festooned with filthy gossamer, stalk each other, among stacks of ancient books eaten away by spiders' eggs, strange astrological devices hung with webs and the shedded shells of spiders long dead. Flay, unknowing, backs into the arms of a suit of armour... with a yell Swelter lunges and swipes off the helmet, and spiders burst forth and spill down the greaves like a cascade of granular blood. Flay flings himself against the keyboard of a clavichord and in the jangle of broken strings spiders flood out in notes, chords and long stringy arpeggios. Silence. The two men continue the stalk, through racks and heaps of broken toys. They pause, crouched; Flay has crouched over on end of a seesaw, the other end tilts up to Swelter's face. Swelter leers, and with one slam of his pudgy fist, levers the plank and slams Flay on the point of his bony chin. Flay staggers back and collapses, groggy on the floor.

Swelter gurgles with delight. He raises his cleaver ceremoniously and takes aim; Flay blinks, twitches, and horrified, throws an arm against a jack-in-the-box. With a scream a rotted doll leaps out and a spider slaps through the air onto Swelter's face, and scrambles about, trying to get up his nose.

Swelter splutters and sneezes; Flay staggers to his feet and swipes with his sword. Swelter screams and clutches the side of his head. A fat ear swings in the hammock of a web nearby; several baby spiders run down to taste it.



Swelter goes berserk. He advances on Flay as if demented, swinging his cleaver from side to side in mighty swipes that leave Flay no alternative but to cower and be backed inexorably into a corner... the blade grows closer and closer as Swelter makes one last mighty swipe that smashes against the wall, masonry collapses, Swelter blinks away the dust, opens his eyes to start backing in horror from the mortally wounded Flay whose sword now hovers at Swelter's solar plexus. Flay staggers forward and at last catches up with Swelter, plunging the sword in deep.

Swelter shrieks and falls backwards into a long trunk like a coffin. Spiders boil and erupt over the mountain of his heaving flesh. Flay falls to his knees clutching his chest trying to staunch the flow of blood. As he falters the door bursts open. Light floods the room, and the Earl, shrieking, floats down the hall toward them, eyes growing wider and wider, face more gaunt, as he seems to metamorphose into an owl, only to be trapped in a huge web, and gibbering and shrieking, be caught up in its glue, as with awful, measured tread, the huge granny spider clambers down from the rafters towards him, venom glistening in its awful jaws, and wraps the Earl in her cold embrace.

messages sent by vibrations along the threads of  
one web up to the Granny spider. She is waiting  
hopefully for her meal. She spins webs to trap  
Flay & Swelter (orders other webs to be built) but fail  
to capture her dinner until the metamorphosing  
Earl takes to his wings and his life is cut short.