“Shadow-Selves”:
Facing Femininities Through Gothic Horror Films of the 1960s

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Abstract:

Feminist criticism of the horror genre has largely focused upon the ways the female victims and monsters of such films embody specifically masculine fears and desires. This thesis will take issue with the complete gendering of this genre and explore several Gothic horror films that exploit problematic aspects of femininity to create fear in an audience versed in its ideals, practices and pitfalls. Examining three horror films in relation to contemporary norms of femininity, feminist historians' and philosophers' work on female experience and theories of horror and spectatorship, I will argue that these films actually illuminate important issues in feminist criticism. Most centrally, by staging, attempting to elicit, or violently disrupting the internalization of discourses of femininity, these films shed light upon women's tangled relation to femininity as both an exterior image and as embodied, internalized part of self. In this respect, these films foster a critical self-awareness insofar as they elucidate oppressions that exist both without and within.

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“Shadow-Selves”:
Feminist Film Critics Watch the Horror Film

“Our identities can no more be kept separate from the appearance of our bodies than they can be kept separate from the shadow-selves of the female stereotype.”

Sandra Lee Bartky, *Femininity and Domination:
Studies in the Phenomenology of Oppression*

The history of the contemporary horror film is widely accepted as having begun in 1960 when audiences were jolted by the furious editing, screeching soundtrack and glimpses of female flesh that signaled the death of their heroine and the birth of the psycho-killer. Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960) has since been credited, and often blamed, for shifting both the terrain upon which cinematic horrors play out and the nature of the genre's monsters. Norman Bates is now recognized as the forefather to the slasher who terrorized his mostly female victims throughout the 1970s and 1980s and, in a corresponding lineage, inspired a formidable body of feminist film criticism of the genre. Linda Williams' condemnation of *Psycho* and its progeny as “male horror fantasy in drag”¹, though meant to expose the fundamental absence of the female horror heroine and viewer in the face of her very presence, invokes another figure from that film, another space in its geography and a tradition that insists upon women as active producers and consumers of tales of terror. Mrs. Bates, the mad “woman” confined to her decaying manor, exists within and fostered “a startling resurgence of Gothic horror”² in the 1950s and 1960s. The popularity of the Gothic with female readers and cinema-goers,³ its distinctly “Female” literary form and its concern with the traditionally feminized domestic sphere make these Gothic horror films a rich resource for re-visiting the

feminist denunciation of the whole of the genre and for exploring the ways in which horror films have attempted to elicit women's fears.

This thesis will examine three films that emerged among a strain of films in the 1960s that employ and re-work the old Gothic equation of "maiden-plus-habitation."⁴ Robert Wise's *The Haunting* (1963), Roman Polanski's *Repulsion* (1965) and Robert Aldrich's *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?* (1962) will be the central texts in this investigation of the ways in which the horror cinema of the period exploited problematic aspects of femininity to create fear and, in the process, an awareness of the limits, failures and flaws of this gendered, classed and raced ideal.⁵ These films are unquestioningly indebted to *Psycho* in their focus on violence within the family and their fascination with the pathology of their protagonists. They also, however, offer a challenge to the centrality of Hitchcock's film in contemporary studies of the horror genre. Mark Jancovich observes that "[d]uring the 1960s and early 1970s [...] *Repulsion*" was acknowledged as a "central moment[] in the history of horror."⁶ Steven Jay Schneider reminds us of *The Haunting*'s reputation among "a great many scholars, aficionados, and casual fans of the genre [...] as] one of the scariest movies of all time- if not *the* scariest."⁷ And *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?* is a rare horror film featuring an Oscar-nominated performance from an actress: Bette Davis, as well as its own decidedly different take on the Mrs. Bates character. This project will then consider a group of films that, though profitable and popular at the time, have since fallen out of critical favor and have largely escaped the attention of scholars concerned with the gender politics of the genre.

This intervention into the history of horror cinema will act as the foundation for the

larger overarching goal of this thesis: to challenge feminist criticism of the genre that avoids explicitly addressing a potential relationship between women and horrific images of their like. The dismissal of the horror genre as irretrievably “patriarchal” has created a gap between theory and practice, between feminists who study horror films and the women who watch them. It is the goal of this project to begin to fill this gap by examining several horror films that feature female heroines, employ various strategies to address female viewers and take contemporary issues of femininity, issues that intersect with feminist theorists’ and historians’ own work on women’s experience, as their material for terror. Specifically, I wish to argue that these Gothic films exploit women’s assumed relationship to the image to infuse these ways of looking, ways through which femininity as image is translated to femininity as practice, with fear and horror. The very processes through which femininity as an image ideal is reproduced - the accumulation of possessions, beauty practices, the emulation of the star - and the spaces upon which it is inscribed - the female mind and body - are made both the subject and the target of these films’ affective techniques.

While this proposal may not be entirely groundbreaking, feminist film theorists have built a veritable chamber of horrors from cinema’s terrorization of fictional and real females, I will argue that these horror films open a critical space beyond and because of the fear they hope to inspire. This union of a terrified engagement and a critical distance, so often attributed to the poles of the feminine and the feminist, foregrounds the ambiguity that has historically characterized women’s Gothic writing, women’s relationship to cinematic images, to other women and to themselves, and even feminism

itself in its various incarnations. Taking the fears inspired by horror films seriously, I will finally argue, is one way in which individuals may recognize this ambiguity and identify their own implication in the oppression of themselves and others. This proposal opens up horror spectatorship for a wide range of viewers marked by multiple and intersecting differences; differences that may include the feminine, the female and the feminist within one horror fan.

It is my intention then for these arguments to both fill a gap that exists within feminist, psychoanalytically oriented film criticism of the horror film and to shift the ground upon which these films have traditionally been evaluated. This first issue may be succinctly summarized by stating that, according the vast majority of feminist film criticism, horror cinema exists only for white, middle-class men. This assumption is embedded in such claims as, “it is women’s sexuality... which constitutes the *real* problem that the horror film seeks to explore”⁸ or that contemporary horror reflects “the crisis experienced by American bourgeois patriarchy since the late 1960s.”⁹ Despite these conclusions, which assume horror is a unified genre with a unified audience, feminist work on the horror film has sometimes alluded to and begun to shape a theory of how such films try to elicit fears coded as female. I wish to draw out these tentative and “secondary” proposals here to form, in compliment with other feminist work, the basis of my own analysis and to also discuss why such propositions are ultimately silenced by the theorists who begin to articulate them.

Mary Ann Doane’s *The Desire to Desire* identifies itself as a study of the woman’s film, however, she does discuss a sub-genre, “the paranoid woman’s film”, which

“exhibits a special kinship [...] with the genre of the horror film”¹⁰ and with the Female Gothic literary tradition. In her analysis of films such as *Rebecca* (1940) *Jane Eyre* (1944), *Gaslight* (1944), *The Spiral Staircase* (1946) and *Caught* (1949), Doane rigorously identifies the iconography of the Female Gothic transplanted to film and thus seems to make a case for a kind of “woman’s” horror film. She ultimately asserts though, “in their articulation of the uncanniness of the domestic [...] the gothic films reside within the “genre” of the woman’s film.”¹¹ Her work here does, however, admit a relationship between the production and marketing of films which exploit violence on a domestic terrain and a specifically female audience.¹² Doane, despite her obvious familiarity with the Female Gothic, a literature written by women and characterized by “self-disgust, [...] self-hatred, and the impetus to self-destruction,”¹³ nevertheless has difficulty conceiving of a relationship between actual women and these violent images. She wonders, “How can the notion of female fantasy be compatible with that of persecution, illness and death?”¹⁴

This is a question of central importance in this thesis’ discussion of horror’s address to a female audience. It is also a question that haunts much feminist work on the horror film, though it is often avoided in favour of an examination of male fears. Linda Williams’ essay, “When the Woman Looks,” exemplifies this critical tactic. Williams convincingly argues that women’s cultural construction as monstrous puts them in a dual position vis-à-vis the monster of classic horror. The heroine’s gaze at the monster is one of simultaneous terror at the threat posed to her body, and recognition of their mutual status as Other. The monster, Williams proposes, is another “one of the many mirrors held up to

[women] by patriarchy,”¹⁵ but, rather than exploring the ways this identification speaks to women’s fears of their bodies, the violence they are capable of or the internalization of patriarchal norms, Williams concludes that the gaze between the woman and the monster is finally “a recognition of their similar status as potential threats to a vulnerable male power.”¹⁶ Despite creating a space in which the articulation of a specifically feminine/female fear begins to take shape, ultimately, the horror heroine and her counterpart in the audience exist only as “horror objects”¹⁷ in this scenario where male fear and power are what is truly at stake.

In “Horror and the Monstrous-Feminine,” Barbara Creed shifts the traditional ground of study by examining not the female victim of the horror film, but the “woman-as-monster.” Employing Julia Kristeva’s theory of the abject, Creed interrogates the nature of the monstrous-feminine and, while her essay differs from Williams’ in many respects, the narrative trajectory it plots is uncanny in its similarity. The theoretical framework employed is complex but, to abbreviate, Creed argues that the presence of the abject in horror films evokes the threat of a return to the maternal body and thus, the death of consolidated identity. This fear is ritualistically exorcised through the destruction of the mother/monster at the horror film’s conclusion. While Kristeva herself does not distinguish between the male and female child’s experience of the maternal, Creed briefly addresses the conflicted position of the female within this process; for she is both a part of the abject female body and of the culture that deems it horrific. She abandons any further inquiry into this double position, however, by insisting that the horror film speaks exclusively to and for the male. She concludes her essay by stating, “The feminine is not

a monstrous sign per se; rather, it is constructed as such within a patriarchal discourse that reveals a great deal about male desires but tells us nothing about female desire in relation to the horrific.”¹⁸

A curious pattern unites these essays: they begin to articulate a space in which women’s relationship to the horror film can begin to be understood only to insist that the genre does not address women at all and is profoundly unconcerned with them as anything other than symbols of male fear. The divided space that Williams and Creed claim as the woman’s, caught between identification and terror, is left unexplored and is finally lost in the movement to deny the horrors of such a position at all. These and all instances of interpretation, writes Tania Modleski, are necessarily based upon exclusion and are “crucially bound up with power.”¹⁹ The power of Williams’ and Creed’s texts, I suggest, is their articulation of the uses to which patriarchy can put horror cinema and the way these films exploit fears coded as male. What is excluded is a consideration of the range of possible identifications these and other horror films open up and, more importantly for these feminist critics, the ways in which a horror film might attempt to engage with discourses coded as female and exploit the double-position of the woman to elicit her fear. For, in denying that the horror film is about women or can speak to her, these critics do not change the fact that women are a part of the culture which produces horror films, are exposed to them and, in some cases, are themselves horror fans.

These theoretical texts’ preoccupation with masculinity and its psychic processes stems largely from their roots in psychoanalytic film theory which genders narrative, the apparatus and the spectator male. While there is not the space here to explore the

complexities of this approach, it is clear that, as Sue Thornham writes, “the feminists who must wield the ‘radical weapon’ of psychoanalytic theory seem to have made their politics not [...] from a split subjectivity but from a point of total absence.”²⁰ Thus images of femininity, though proven to “have a concrete existence and determining effect on social reality,”²¹ are imagined to function only for the male, and the issue of women’s potential relation to these images is buried. Doane, whose work on the “paranoid woman’s film” is also psychoanalytic in nature but whose very subject matter is labeled “woman’s”, is confronted by this problem in acute form. She addresses it when she writes, “[t]here is an extremely strong temptation to find in these films a viable alternative to the unrelenting objectification and oppression of the figure of the woman in the Hollywood cinema,” but goes on to insist they do not “provide us with an access to a pure and authentic female subjectivity.”²² Again, the notion of a “split subjectivity,” that position which emerges over and over again as the woman’s, is avoided and Doane searches instead for a heroine untouched by the patriarchal context in which she is immersed. In this respect, Doane absents herself as a feminist and avoids her own “inexorable embeddedness in history,”²³ as well as urging her readers, whether female or feminist, to do the same. Psychoanalytic film theory, structured around the male psyche, aides the theoretical invisibility of the female spectator, most especially where it might be a desired absence, such as in a problematic genre like horror, as well abetting the invisibility of the feminist theorist, herself a female spectator, in her own theories.

Vivian Sobchack addresses this very issue in her 1999 essay, “Revenge of *The Leech Woman*,” when she claims, “I am surrounded by the intellectual discourse on horror, a

discourse that is thoughtful but never quite gets to a description of my experiences.”²⁴

Sobchack, herself a feminist critic, links this failure to the horror film’s categorization as a “misogynist scenario elaborated within a patriarchal and heterosexual social formation and based on the male fear of female sexuality.”²⁵ To this “truism”, she admits: “this scary woman scares not only men but also me- though I am ashamed to admit it.”²⁶ Here, Sobchack intervenes in feminist theoretical propositions with what she terms a “quasi-autobiographical confession”²⁷ but which is more generally called personal criticism. Personal criticism is practiced by many feminist critics eager to disrupt traditional claims of objectivity and to “examine [their] relationship to the object of study.”²⁸ In her essay, Sobchack’s union of film analysis and her personal responses are used “to point to the doubled nature”²⁹ of both the representations in question and the phenomenological response they engender. Her work thus develops the unspoken or under-emphasized of other feminist criticism of the horror film and explicitly addresses the issue of “split subjectivity” by making her own divisions visible, by inserting her “split” self into her analysis.

The “doubled nature” of Sobchack’s response is created from her own position within her middle-aged woman’s body and her culturally ingrained fear of aging which is embodied by the woman on screen. She writes of her encounter with this woman:

The image? It’s me and yet her, an Other - and, as her subjective object of a face has aged, the blusher I’ve worn every morning since I was a teenager has migrated and condensed itself into two distinct and ridiculous red circles in the middle of her cheeks. This image- which correspondingly brings a subjective flush of shame and humiliation to my cheeks for the pity and unwilling horror and contempt with which I objectively regard as hers - is that of an aging woman.³⁰

Sobchack's experience, though specific to herself and her response to these horror films, builds here upon the more theoretical work of Creed and Williams who began to explore the ways in which women's cultural conditioning, their internalization of patriarchal notions of themselves as abject or monstrous, put them in a dual position vis-à-vis horrific images of their like. It is the horror film, a space in which these images and the shame and fury that they inspire are given free reign, which exploits, draws out and makes tangible these conflicted feelings about self. Although these images may be a product of a "patriarchal and heterosexual social formation," Sobchack's work reveals that they nevertheless "speak to"³¹ female viewers, themselves a constellation of multiple and intersecting differences that may only be visible in a genre like horror.³²

Sobchack's autobiographical essay thus uses the personal to insist upon the presence of the female spectator in a theoretical discourse that would deny her. It is her extraordinarily honest response to an image which inspires both fear and identification, which will thus provide the basis of this thesis' more theoretical investigation of horror's strategies for eliciting fear from the female spectator and for the implications of this fear in the context of feminist film theory. For Sobchack herself places her personal response in the context of textual analysis, the phenomenology of aging and the historical contexts in which the films emerged and in which she herself exists. My own analysis of *The Haunting*, *Repulsion* and *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?* will follow the same pattern, exploring each film in relation to contemporary norms of femininity, feminist film theory's work on female spectatorship, feminist historians' and philosophers' work on female experience, and theories of Gothic horror. This analysis will, however, be

employed toward the goal of understanding how a particular horror film attempts to engage a “self” through its own culturally instilled divisions and fears and to ask, to what end can this exchange be put?

I will focus in particular on horrific representations of femininity, how they attempt to appeal to the female spectator, how they intersect with female experience, and how this process problematizes, disrupts and illuminates the relationship between the woman and the image. While I have thus far attempted to open a space in which to begin to explore horror’s representation of femininity to a female audience, the relationship between cinematic images of femininity and the female spectator is itself a complex issue and is riddled with theoretical pitfalls. In the space remaining, I would like to address this relationship and to clarify the way in which these terms will be used. I will also address the issue of the “progressive” or “regressive” film in relation to feminist film criticism and to the horror genre in order to both move away from and to re-locate my work within the field of feminist criticism.

Feminine, female, feminist: the three are often divided in the geography of the cinema. The term femininity is employed, for the most part, to refer to those “false images” created by men for women on the screen. The female, on the other hand, is the film spectator, the historical subject “en-gendered across multiple representations of class, race, language and social relations.”³³ Within the politically oriented field of feminist film criticism, it has been a goal to separate the two as much as possible. Laura Mulvey’s call to reject pleasure in the image and to “free the look”³⁴ and Mary Ann Doane’s characterization of the image as “lure and trap”³⁵ and incitement to “*look*

*elsewhere*³⁶ exemplify such a tendency and point to yet another split: between the female and the feminist. The feminist critic may also be a spectator but she is an enlightened one, immune to the cinema's tricks and standing at a distance from the woman "in spectatorial ecstasy, enraptured by the image."³⁷

In theory, these divisions foster a feminist political project: feminist film theorists expose the patriarchal function of images of femininity to free women from their oppressive effects. In practice, such divisions are not so clear-cut and are rife with contradictions. Dorothy E. Smith, for instance, insists,

We must not begin by conceiving of women as manipulated by mass media or subject passively to male power, but recognize when we speak of 'femininity' that we are talking about how women's skills and work enter actively into textually-mediated relations which they do not organize or produce.³⁸

Images of femininity and actual woman are not so easily separated here and femininity becomes instead "a complex of *actual* relations vested in texts."³⁹ This overlap between the image of the woman and the woman, whether an oppressive relation or otherwise, is thus a fundamental part of a specifically female subjectivity. Christine Gledhill elaborates upon this point in relation to the practice of feminist work on the cinema when she writes:

'femininity' is not simply an abstract textual position; and what women's history tells us about femininity lived as a socioculturally, as well as psychically differentiated, category must have consequences for our understanding of the formation of feminine subjectivity, of the feminine textual spectator and the viewing/reading of female audiences.⁴⁰

Following these critics, the terms 'feminine' and 'femininity' will be employed in this thesis to refer to not only the on-screen representations of women and the viewing positions offered by these horror films, but also to a set of activities, skills, ideals and social relations that are practiced by, aspired to and formative of actual women to varying

degrees.

Mainstream cinema, as has been widely documented by feminist critics, has played a fundamental role in creating and communicating the norms of femininity that intersect with the lived experience of women subject to those ideals. Dorothy Smith notes that women's "self-creation, their work, the uses of their skills, are coordinated with the market for clothes, make-up, shoes, accessories, etc., through print, film, etc."⁴¹ and Mary Ann Doane observes that, even in the face of overwhelming evidence of women's exclusion from the subject position in cinema, "the feminist theorist must acknowledge the fact that women [...] buy."⁴² It is then as both consumers and commodities that women have traditionally been addressed by mainstream film, a practice that has created a unique relationship between women and cinematic images. Mary Ann Doane claims, "the cinematic image for the woman is both shop window and mirror, the one simply a means of access to another."⁴³ bell hooks, on the other hand, speaks of her "oppositional gaze"⁴⁴ developed from the knowledge that she was not like those images on the screen.

These two theorists illustrate both the differences that exist between women and between women's relationships to images of femininity. I have, thus far, referred to female spectators as a group, but this group, though unified by gender, is by no means homogeneous. Though female spectators may be separated by multiple differences, I would argue that they are, however, unified in their necessary, though varying, participation in the discourses of femininity. Sandra Barky writes, "The larger disciplines that construct a 'feminine' body [...] are by no means race- or class-specific. There is little evidence that women of color or working-class women are in general less

committed to an ideal of femininity than their privileged sisters.”⁴⁵ Moreover, Smith insists women are further united by their again necessary, though varying, failure to replicate the image: “Viewed from the standpoint of the discursive image, women’s bodies are always imperfect. They always need fixing.”⁴⁶ In speaking of female spectators in this thesis then, I am primarily concerned with the specifics of their complex relationship made up of difference, desire and hostility to the white, middle-class, consumer-oriented, young, able-bodied and beautiful image of femininity that is, in mainstream cinema, offered as an ideal for replication through consumerism and is an ever present shadow.

The horror films in question are not, of course, subject to the same rules as mainstream cinema, though it will be my contention that in exploring issues of consumerism, beauty and its practices, and the star as image ideal, they intersect with and illuminate the traditional cinematic means through which discourses of femininity are disseminated. Released in an era that “remain[s] marked by the rigorous attention of popular culture to an explicit and rarely wavering ideological agenda of family harmony and feminine containment,”⁴⁷ these films, through differing methods, address the absences, betrayals and terrors of the image of femininity and its multiple supports. That this ideal impinges upon lived experience and marks both the female body and mind makes these representations useful tools for examining the dark side of a historically specific femininity; the horrors lurking beneath or upon its surface. These films also provide a space in which to imagine the female spectator, “doubly bound” by “that very representation which calls on her directly, engages her desire, elicits her pleasure, frames

her identification and makes her complicit in the production of her own woman-ness,”⁴⁸ engaging with this culturally and cinematically inscribed position through fear, identification and, potentially, critical awareness.

As stated earlier, to propose that these horror films engage women in a fear of femininity that necessarily overlaps with self, is, in some respects, repeating what feminist film critics have long declared the patriarchal function of the worst kind of cinema. Neither subversive nor progressive, such films are exposed for re-inscribing oppression at the site of the female spectator when they acknowledge her at all. Christine Gledhill identifies “a problem for feminist criticism” when she observes “it enters critical negotiation from a specific political position, often beginning with the aim of distinguishing ‘progressive’ from ‘reactionary’ texts.”⁴⁹ This means of classification is particularly problematic in relation to horror. While it is not the project of this thesis to construct an all-encompassing definition of horror, at this point, it is worth clarifying the way in which the term will be employed.⁵⁰ This thesis will adopt the broad definition David Lavery proposes: that the horror genre is comprised of “all films whose primary effect is to surprise, terrify or alienate an audience by means of narrative and cinematic techniques which are disorienting and aggressive, violent or discomforting.”⁵¹ What this definition emphasizes is both the affective nature of the genre and nature of those affects. Horror is intended to elicit a “negative” reaction, to disturb and frighten. The search for a progressive horror film is, thus, made problematic by the very nature of the genre.

Though women are often imagined to be morally exempt from violence, fear and aggression, a false position which is often perpetuated by both horror films and feminist

film criticism of them,⁵² the tradition of the Female Gothic will be evoked in this thesis to disrupt these moral assumptions and to help shift the ground upon which such films are analyzed. While I will not be concerned with a detailed investigation of the texts of this branch of Gothic literature, it nevertheless provides evidence of women's active production and consumption of fearful tales which "provoke[] various feelings of terror, anger, awe, and sometimes self-fear and self-disgust directed toward the female role."⁵³ This literature will be evoked throughout these pages to analyze the ways Gothic film borrows, re-invents and makes cinematic its central concerns to address a female audience. For, as Christine Gledhill writes:

When popular cultural forms [...] attempt to engage contemporary discourses about women or draw on women's cultural forms to renew their gender verisimilitude and solicit the recognition of a female audience, the negotiation between 'woman' as patriarchal symbol and woman as generator of women's discourse is intensified.⁵⁴

The films in question, part of a genre that tends toward the masculine yet addressing issues that intersect with female experience, exemplify this process of negotiation and, in some respects, this process becomes their horrifying subject matter. Trapped within their houses, bodies or dreams of ideal femininity, the heroines of these films confront the terrors of their own culturally conditioned femininity and their internalization of the patriarchal discourses which cannot help but shape their lives.

This thesis will not, therefore, because of the nature of horror, the Gothic tradition from which these films draw, and their "problematic" subject matter, be concerned to evaluate them on the basis of their "progressiveness" or "regressiveness". This choice seems to separate this project, determined as it is to explore issues of internalization,

femininity as lived experience, and oppressions that are as much rooted in the self as they are in patriarchy, from the political goals of some feminist film criticism and its search for a “pure and authentic female subjectivity.” We might recall, however, that Vivian Sobchack’s identification with the figure of the aging woman is mediated by her body and, more specifically, by the distinctly feminine practice of make-up application, although she writes that she is “supposed to know better.”⁵⁵ Not only are the feminine and female blurred here but the feminist is added to the mix as well. Through the lens of Sobchack’s work I wish, ultimately, to propose a way of watching horror that, rather than progressive, begins from the point of acknowledging that the self, regardless of gender, race, class or sexuality, is “concretely embedded in social and power relations.”⁵⁶ The “negative” reactions elicited by horrific representations may therefore be employed, as is the case in Sobchack’s essay, to illuminate deeply ingrained oppressions of both the self and the Other.

The roots of this argument will be laid in chapter one’s examination of Robert Wise’s *The Haunting*. Exploring the specific techniques this film employs to represent terror, I will argue that it exploits the assumed relationship between female spectators and the image of the commodity to create fear around the “lack of viable identity”⁵⁷ upon which consumerism thrives. Staging a confrontation with the culturally constructed self in the era of the “Feminine Mystique,” *The Haunting* also draws out the problems of a domestic feminine identity, problems which haunt the Victorian home which is its setting and the Female Gothic novel which is its source. This film thus challenges the wholesale categorization of the horror genre as masculine, exemplifies the ways in which horror has

attempted to engage a female audience and, beyond that, illustrates the genre's capability to illuminate the terrors of an ostensibly historically specific femininity that may haunt female viewers even today.

Roman Polanski's *Repulsion* will be employed in chapter two to both elaborate upon the ways the horror film has tried to terrify women and the uses to which feminists and female spectators might put such films. Concentrating upon the film's representation of historical shifts in the visibility of women in the 1960s, I will argue that *Repulsion* depicts the internalization of the male gaze and thus disrupts both the male figure and the camera as the site of the sole source of oppression. Catherine Deneuve's performance as Carol further offers a representation of the ways the ideal feminine body is always and already vulnerable and subject to violence from within and without. While this analysis illuminates the ways in which the victimized female body is eroticized in patriarchal culture, I wish to emphasize, rather, the opportunity *Repulsion* affords feminist critics of exploring the particular horrors of inhabiting a raced and gendered body that was, and to some extent remains, an exalted ideal and whose practices and disciplines all women have been encouraged to adopt, perform and internalize.

While chapters one and two are largely concerned with the ways women have been divided against themselves and weakened by their "ways of looking", chapter three's investigation of *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?* will explore the inevitable rage inspired by this dual position. Reading Bette Davis's performance as Baby Jane through research on women, stars and envy, I will argue that Davis endows her monster with all that Hollywood represses in the image of ideal femininity: the star. This exploration of

Jane's fictional hostility toward the feminine ideal will be extended to Davis's own discussion of working with Joan Crawford on this film. Davis's envy, hostility and identification with her more "feminine" rival will be employed to stress the divisions that necessitate even an identity like "feminist": a term which is often used to characterize the actress. In disrupting the figure of the woman from the exclusive position of Other and insisting that each and every self is based upon certain identifications and exclusions, I will finally suggest the ways in which horror in general might be employed by feminist critics, and any and all spectators, as a tool for critical reflection upon the cultural conditioning of the self.

¹ Linda Williams, "When the Woman Looks," in *The Dread of Difference* ed. Barry Keith Grant (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996): 32.

² Mark Jancovich, "General Introduction," in *Horror: The Film Reader*, ed. Mark Jancovich (London and New York: Routledge, 2002): 4.

³ Alison Milbank records that this popularity was initially established through early publications such as *The Lady's Magazine*, which "encouraged submissions from their readers," creating "a reciprocity of female reading and writing of Gothic." Alison Milbank, "Female Gothic," in *The Handbook to Gothic Literature*, ed. Marie Mulvey-Roberts (Washington Square, NY: New York University Press, 1998): 53. Remarkably, the genre has remained popular with women readers since this early exchange. Ann Williams notes, however, a noticeable surge in sales of Gothic novels in the 1960s. Anne Williams, *Art of Darkness: A Poetics of Gothic* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1995): 160. The interests of women readers have clearly carried over into their film preferences. Brigid Cherry's extensive survey of female horror viewers shows that "92 percent of all the respondents liked all or most vampire films. This was followed in popularity by the occult/supernatural films (liked by 86 percent), psychological thrillers (81 percent), Hammer films (76 percent)[...] the least liked horror film type was by far the slasher film." Brigid Cherry, "Refusing to Refuse the Look: Female Viewers of the Horror Film," in *Horror: The Film Reader* ed. Mark Jancovich (New York and London: Routledge, 2002): 172. For more evidence of the marketing of horror films to women and women as horror fans see: Rhonda Berenstein, *Attack of the Leading Ladies: Gender, Sexuality and Spectatorship in Classic Horror Cinema* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995).

⁴ Norman N. Holland and Leona F. Sherman, "Gothic Possibilities," *New Literary History* 8 (1977): 281.

⁵ Other films of this period which employ this formula include: *The House in Marsh Road* (Montgomery Tully 1960), *The Innocents* (Jack Clayton 1961) *Taste of Fear* (AKA *Scream of Fear* Seth Holt 1961), *Trauma* (Robert Young 1962), *Hush, Hush Sweet Charlotte* (Robert Aldrich 1964), *The Night Walker* (William Castle 1964), *Della* (AKA *Fatal Confinement* Robert Gist 1964), *Straightjacket* (William Castle 1964), *Die, Die My Darling* (AKA *Fanatic* Silvio Narizzano 1965), *The Shuttered Room* (David Greene 1967).

⁶ Jancovich, "General Introduction," 2.

⁷ Steven Jay Schneider, "The Haunting, from Novel to Film...to Film," *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 30, no.3 (Fall 2002): 168.

⁸ Steve Neale, *Genre* (London: British Film Institute, 1980): 44. Author's italics.

⁹ Vivian Sobchack, "Bringing It All Back Home: Family Economy and Generic Exchange," in *The Dread of Difference*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996): 143.

¹⁰ Mary Ann Doane, *The Desire to Desire: The Woman's Film of the 1940s* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987): 141.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 125.

¹² Though this seems an unusual link in literature surrounding the horror film, David Hartwell insists, in publishing, "[b]estselling horror most often addresses the traditional concerns of women (children, houses, the supernatural) as well as portraying vividly the place of women and their treatment in society." Though this seems to beg the question why has cinematic horror seemingly avoided tapping into this audience, we might also wonder why feminist theorists have focused largely on the slasher film to the exclusion of other horror sub-genres that clearly do appeal to female viewers. Qtd. in Linda Badley, *Film, Horror and the Body Fantastic* (Westport and London: Greenwood Press, 1995): 103.

¹³ Ellen Moers, *Literary Women* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976): 107.

¹⁴ Doane, *The Desire to Desire*, 17.

¹⁵ Williams, "When the Woman Looks," 31.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 23. Williams has since re-visited this essay and admits its shortcomings while maintaining her commitment to the issues it raises. See: Linda Williams, "When Women Look: A Sequel," www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/01/15/horror_women.html. Posted: 1/15/2000, visited 3/3/2003.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 21.

¹⁸ Barbara Creed, "Horror and the Monstrous-Feminine: An Imaginary Abjection," in *The Dread of Difference* ed. Barry Keith Grant (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996): 63.

¹⁹ Tania Modleski, "Feminism and the Power of Interpretation: Some Critical Readings" in *Feminist Studies/Critical Studies* ed. Teresa de Lauretis (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986): 136.

²⁰ Sue Thornham, *Feminist Theory and Cultural Studies: Stories of Unsettled Relations* (London: Arnold, 2000): 84.

²¹ Christine Gledhill, "Developments in Feminist Film Criticism," in *Re-Vision: Essays in Feminist Film Criticism*, eds. Mary Ann Doane, Patricia Mellencamp and Linda Williams (Frederick, MD: University Publications of America Inc., 1984): 21.

²² Doane, *The Desire to Desire*, 4.

²³ Susan Gubar, "Feminist Misogyny: Mary Wollstonecraft and the Paradox of 'It Takes One to Know One'," in *Feminism Beside Itself*, eds. Diane Elam and Robyn Wiegman (London and New York: Routledge, 1995): 148.

²⁴ Vivian Sobchack, "Revenge of *The Leech Woman*: On the Dread of Aging in a Low-Budget Horror Film," in *The Horror Reader*, ed. Ken Gelder (London and New York: Routledge, 2000): 336.

²⁵ Ibid, 336.

²⁶ Ibid., 337.

²⁷ Ibid., 338.

²⁸ Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, "Introduction: Situating Subjectivity in Women's Autobiographical Practices," in *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader*, eds. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998): 33.

²⁹ Ibid., 338.

³⁰ Ibid., 337.

³¹ Ibid., 345.

³² Sobchack, for instance, notes that the middle-aged women is rarely dealt with in cinema as "either the object or the subject of the gaze" and is more often excluded altogether. Ibid., 337. More generally, Robin Wood's famous articulation of horror as "the return of the repressed" points to the presence of the often unrepresentable (he lists female sexuality, the proletariat, other cultures, ethnic groups, alternative ideologies, homo and bisexuality and children) in horror films. Robin Wood, "An Introduction to the American Horror Film," in *The American Nightmare: Essays on the Horror Film* (Toronto: Festival of Festivals, 1979): 11.

³³ Teresa de Lauretis, "Feminist Studies/Critical Studies: Issues, Terms and Contexts," in *Feminist Studies/Critical Studies* ed. Teresa de Lauretis (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986): 14.

³⁴ Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989): 26. Mulvey has since re-visited her essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," but it continues to be a powerful influence on the work of feminist film theorists and rarely goes unmentioned in work grappling with issues of women and mainstream cinema.

³⁵ Doane, *The Desire to Desire*, 156.

³⁶ Ibid., 183. Author's italics.

³⁷ Ibid., 1.

³⁸ Dorothy E. Smith, "Femininity as Discourse," in *Becoming Feminine: The Politics of Popular Culture*, ed. Leslie G. Roman, Linda K. Christian Smith, and Elizabeth Ellsworth (London, New York and Philadelphia: The Falmer Press, 1988): 39.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 41. My italics.

⁴⁰ Christine Gledhill, "Pleasurable Negotiations," in *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader*, ed. John Storey (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1998): 238.

⁴¹ Smith, "Femininity as Discourse," 39.

⁴² Mary Ann Doane, "The Economy of Desire: The Commodity Form in/of the Cinema," *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, 11 no.1 (1989): 23.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 32.

⁴⁴ bell hooks, *Black Looks* (Boston: South End Press, 1992).

⁴⁵ Sandra Lee Bartky, *Femininity and Domination: Studies in the Phenomenology of Oppression* (New York and London: Routledge, 1990): 72.

⁴⁶ Smith, "Femininity as Discourse," 47.

⁴⁷ Suzanna Danuta Walters, *Lives Together/Worlds Apart* (Berkeley, LA and Oxford: University of California Press, 1992): 100.

⁴⁸ Teresa de Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics and Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984): 3.

⁴⁹ Gledhill, "Pleasurable Negotiations," 245.

⁵⁰ For work on this area see: Noël Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror* (New York and London: Routledge, 1990) and James Twitchell, *Dreadful Pleasures* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985).

⁵¹ David Lavery, "The Horror Film and the Horror of Film," *Film Criticism* 6 no.1 (1982): 48.

⁵² Tania Modleski writes of horror, "Importantly, in many of the films the female is attacked not only because, as has often been claimed, she embodies sexual pleasure, but also because she represents many aspects of the specious good." "The Terror of Pleasure: The Contemporary Horror Film and Post-Modern Theory," in *Studies of Entertainment: Critical Approaches to Mass Culture*, ed. Tania Modleski, (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1986): 163. This equation of morality and womanhood is echoed by Linda Williams' plea to female spectators: "we are so used to sympathizing, in traditional cringing ways, with the female victims of horror that we are not likely to notice the change, to assume that films such as these have maintained this sympathy while simply escalating the doses of sex and violence." The "we" here seems to be a unified group who conform to stereotypes of women as emotional and sympathetic and who believe representations of sex and violence are offensive. Such assumptions again foster the exclusive study of the male subject's stake in horrific representations. Williams, "When the Woman Looks," 32.

⁵³ Juliann Fleenor, "The Female Gothic," in *The Female Gothic*, ed. Juliann Fleenor (Montreal: Eden Press, 1983): 15.

⁵⁴ Gledhill, "Pleasurable Negotiations," 238.

⁵⁵ Sobchack, "Revenge of *The Leech Woman*," 340.

⁵⁶ de Lauretis, "Feminist Studies/Critical Studies: Issues, Terms and Contexts," 14. Author's italics.

⁵⁷ Bartky, *Femininity and Domination: Studies in the Phenomenology of Oppression*, 31.

“I belong”:

Robert Wise’s *The Haunting* and the Horrors of the Feminine Imagination

“If you are to be a glamorous, sophisticated woman that exciting things happen to, you need an apartment, and you need to live in it alone!”

Helen Gurley Brown, *Sex and the Single Girl* (1962)

“This is the real mystery: why did so many American women, with the ability and education to discover and create, go back home again...?”

Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (1963)

As outlined in the introduction to this thesis, much feminist criticism of the horror genre insists that one of its particular problems for the female spectator is her exclusion from the mechanisms that construct terror, her essential absence as a viewer in the face of her very presence. In this chapter, I wish to explore the ways in which one horror film, Robert Wise’s *The Haunting* (1963), works against this critical condemnation of the whole of the genre and offers its own insights into the complexities of female spectatorship. By analyzing the film’s representation of terror, I will show that *The Haunting* attempts to engage and expose the horrors of a specifically feminine imagination as it is socially and cinematically constructed to consume. This process is echoed in the film’s narrative where Eleanor (Julie Harris), its homeless heroine, is also met with an image of terror through which she encounters the deadly duplicity of her own consumer’s imagination. *The Haunting* thus acts as a kind of tutor-text for the female horror spectator it imagines but also, I will argue, holds insights for the feminist horror critic imaginatively engaged by this 1963 film.

For *The Haunting* enacts precisely the mapping of a modern woman onto the mise en

scène of the past. The film thus begs for a reading attentive to layers of historical detail and material culture and my analysis of the film will, therefore, be attentive to these elements in its two main characters: the Victorian house and the post-war American woman. Examining *The Haunting*'s evocation of the past to effect a violent intersection with the present reveals the ways this film attempts to engage and expose particularly gendered fears surrounding contemporary issues of domesticity, consumerism and female identity. While contextualizing this film assists in intervening in theories that proclaim all horror's essential alliance with masculine psychic structures, it must be acknowledged that *The Haunting* remains an effective horror film even today. The encounter with "self" as staged by the film's structuring absences and its forced recognition of forms of cultural conditioning and internalized oppression that are intimately tied to both Gothic traditions and cinematic processes, will thus be used in this chapter to begin to address issues of the possible uses of Gothic horror films for the female viewer and the feminist critic, a line of investigation which will be developed in subsequent chapters.

Film, Phenomenology, and the Appresentation of Terror

In his discussion of film and meaning, Patrick Fuery employs the branch of philosophy called phenomenology to examine the construction of terror in the viewing subject. Fuery defines phenomenology as the study of "how the subject produces understanding (that is interpretive gestures) about the world around himself/herself, and the relationships which determine, and are determined by this."¹ Phenomenology thus offers a model of meaning in which texts and subjects interact, with neither wholly

determining the shape or results of the interpretive process. This intersection is exemplified in the notion of appresentation: “the idea that all phenomena are presented as incomplete and part of the act of consciousness is involved in adding further information and details.”² The cinema, Fuery notes, seems to shut down possibilities for appresentation in its frequent visual and aural obviousness. He insists, however, that the medium has developed particular strategies for engaging the subject in the act of interpretation, for creating a pleasurable “slippage in meaning and creativity.”³

In fact, films demand acts of appresentation almost constantly from their viewers, for instance, in the creation of a coherent, though not always entirely visible, space within which the narrative unfolds. Fuery claims that film offers even more complex opportunities for appresentation, however, where the construction of meaning by the spectator is intensified. One such opportunity exists in the incomplete image of terror. A famous example of this is the opening sequence of John Carpenter’s *Halloween* (1978), in which slasher Michael Myers remains invisible to the viewer, though we share his point-of view, as he prowls the house and murders its female inhabitant. Myers is eventually embodied at the end of this sequence but the moments leading up to this insist the spectator form a particular relationship to the absent image of terror. According to Fuery, this mode of appresentation “inserts the spectator into the image, reflecting themselves back to the self,” thus, “[w]hat we fear in the appresentation of terror is twofold: that which can be created in our imagination, helped by the elements in the film; and our relationship to the terror, created in the creative act of appresenting.”⁴

Fuery’s theory of the relationship between the image of terror and its beholder offers

support for the common sense notion that one's imagination can out-horror even the goriest and most explicit of horror films. It is also useful in dislodging those structures of looking which demand the female viewer always take up a pre-determined masculine viewing position. The act of appresentation as articulated by Fuery, may be as unique as the particular self performing it and, indeed, it may be quite impossible to determine how any one individual's imagination fills in those blanks on the screen. Fuery's model is built on the interaction of the spectator and the image, however, and he insists that appresentation cannot occur in a vacuum. He writes, "where such information comes from will depend on the particular object or sensation, but certainly memory, cultural conditioning, and, in the case of texts, the contextual fields, all play a part."⁵ One might, therefore, examine the ways in which a particular film structures its terrifying absences and how these absences work to trigger terrors rooted in the cultural consciousness of its viewers. In the case of Carpenter's film, one might argue that the absent image is already heavily coded as masculine through memory and cultural conditioning which unite the violent, all-seeing gaze with the figure of the male.⁶ For this thesis, which attempts to intervene in the gendering of the entire horror genre, one might explore the different ways horror attempts to engage the feminine imagination through memory and cultural conditioning to create another particularly gendered form of terror.

Robert Wise's *The Haunting* is a fascinating film in this respect. It is based on a 1959 novel by Shirley Jackson, *The Haunting of Hill House*, and is the story of Eleanor Lance, a woman who has spent her entire adult life caring for her invalid mother. Upon her mother's death, Eleanor is offered employment as a paranormal researcher in Hill House,

a home that was built by Hugh Crain “ninety odd, very odd, years ago.” Dr. Markway (Richard Johnson), the anthropologist who heads the team, hopes to prove his theories of supernatural life using Eleanor and Theo (Claire Bloom), two women with paranormal experience, as “live bait”. Eleanor, whose fragile sense of self and obsession with finding a home of her own are communicated through her voice-over, becomes the center of the hauntings and her troubled psychic history is made tangible in the smells, sounds and sights of the house. When her hopes for a romantic relationship with Dr. Markway are dashed upon the arrival of his wife, Eleanor quickly deteriorates and becomes entirely enmeshed in the house. She attempts suicide, staging a replica of a past death on the property and, though she is rescued, she is forced to pack her bags and leave. As Eleanor drives away from Hill House she feels the wheel of her car possessed by the forces of the house and, upon seeing Mrs. Markway run across her path, drives her car into a tree and dies where Hugh Crain’s first wife died ninety years before.

The events that occur in Hill House are entirely ambiguous and viewers are never really certain whether the haunting is, as Eleanor herself suggests at one point, all in her mind, or if the house has truly possessed her. Even when Eleanor dies in the last moments of the film, the remaining researchers offer competing interpretations of the event: seeing Dr. Markway’s wife caused her to crash the car, the crash was another suicide attempt, or “she wasn’t alone in the car” and Hill House caused her death. Thus, *The Haunting* foregrounds the role of interpretation by creating a central mystery, “Who is in control, the house or the woman inside it?”, and leaving this mystery unresolved. Through out the film Robert Wise goes to great lengths to preserve this hesitation between the natural and

the supernatural; that effect which Tzvetan Todorov defined as the fantastic.⁷

This effect is supported not only by narrative events and dialogue but also through the visual strategy Fuery outlines for the creation of terror. The spirits of Hill House remain invisible and concrete evidence for their existence is never explicitly provided. *The Haunting* is, in fact, most famous as a ghost story in which the ghosts are never seen. Linda Badley claims, “there are no special effects in the modern sense: the ghosts are represented by sounds (a child’s crying, laughter, rappings), camera angles, and reaction shots.”⁸ While Badley is correct in this observation, she ignores what is perhaps most obvious in any film: what is right in front of her eyes.

Hill House and the History of the Bourgeois Interior

The medium for the haunting and for the spectator’s appresentation of terror is, of course, the house itself. Wise’s lingering shots of its interior, compositions with carefully placed objects foregrounded in the frame, use of deep focus and his characters’ frequent references to the colours, textures, smells, style and temperature of Hill House draw the audiences’ attention to these details, creating a tangible sense of place and developing the house’s sinister personality. Because this is the “contextual field” in which both Eleanor and the film’s spectator appresent terror, it is worth examining the history of Hill House and its replication of the Victorian interior. As a film that seemingly stages the return of the past through *mise en scène*, *The Haunting*, demands such attention to material details.

The 19th century was the era of the consolidation of the ideology of separate spheres as the “role of ‘production’ was separated from that of ‘reproduction’.”⁹ The emergence

of industrialization and capitalism necessitated a distinct spatial division between the world of waged work and its physical and emotional support in the middle-class home. These spaces were defined according to gender and, despite the inability of the rhetoric of separate spheres to account for reality at any given point in history,¹⁰ feminists and historians insist “it remains extremely powerful to this day as both metaphor and metonymy, the unacknowledged model and source of middle-class power.”¹¹

The Victorian house itself was a fundamental marker of this separation of spaces. Mark Girouard claims that its requirements, a complex arrangement of rooms separating its residents, served to “protect the womanliness of women and encourage the manliness of men.”¹² The Victorian notion of domestic environmentalism highlights the importance of furnishings and decoration in reinforcing the ideological foundations of the house’s geography. Domestic environmentalism “conflated moral guidance with the actual appearance and physical layout of the house and its contents.”¹³ Home furnishings thus acted not only as a sign of status and moral standing, but were thought to shape character.

In his essay on the relationship of this bourgeois interior to the neurasthenic male, Keith Bresnahan elaborates on the particularly gendered functions of this space and upon the ways in which it shaped subjectivities. Bresnahan employs Walter Benjamin’s analysis of the bourgeois interior to examine the construction of a masculine identity within the domestic sphere. He quotes Benjamin’s description of the bourgeois interior:

The alteration in styles - Gothic, Persian, Renaissance, and so on - signified: that over the interior of the middle-class dining room spreads a banquet room of Cesare Borgia’s, or that out of the boudoir of the mistress a Gothic chapel arises, or that the master’s study, in its iridescence, is transformed into the chamber of a Persian prince.¹⁴

This is indeed an apt description of Hill House; itself a menagerie of Grecian statues and gargoyles that prompts Mrs. Markway to exclaim the ghost of Hill House is “the interior decorator.” Bresnahan observes that this interior, “as a site of historical escapism, was the means by which the bourgeois avoided his own time.” This was also the intention of Hugh Crain, who built Hill House because he “hated people and their conventional ways.”

“The bourgeois subject,” writes Bresnahan, “constructed himself - and was himself constructed - through the interior.”¹⁵ Hill House, whose doors and windows were constructed without using a single 90 degree angle is, as Eleanor observes, “one big distortion”, a characteristic Wise emphasizes by constantly disorienting viewers in the filmic space through the use of mirrors, extreme angles and jarring shifts in continuity. The notion of “distortion” is narratively tied to Hugh Crain who, as architect and decorator of this house that was “born evil,” seems to have inscribed his misanthropy and malice onto the very walls and objects of Hill House. When Eleanor cries out that Crain, “was a dirty man,” who made a “dirty house,” she seems to suggest that the point-of-view shots from the windows, corners and ceiling of the house belong to this dead patriarch. Indeed, within what he describes as an explicitly patriarchal space, Bresnahan’s work supports Eleanor’s outburst. He claims that bourgeois women existed only as “decorations and objects for serene contemplation,” but that, for the male “the domestic interior sustained the private fictions of control and subjective agency.”¹⁶ “In this space, this dreaming,” Bresnahan writes, “the bourgeois subject found himself at home.”¹⁷ Home does not, therefore, exist for bourgeois women who are merely scenery and who

are, “excluded from the interior as inhabitants.”¹⁸ The representation of the history of Hill House that acts as a prologue to *The Haunting* dramatizes the extent to which the female occupants of the house act as objects in Hill House’s *unheimlich* history.

The story of Hill House, like so many other horror stories, depends upon the visibility of the female corpse. *The Haunting* opens with a sequence depicting the deaths of Hill House’s female inhabitants, a visual rendering of its bloody history. A montage shows the limp hand of Hugh Crain’s first wife, her bracelets still jangling on her arm, the frozen face of his second wife, her earrings shining, the legs of yet another woman hanging from the ceiling as her shoe falls to the floor. Abigail, Crain’s daughter, is shown as a little girl in her bed but a series of dissolves ages her, obliterating the ordinary details of her life and confining her to that bed so that within seconds she is dying and banging on the wall for her companion’s assistance. The companion is on the veranda with a farmhand, another titillating moment that is offered to the viewer’s gaze.

In this sequence, the dead women are introduced as objects, mere victims of Crane’s twisted interior manifest upon the house’s. In the context of the film as a whole, when viewers become acquainted with the unusual objects that fill Hill House, this story of “scandal, murder, insanity, and suicide,” seems only another curiosity among the many in Crain’s collection. The statue Crain commissioned of St. Francis curing the lepers makes this concrete. Luke (Russ Tamblyn), the heir to Hill House, notes that the statue is actually a family portrait: Crain stands with his arm raised as though “pointing out all the great treasures in this creepy house he built,” while the lepers (all women) gather round him. Theo points out that Crain has even included his daughter Abigail’s companion in

this statue though she committed suicide on the property many years after its creation. In a moment of foreshadowing, Theo also notes that the companion looks like Eleanor, who will herself take her place among the “treasures” of Hill House when she dies. *The Haunting* thus appears to literalize the claim that “the body of the bourgeois housewife became an integral part of the interior.”¹⁹

Dr. Markway narrates the opening sequence of *The Haunting*, in which he recounts the historical facts of the house but also intersperses such statements as, “The history of Hill House was ideal, it had everything *I* wanted,” and, commenting on the deaths of its inhabitants, “Marvelous.” This narration reinforces the status of these women as objects of contemplation long after their deaths. They once served to decorate and care for the house; they now act as objects of scientific study. Markway’s first words, “An evil old house, the kind some people call haunted, is like an undiscovered country waiting to be explored,” suggests *The Haunting* will take up this viewpoint and will impose the desires of yet another man upon the history of these women’s lives.

Markway’s rational, scientific discourse quickly gives way, however, to Eleanor’s voice-over. His pompous, authoritative introduction is, in fact, the only time Markway is granted a voice-over in *The Haunting*. His status is further diminished during his experiments in Hill House and he is increasingly used as comic fodder. He draws maps of the house but walks into broom closets, he attempts experiments that fail miserably in front of the others and, while the spirit forces in the house visit Eleanor regularly, Markway spends his time in front of a harp, noting and measuring its spontaneous sounds. It is, in fact, Eleanor, in her quest for a place to call her own, who is the “main

attraction” of both the house and the film. Given Bresnahan’s denial of the possibility of the female subject on such a terrain and the uses to which Hugh Crain and Dr. Markway put the female inhabitants of Hill House, one wonders how such a quest is possible and how Theo can claim upon Eleanor’s death, “the house belongs to her now too”?

This question returns us momentarily, and by analogy, to the project of this thesis. How can the horror film, which offers a “misogynist scenario elaborated within a patriarchal and heterosexual social formation and based on the male fear of female sexuality,”²⁰ create or inspire women’s fears? Does *The Haunting*, in depicting a woman’s terror within the oppressive, confining and explicitly patriarchal representation that is Hill House, perform an imaginative feat that is absent in much feminist film criticism of the horror genre? I will argue that *The Haunting* does indeed hold lessons for the feminist critic and for the female horror viewer. These lessons, however, are more disturbing than one woman’s struggle with the dark forces of patriarchy that long to objectify, punish or erase her. *The Haunting*, I suggest, instead depicts one woman’s terrifying relationship to her self, a relationship that is reflected in and exacerbated by the haunted objects that surround her.

A “Woman’s” Horror Film

The abrupt and unusual disruption of the male voice-over and the explicit undercutting of his authority early in *The Haunting* signal not only Eleanor’s privileged position in relation to Hill House, but also the privileged position of the cinema-literate female viewer in relation to this horror film. It is her gaze, I suggest, which is appealed to

by the absent terrors of Hill House. I will turn now to a discussion of the scenes of the haunting and the specificities of their “lacunal qualities.”²¹

The house itself, as mentioned earlier, is the medium for the supernatural but the hauntings are more than vague sensations or, as Badley suggests, camera tricks. The researchers first night in Hill House makes the physical medium for the haunting explicit. The sequence begins with a shot of the exterior of the house, which dissolves into a shot of the interior. Wise holds this shot for an unusually long time, allowing viewers to register the material details of the ornately decorated and furnished room. As the image fades to black, there is a loud banging on the soundtrack and Eleanor says, “All right mother, all right.” She turns on the lamp but is excluded from the shot and, once again, only the architecture of the room and its furnishings are in view as the banging continues. Eleanor rises and runs into Theo’s room. As the women cling to one another, they stare across the room at the door. The camera alternates between shots of their reflection in a large full-length mirror at the opposite end of the room and close-ups of Eleanor, with a bust of a woman turned to face her, behind her left shoulder. This arrangement creates a complex relationship between the women and the objects in the room, where they themselves are positioned as objects within the space, both being watched and watching themselves replicated in glass and marble. The arrangement also serves to suggest the possibility that the haunting is, somehow, their projection. As the noise moves across the walls, the camera pans from the mirror to follow it, taking in every detail of the door, mantelpiece, and the trinkets that litter the room. The banging stops momentarily and then settles on the top of the door. Wise cuts to a shot of the stained glass window and

then, in a reverse shot, the camera faces the room where the women are dwarfed by the canopy bed and the clashing tapestries, wallpaper and bed linens that surround them. There is another reverse shot of the door and a zoom in on its brass doorknob that is shaped as a face. As the knob begins to turn there is a montage of shots of the room, and then a pan over the door itself, the camera revealing its every detail. The scene ends with a woman's laughter echoing through the room and yet another series of shots of its architectural and decorative details.²² When Eleanor reports these events to Dr. Markway, he decries the absence of any physical proof, to which Eleanor replies, "How nice it didn't mar the woodwork!"

The second night presents another variation of this haunting through *mise en scène*. Wise begins this sequence with a shot of a book upon which the name "Abigail Crain" is engraved. This shot dissolves onto the exterior of Hill House, specifically, the tower where Abigail's companion hanged herself many years ago. The signature is held momentary over the tower, before a cut to the inside of the bedroom where Eleanor and Theo are again sleeping. Eleanor awakens before she hears a single sound and stares suspiciously at the wall of the room until a voice begins to deliver an unintelligible sermon. She continues to stare at the wall and, through the use of light and shadow, the wallpaper is given the features of a face. Eleanor reaches for Theo's hand while she listens to a woman laughing and the screams of a child. Throughout this visitation, Wise cuts only between Eleanor and the richly papered wall. When she finally brings herself to scream and the light comes on, she realizes Theo is on the other side of the room and asks, "Whose hand was I holding?" Wise then cuts back to the tower and then to a cherub

with an outstretched hand, perched upon a harp that Dr. Markway is intently studying on the following morning.

As these scenes make clear, it is the architectural and decorative details of Hill House that visually represent its hauntings and act as the centre of both the house's and Eleanor's disruptions. These objects thus mediate the viewer's acts of appresentation and the insertion of themselves and their imagination into these "vacant" images of terror. How then does this choice work to shape the imagination of the viewer, and what contexts, memories and cultural conditioning does *The Haunting* draw upon to create terror?

In her essay, "The Economy of Desire: The Commodity Form in/of the Cinema," Mary Ann Doane acknowledges, in the face of overwhelming theoretical evidence of the exclusion of women from the subject position in the cinema, that "the feminist theorist must admit that women [...] buy."²³ Women can thus be subjects, Doane suggests, insofar as they are consumers, as they are positioned to covet and to replicate the images on screen in their homes and upon their bodies. Doane writes: "[i]f the film frame is a kind of display window and spectatorship consequently a form of window-shopping, the intimate association of looking and buying does indeed suggest that the prototype of the spectator-consumer is female."²⁴

Doane insists this connection between looking and buying in the cinema, its source in the development of the 19th century department store, created "a transformation in modes of perception."²⁵ Her articulation of this transformation is closely tied to the strategies of *The Haunting* and to the ways in which this text asks its addressee to imagine terror and I

will thus quote her at length. She writes:

At the cinema, the consumer glance hovers over the surface of the image, isolating details which may be entirely peripheral in relation to the narrative. It is a fixating, obsessive gaze which wanders in and out of the narrative and has a more intimate relation with space - the space of rooms and of bodies [...] It is as though there were another text laid over the first - a text with an altogether different mode of address - so that the film becomes something of a palimpsest. In this other text, the desire to possess displaces comprehension as the dominant mechanism of reading.²⁶

This gaze, so different from that of the voyeur, is the gaze of the consumer and, as Doane elaborates it, is a specifically woman's gaze. At the very least, one can claim it is the gaze she is encouraged to take up, the gaze that offers her a socially condoned pleasure and, even if she refuses this gaze, which is truthfully a middle-class woman's gaze, she may be adept at recognizing its triggers and the images that call upon her to look this way. Evidence to support this claim lay in the fact that for feminist scholars, "clothing and furniture remain highly politicized objects through which women's 'unequally valued cultural styles' assert themselves."²⁷ The attention to such material details in *The Haunting* and the representation of Eleanor, a woman longing for a home of her own with "a pair of stone lions" to guard the gate, marks this as a particularly feminine horror film.

The female spectator is elaborated here in generalized terms, according to Doane's analysis of the female gaze and *The Haunting's* own attempts to elicit that gaze. I recognize that this articulation of the woman's gaze is limited and it is not my intention in this thesis to account for the responses of every female spectator through this narrow conceptual framework. While *The Haunting* may call upon this specifically feminine sensibility to solve its mysteries, one simply cannot account for the variety of "selves" engaged by its invisible terrors. What *The Haunting* does offer the critic, however, is its

own representation of a woman looking, imagining and interpreting and of an image calling, luring and trapping. Eleanor's navigation of Hill House, where her own memory and cultural conditioning become entangled with the house's, thus imagines a female "self" and her relationship to visual horrors. While Eleanor's experience may not account for the total range of responses to this highly ambiguous film, it does offer insight into the ways horror films can attempt to engage the female viewer and the consequences of such strategies. I will return to the issue of the female spectator in relation to *The Haunting*, to the ways the film asks her to appresent terror and how this, in turn, relates to the larger project of this thesis. First, however, while attempting to preserve the unsolvable mysteries of Hill House, I will offer my own interpretation of its fictional rendering of female terror.

Hill House and the Horrors of Belonging(s)

Part of the difficulty in "reading" *The Haunting* is that it seemingly offers the critic little stable ground to stand upon. One simply cannot interpret the events of Hill House as being all in Eleanor's mind anymore than one can claim the house has possessed her completely. It is this ambiguity that has no doubt earned *The Haunting* its reputation as "one of the scariest movies of all time- if not the scariest."²⁸ Monica Degan and Kevin Hetherington urge analysts of the supernatural to remember, "[n]ot only do [...] human inhabitants have memories, anxieties, hopes and dreams, so too do the walls."²⁹ My analysis will thus be attentive to both Eleanor's appresentation of terror, her insertion of herself into the "vacant" image, and the will, the personality, indeed the subjectivity, of

Hill House. Despite the seeming duality set up here, Eleanor and the house echo and overlap with one another in significant ways. Rather than thwarting interpretive gestures, these intersections inspire it, giving the film a material and historical dimension that not only addresses the consumer's gaze but also deals with the timely problem of women's relationship to domestic space and commodities. While I will argue that *The Haunting* exploits contemporary female anxieties at the site of the home, and indeed the cinema, the film also raises more ahistorical issues of the woman's relationship to her "culturally-conditioned" self. The representation of the terrors of femininity as an ideal that intersects with lived experience, I will suggest, opens a space in which to examine the horror film's address to its female audience and its evocation of both horror and particular kind of pleasure.

Eleanor's introduction to Hill House demonstrates both the confusion of boundaries which thwart stable meanings in *The Haunting* and the subtle parallels that encourage interpretation. Eleanor, having just delivered a speech in which she wishes for "an apartment of my own with a pair of stone lions guarding the gate," passes the guarded gates of Hill House and stops suddenly, taking in its foreboding image. Wise cuts to two windows in the house that serve as its eyes and Eleanor timidly gazes into them while her voice-over declares, "It's staring at me!" Though she realizes she's "being given a last chance," she reminds herself she has "nowhere else to go" and proceeds to drive up to the door. This entrance is captured in a remarkable sequence of shots which alternate between Eleanor's point-of-view and Hill House's. The house is thus made an object of Eleanor's desire and fear, and is itself a desiring object/subject. Eleanor's "consumer's

glance” that “has a more intimate relation with space”³⁰ is immediately unsettled here by the threatening, possessive glance that the house returns. The house, with its “fixating, obsessive gaze,”³¹ is, like the oft-repeated image of the woman staring out of her window, “patiently waiting” for Eleanor.

Eleanor nevertheless approaches the door and is greeted by a knocker in the shape of a laughing face. Before she can knock, however, Mrs. Dudley, another of Hill House’s guardians, opens the door. The three faces of Eleanor, Mrs. Dudley and the knocker are placed side-by-side in this shot, as though the objects of the house were also greeting Eleanor or, as if Eleanor and Mrs. Dudley were no more than objects themselves. The parallel between these women and the objects in their presence is reiterated as Eleanor enters the house and we see Mrs. Dudley stare appraisingly at her, while Eleanor, in turn, appraises the room. A point-of-view shot captures this surveying look, which “hovers over the surface”³² and reveals an interior that is both cluttered with furniture, lamps, mirrors, and statues and is extraordinarily tidy. The parallel of appraising glances that equates the figure of Eleanor with the things in the room is reiterated as Eleanor reaches down for her suitcase and sees a reflection of herself and the chandelier above her in the highly polished floor. Here Eleanor literally sees herself in the house. Her desire for a home, in other words, is immediately met by Hill House, which offers her a place in the very floor that supports it. While the chandelier above her head seems to confirm her status as yet another of the objects littering the room, the use of the point-of-view shot simultaneously stresses her subjectivity.

If the use of the point-of-view shot here seems to offer evidence that *The Haunting* is

indeed a subjective portrayal of Eleanor's apprehension of terror, Wise is quick to undermine this possibility. Eleanor, on her way up to her room, next encounters a strange statue of a girl praying and stares at it as if repulsed. Hill House is overrun by such statues. They represent the watchful eye of the house made constantly present through the bodies that crowd every room. They also lend a curious air of exhibitionism to the house, particularly insofar as Wise frequently foregrounds these objects, as if they were offering themselves to the viewer's gaze.

Continuing up the stairs, Eleanor turns and jumps at the sight of her reflection in a huge hallway mirror. Statues are matched in number by these mirrors and the two often co-exist in the same shot, as is the case when Mrs. Dudley shows Eleanor her room. The room itself is a jumble of patterns and objects and Wise's use of deep focus creates a distracting gulf between the two characters as Mrs. Dudley informs Eleanor of the house rules. The housekeeper's instructions are given beside a mirror beneath which sits a marble nude in a provocative pose. Here, the multiplication of female figures in flesh, marble and glass, standing one beside the other, creates a kind of visual equation that, despite the contrasts of the stern, black-clad Mrs. Dudley and the white marble goddess, beg us to compare the three. The mirrors, which work to suggest that the terrors of Hill House are a "reflection" of Eleanor, also work to communicate the exhibitionism and conscious will of the statues. At the same time, the sense of surveillance created by the statues is collapsed here unto self-surveillance, which is demanded by the house in its relentless offering of self-images in strategically placed mirrors. Eleanor is eventually left alone in this room thinking, "I'm like a small creature swallowed whole by a monster."

Wise positions her beneath the canopy of the bed at its very center where the fabric radiates out like a projection of Eleanor herself or, illustrates the forces of the house closing in on her.

The point here is not just that Wise's mise en scène creates confusion and uncertainty, though it certainly does, but that, in so doing, he also creates specifically gendered parallels between Eleanor and Hill House. The relationship between the two parallels Rachel Bowlby's description of the woman's relationship to the commodity on a domestic landscape: "Seducer and seduced, possessor and possessed of one another, women and commodities flaunt their images at one another."³³ What *The Haunting* refuses to clarify is which is the seducer and which the seduced, which the possessor and which the possessed? This scenario is a familiar one in horror cinema where the collapse of the subject and object, the dissolution of a stable self, the evocation of what Kristeva calls the abject, is a source of dread.³⁴ Rather than pursue an entirely psychoanalytic reading of *The Haunting*, however, I suggest that *The Haunting's* choice of "object" and "subject" and the terrain upon which these are blurred, illuminates historically "female" problems and is thus useful in intervening in horror theories which insist all horror films "reveal[] a great deal about male desires and fears but tell[] us nothing about feminine desire in relation to the horrific."³⁵

As the previous discussion of the visual manifestations of the haunting suggests, and as the parallels between Eleanor and the representation of the consciousness of the house make clear, Hill House is haunted by "an implied (female) ghost."³⁶ Abigail Crain, Hugh's daughter, whose room is the "cold, rotten heart of Hill House," and whose name

appears before the supernatural eruption of the second night, is positioned as a source of much of the house's evil energy. At one point, Eleanor stands beneath the statue representing Hugh Crain, saying of her nemesis, Mrs. Markway, "We killed her Hugh Crain, you and I, you and I." As she begins her dance with him, however, the camera pans down to frame the statue of Abigail who reaches up her arms in offering to her father while Eleanor twirls in the background. That patriarchal scenario elaborated in the film's exposition is mediated here by a woman and by the objects that represent her, contradicting and complicating the clichéd horror plot of the male monster and the female victim.

In one sense, this contradicts Bresnahan's claim that bourgeois women were "excluded from the interior as inhabitants."³⁷ Visual evidence tells us that the Hill House Eleanor enters is not merely the house of the "bourgeois subject" Hugh Crain, but is a place that has been inhabited by Crain's wives, daughter, and employees and has been the site of their isolated lives and fantastic deaths. Didier Maleuvre notes, "the bourgeois observes his objects, he does not live with them: the home becomes a spectacle of itself."³⁸ This distance afforded by the male, Maleuvre's comment suggests, is a literal distance achieved through the ideology of separate spheres that afforded white, middle-class men an identity outside the walls of the home. In the case of Hill House and the introductory sequence, we learn that Hugh Crain built this house in the most remote part of New England *for* his wife and daughter and that he himself left his daughter in the house with a nurse and died elsewhere. Hugh Crain built Hill House and invested the architecture and furnishings with his own religious fanaticism and misanthropy but it is

the women who made this house their home. In this sense then, *The Haunting* affirms Bresnahan's claim, though in a twisted way, for the dead women of Hill House are no more than decorations but it is they, nonetheless, who animate the house. "[A]s though there were another text laid over the first,"³⁹ these women's ghostly subjectivities are embedded in the objects beside which they once existed, and possibly desired, trapped by their status as curiosities. For, although the consumer's gaze may be a source of pleasure to its owner, Doane's work insists it also functions as a "trap," luring women into an "environment of objects showcasing the achievement of its male owner,"⁴⁰ through their own culturally conditioned desires.

Dream Houses and Housework Horrors

Much as Hill House's ghosts are a product of the environment in which they exist, Eleanor Lance must be understood as a product of her own time. We first meet Eleanor in the living room of her sister's modern home where she has been sleeping on the couch for the two months since her mother's death. She pleads with this sister and her husband to allow her to take the car, for which she helped to pay, to Hill House, where she has planned a "vacation". Taunting children's music plays on the soundtrack as Eleanor paces the cramped room begging while her sister knits and condescendingly calls her "young lady," asking, "How do I know you'll return *my* car in good condition?"

Eleanor chooses to ignore the couples' final "no" and decides to take the car anyway. Upon arriving at the garage, the attendant refuses to give her the keys, snarling, "You ain't Mrs. Fredericks. Who are you?" *Miss* Lance is forced to produce numerous pieces

of identification to prove that she lives with her sister and can thus take “the Frederick’s car.” In these two scenes Eleanor’s lack of social status is constantly underscored and as she drives away, we hear her voice on the soundtrack saying:

Someday, someday, someday I’ll have an apartment of my own with a pair of stone lions guarding the gate. I might just stop anywhere. Or I might drive on and on until the wheels of the car are worn to nothing and I’ve come to the end of the world. I wonder if all homeless people feel that way?

Eleanor’s deficient femininity and social vulnerability are tied here, not merely to her lack of a husband, but to her lack of a house and of the possessions that mark it as hers. The one suitcase she has packed juts out from the backseat of the car in this scene, visually encapsulating this lack and offering a contrast to the glut of objects Eleanor is about to encounter in Hill House. Ironically for Eleanor, her journey of self-discovery will take place not “on the road” but rather within the domestic sphere to which she is heading once again.

Historian Rosalind Rosenberg writes of the post-war years, “of all the aspirations encouraged by [the] new prosperity, home ownership stood at the top of most women’s lists.”⁴¹ In America in the 15 years following the war, 62 percent of citizens were homeowners, versus 45 percent from the years 1890 to 1945.⁴² A similar boom occurred in Britain, so that “[b]y 1964 one family in four was living in accommodation that had been built since the war.”⁴³ More than a site of family and security, the domestic sphere also functioned as “the most intense and gendered site of commodity consumption in the mechanical and electronic age of privatization.”⁴⁴

The possession of a home thus became as essential a part of a properly realized feminine identity. The two quotes that began this chapter, one from *Cosmopolitan*

founder Helen Gurley Brown and the other from Second Wave feminist Betty Freidan, make this clear. What these two very different authors, who are both writing for the improvement and diversification of women's lives, share is an acknowledgement of the power of the home as both a symbolic and physical place. Freidan's well-known critique of the home as a prison for the middle-class housewife is silently echoed by Gurley Brown, who writes of a glamour and excitement that can only be achieved by being alone at home and by having control over one's environment.

Freidan and Gurley Brown's texts, both wildly popular and widely read, give voice to the grievances and fantasies of the middle-class woman of the time and are strangely echoed in *The Haunting*'s homeless heroine. For, like the "single girl" of Gurley Brown's title, Eleanor longs for a place of her own with "a pair of stone lions guarding the gate" and infuses that dream with visions of romance and glamour. This dream, of which she speaks frequently, is, however, born from a past that is not represented in the film. The boredom and drudgery of her life confined to the space of her mother's home, that problem "which has no name" that Freidan identified, is visually avoided in much the same way that Abigail's entire life was encapsulated by a series of dissolves. Eleanor's domestic history haunts the film, however, as the objects in Hill House are layered with her own dull, unrepresentable past made fantastic.

In a breakfast conversation with Dr. Markway, where the gulf between the two is filled with silver, china, clocks, plants and tapestries, Eleanor reveals that she always sleeps on her left side because she "read somewhere it wears the heart out quicker." Dr. Markway remarks this is a depressing thought and Eleanor replies, "For the last eleven

years I've been walled up alive on a desert island." The only thing that got her through this time, she says, was the knowledge that "someday something would happen.

Something extraordinary. Like Hill House." Markway and Eleanor's conversation is interrupted when Luke enters to tell them he's been frightened by what he's just seen in the hall. The four researchers examine the hallway to find, "Help Eleanor Come Home," has been scribbled across its ornate wallpaper. Shortly afterwards, on a tour of the house, Eleanor cannot enter the library because of the "sickroom smell". She instinctively believes the banging she hears on the walls at night is her mother calling for help and, upon entering Abigail Crane's room, she moves toward the wheel-chair, whispering, "my mother..."

Though Hill House seems to offer Eleanor an escape from the drudgery of domestic life ((she hopes there is no natural explanation for the events "because it wouldn't be nearly so exciting,") it is that very history that is played out on its walls. The furnishings, which are at once Eleanor's objects of desire, her "stone lions", are also a reminder of her time "walled up alive," the time that this horror film, in its efforts to terrify, cannot represent.⁴⁵ That contradiction between Friedan and Gurley's quotes, where the home is at once a prison and a glamorous escape, is enacted here on the site of Hill House. This overlap of Eleanor's history and the hauntings would work to suggest that the film is a subjective representation of Eleanor's appresentation of terror, the objects of the house only reflecting herself back to herself, but once again the film works against this explanation, collapsing the boundaries that enable the viewer to "locat[e] the self outside of it."⁴⁶

For Eleanor's history has, in fact, already happened in Hill House. When Eleanor admits that the night her mother died she heard her knocking on the wall but stayed in bed, she echoes the film's exposition, where viewers have already seen Abigail banging on the wall for her companion but dying unanswered. This curious correspondence works again to stress the central mystery of *The Haunting*. Moreover, it collapses not only the separation of subject and object but also of the past and the present. It is not until Mrs. Markway, arrives, however, that the boundaries between the dead women of Hill House's past and the ideal modern woman of the present truly give way.

Mrs. Markway's unexpected arrival escalates Eleanor's deteriorating sense of reality and the rage that has begun to bubble to the surface in a series of violent speeches. Eleanor suggests Mrs. Markway sleep in the nursery, the "cold, rotten heart of Hill House" which once served as Abigail's room. Although the door of the room is kept locked, the researchers find it miraculously open, a supernatural event that underscores the increasing synchronicity of Eleanor and Hill House. That night there is another haunting during which Mrs. Markway disappears from Abigail's room without a trace.

The discovery of Dr. Markway's marital status effectively destroys any notions Eleanor had of sharing her house with him. Rather than diminishing her hopes, however, this event solidifies her determination to keep Hill House. Eleanor's voice-over and image become even more central in these last scenes of *The Haunting*: at one point her face fills the left side of the frame and her voice drowns out the other voices in the room as she thinks, "What if he does have a wife, I still have a place in this house. I belong. I want to stay here [...] He doesn't make the rules around here!"

Indeed it is at this point in the film that Eleanor gives herself over entirely to her desire for the house and to the house's desire for her. During the night of Mrs. Markway's disappearance, Eleanor runs through Hill House as the chandeliers sway, objects crash around her, and mirrors self-destruct. She cries, "The house is coming down around me! The house is destroying itself!" Wearing a flowing white nightgown, she becomes entangled in a long, white curtain, blending in completely. Only moments later as she wanders again, caressing statues and pressing her face against the walls, she exclaims, "I'm coming apart a little at a time. I'm disappearing into this house."

Eleanor does, in fact, move through the house as though possessed, entering the library from which she once recoiled and climbing the rickety staircase that leads to the tower where the companion hung herself. She whispers, "No stone lions for me, I am home." Her attempt to replicate the suicide of the companion is, however, thwarted when Markway climbs the stairs to come to her rescue. The two share a tender moment and, in a strange twist, just before they begin to descend, Mrs. Markway's face appears from behind a door and frightens Eleanor so badly she faints.

The use of objects in the *mise en scène* to represent the spirits of Hill House is abandoned here in favor of a full-fledged human body. The figure of Mrs. Markway thus fills the gap between the past and the present, between Eleanor's dull domestic history and her dreams of an ideal domestic future, and between her imagined terrors and the actual terrors of the house. In choosing the figure of Mrs. Markway, a housewife who in mainstream cinema of the period, "came to stand for the completion and assumption of a "proper" feminine identity, of the "natural" completion of womanhood,"⁴⁷ the film

equates this idealized femininity with terror. The horrific history of Hugh Crain's wives, daughter and employees, confined to the demented space he built for them overlaps here with the modern housewife, whose identity is similarly constructed in relation to the space in which she lives. The film thus forges a connection often noted by feminist historians, that "[i]n many ways, the renewed emphasis on domesticity and its association with femininity in the 1950s echoed Victorian times."⁴⁸ Eleanor's conflicted desires to return to domestic obscurity or to embark on a romantic adventure in a house of her own are shown to be entirely compatible. In both cases the self is constructed in relation to the possession of objects and in both cases the self can thus be reduced to an object.⁴⁹ This is, significantly, the first of only two times the haunting is given a human form and it is this ultimate symbol of domestic bliss that also stands in for the ghostly powers that lure Eleanor to her death.

Eleanor's suicide attempt convinces Markway and the others that she is too unstable to remain in the house any longer. It is at this point that Eleanor confesses to the others that she has "no apartment, no things" waiting for her. She is, nevertheless, banished but on the winding road to Hill House's gates says, "I won't go, Hill House belongs to me," and feels the wheel of her car possessed by another force. She fights it but then realizes that "Something at last is really, really happening to me." Suddenly she sees a figure dark behind a tree and, moments later, her car crashes and she dies in the exact place where Hugh Crain's first wife died. Grace Markway emerges and she is reunited with her husband who comments, "Poor Eleanor." Theo argues, however, "Maybe not poor Eleanor, it was what she wanted. The house belongs to her now too." Luke, to whom the

property will belong and who has, until this point, shown himself to be entirely avaricious, disowns Eleanor's new property, stating, "It should be burned down and the ground sowed with salt."

Again the figure of Mrs. Markway functions as the embodiment of both the dead women of Hill House and of Eleanor's own desires. The wish for a home and "a pair of stone lions" is thus conflated with the position of the bourgeois wife and her daughter, whose "'placing' [...]" in this space was effectively that of one more decorative object among a total environment of objects showcasing the achievement of its male owner."⁵⁰ When Eleanor says, "My mother, story of my dull life," she is closer to the truth than she knows, for Hill House exposes the ways in which all the progress of fashion, science, and commerce still serve the creation of a century-old feminine self.

This reading of *The Haunting* points to the ways in which this horror film is structured around the creation of specifically feminine/female fears. The film might, in fact, be compared to a text like Freidan's *The Feminine Mystique*, which takes a decidedly negative view of the middle-class woman's relationship to domestic space. I would not suggest that *The Haunting* is a feminist horror film, however one might determine what that would be, for it not only depicts a woman trapped by her duplicitous consumer desires but it also asks its frightened spectators to take up that consumer's gaze in relation to its images of terror. This choice, while it may negate the possibility of labeling the film "progressive", does, nevertheless, make the film particularly loyal to its literary origins in the Gothic and opens up ways of understanding horror's possible address to a female viewer beyond the confines of its historical period.

Fear and the Feminine Self

Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House*, upon which Wise's film is based, is part of a body of literature that has been labeled the Female Gothic. In her discussion of this genre, Kate Ferguson Ellis explicitly links the Female Gothic and domestic space, claiming, "[i]t is only when the home becomes a 'separate sphere,' a refuge from violence, that a popular genre comes into being that assumes some violation of that cultural ideal."⁵¹ Thus, Female Gothic narratives, whatever their historical context, are often treated as "elided representations of the political, socio-economic and historical complexities of women's lives under [...] bourgeois ideology."⁵² In her essay entitled simply "The Female Gothic," Juliann Fleenor examines these complexities and goes on to describe this literature as having been:

formed by dichotomies, the patriarchal dichotomy between the supposed complementary male and female, the feminist dichotomy between woman's prescribed role and her desire and hunger for change and the dichotomies of good and evil projected by men upon women and consequently internalized by them.⁵³

The notion of internalization, which might also be termed "cultural conditioning" to refer back to Fuery's work, is thus a central problem in the Female Gothic. Indeed, Fleenor notes that it is often played out on the very architecture of the house, which serves to both shelter and trap its female inhabitants and "suggests either the repressive society in which the heroine lives or the heroine herself, and sometimes, confusingly, both."⁵⁴

The processes of internalization are alluded to in *The Haunting*'s narrative. The opening sequence, though mostly focused upon the violent deaths of Hill House's female

inhabitants, does offer some insight into Abigail's life in this house. In a scene following the death of the first Mrs. Crain, Hugh Crain looms over his wife's dead body while reading from the bible with his daughter at his side. As Abigail turns away from this ghastly sight, Crain reaches over and turns her around to face the body again as though this body were part of the domestic environmentalism of the house. This tradition is invoked again in the scene of Abigail's almost instantaneous aging. As she plays with a doll in bed, the camera pans to reveal the script above her bed, which reads, "Suffer Little Children." These moments, which suggest the shaping of a young girl's mind by the cruelty of her father and the environment he provides for her, are minimized in Markway's narrative, which chooses to emphasize the value of the house to his scientific research. They are taken up again, of course, through the story of Eleanor, a woman who comes to Hill House searching for an identity, a home and "a pair of stone lions" to guard it. For Eleanor's search for selfhood through the home and its commodities is precisely the product of a culture that defines her as lacking and which offers her the illusion of wholeness through possession. This narrative representation of the role of the commodity in the female self is, of course, doubled in the film's own address to its spectators and its exploitation of the woman's presumably intense relationship to the image of the commodity to create terror.

In *Femininity and Domination*, Sandra Bartky writes, "psychological oppression is dehumanizing and depersonalizing; it attacks the person in her personhood," therefore, "[l]ike the psychologically disturbed, the psychologically oppressed often lack a viable

identity.”⁵⁵ For women, this lack of identity is, in part, the product of the internalization of patriarchal norms. Bartky explains the process and results of this phenomenon:

Something is “internalized” when it gets incorporated into the structure of the self. By “structure of the self” I refer to those modes of perception and of self-perception which allow a self to distinguish itself both from other selves and from things which are not selves.⁵⁶

Bartky’s definition has obvious parallels with Doane’s analysis of the cinema’s address to women. Doane writes, “[e]ven when consumerism concerns the objects of the space which she inhabits, its tendency is essentially narcissistic. For all consumerism involves the idea of self-image.”⁵⁷ The shift in modes of perception, which Doane ties to the cinema and the evolution of the female consumer, is thus part and parcel of her oppression, her continuing “lack of viable identity.” What is interesting about this process, and what has been noted elsewhere,⁵⁸ is that this exercise of power “does not rely upon violent public sanction, nor does it seek to restrain the freedom of the female body” but it is, rather, contingent upon the woman herself, the extent to which her “very subjectivit[y] [is] structured within an ensemble of systematically duplicitous practices.”⁵⁹

The collapse of subject and object, past and present, consumer and consumed in Hill House that sees Eleanor endlessly reflected in the house, and visa versa, plays out this encounter with the self and its imbrication in its own oppression. For the evil that Eleanor feels is patiently waiting for her in Hill House is, in fact, the history and reflection of her own culturally conditioned need for a home and its trappings to secure her sense of self. Though this occurs within the patriarchal context of Hugh Crain’s home, the terrors Eleanor confronts are the terrors of her feminine self, which is both produced by and

produces the environment in which she exists. This is, of course, literalized when her wish to “belong” is granted as she takes her place among the curiosities of Hill House.

Dead, she usurps the place of Dr. Markway, and in a voice that is forever separated from her body ⁶⁰ but tied to the visible image of Hill House, Eleanor says:

Hill House has stood for ninety years and might stand for ninety more. Within, walls continue upright, bricks meet, floors are firm, and doors are sensibly shut. Silence lay steadily against the wood and stone of Hill House and we who walk here, walk alone.

This final collapse of boundaries, between oppressor and oppressed, may be one of the most disturbing elements of this film for in its implication of Eleanor in her own oppression, *The Haunting* thwarts recuperation as “progressive”. Eleanor has what she wants and so, Dr. Markway adds, does the house, while we, the viewers, have also confronted the terrors of our *own* culturally conditioned imaginations.

Thus, while *The Haunting* stages the Female Gothic preoccupation with internalization through its narrative, it also attempts to engage a cinematically constructed female viewer in this same struggle through its “empty” images of terror. Through the use of a *mise en scène* that calls to the female consumer’s gaze and the foregrounding of the screen as a mirror/window “that takes on the aspect of a trap whereby [...] subjectivity becomes synonymous with [...] objectification,”⁶¹ Wise makes cinematic the literary preoccupations of the Female Gothic. The “absent” image of terror, with its structuring presence that “inserts the spectator into the image, reflecting themselves back to the self” through “memory and cultural conditioning,”⁶² in this film, attempts to both engage the female viewer through her consumer’s gaze, that same gaze which underscores and affirms her “lack of viable identity,” and to make this a source of terror. Here, women’s

imagination, as constructed in relation to commodities and their aura of glamour and excitement, is paired with their entrapment in the image of terror. This is, of course, the oft-noted “double-bind” of the female spectator.⁶³ Few feminist scholars have been attentive to the ways this same scenario, though revealed through critical analysis to be horrible to the woman, has been used by the horror genre to terrify and elicit pleasure. Eleanor’s visit to Hill House, where she goes in search of a new self and finds her self in the possessions which possess her, attempts to delineate and trigger the horrors of a feminine imagination caught by the lure of the screen/mirror/window and trapped in the house history forgot.

Unlike the woman’s film, however, “together with the massive extracinematic discursive apparatus,” which Doane insists, “insure[s] that what the woman is sold is a certain image of femininity,”⁶⁴ *The Haunting* wants to terrify its audience which, it assumes, is already versed in the cinematic construction of femininity. *The Haunting* thus complicates the hierarchy of possession to comprehension that Doane elaborates when she writes of the palimpsest offered to the consumer’s gaze: “the desire to possess displaces comprehension as the dominant mechanism of reading.”⁶⁵ *The Haunting*, by collapsing commodity image and terror, does not address “the consumer as a passive subject who is taken in by the lure of advertising,”⁶⁶ but makes active comprehension co-equal with “the desire to possess.” “The capacity for film to cause the appresentation of terror, which should run counter to any sense of pleasure,” Fuery insists, is precisely the reason “why pleasure and terror can be co-joined.”⁶⁷

The Haunting as Tutor-Text

What, then, are the lessons that *The Haunting* holds for its female viewers and for feminist critics of the horror film? Remaining attentive to the ambiguity of the film and, in particular, to its final image of a powerful yet pathetic heroine, I wish to suggest two different but intersecting ways *The Haunting* instructs its spectators and the project of this thesis.

In one sense, the film warns its female viewers against the lure of the mirror/window. By constructing terror in relation to what traditionally functions as the cinematic image of desire for the woman, indeed, what Doane would insist is reducible to the woman who becomes a “merchandising asset”⁶⁸ herself, *The Haunting* presents a kind of cautionary tale about the cinema’s address to the female viewer. That gaze that “brings the things of the screen closer,”⁶⁹ is made frightening for precisely its capability to collapse the boundaries between the self and “things which are not selves.” The notion of the woman’s proximity to the image which feminist film theorists have rigorously identified are exploited and uncovered here, made a source of terror for all who sense the film’s address, for those who watch Eleanor and “feel her somewhere deep within.”⁷⁰

This quote, taken from Vivian Sobchack’s account of her own response to the image of Baby Jane Hudson, returns us to the issue of internalization and to the ways horror films may make use of the now well-documented terrors of femininity to frighten female viewers. It is perhaps redundant or at least somewhat politically suspect to argue for another way in which women are “victimized” by cinema. Exploring horror’s exploitation of the dangers of femininity, however, intervenes in theories that suggest

female figures are simply and always fodder for the male imagination, or meat for his slashings. Instead, by positing that certain horror films are attentive to the pitfalls of femininity and that these representations can intersect with the female viewer's own "horrific" experiences, one can begin to explore the ways women may be intellectually and emotionally engaged by horror films and participate in the cinematic culture that binds terror and pleasure in film viewing.

Indeed, this is precisely the lesson *The Haunting* offers to the feminist horror critic, anxious to distance herself from the terrifying images on the screen. By anchoring its "invisible" terrors to images that call upon the female spectator, the film refuses her invisibility as a spectator, insists upon her participation in the appresentation of terror. At the same time as the film insists upon terrorizing the members of the audience that recognize its gendered address, it also foregrounds the pleasures of interpretation. *The Haunting* thus combines those "uncritical" viewing positions occupied by women, which feminists have "exposed" and "named," and the kind of critical viewing position feminists themselves take pleasure in.⁷¹ If *The Haunting*'s final image of the now invisible Eleanor warns against the dangers of the image which lures the woman to "belong", might its mystery and its hint of power through the granting of the disembodied voice-over also suggest the critical potential of engaging with terror? Might it act a warning to those feminist critics who render themselves and all other female spectators invisible through interpretation?

The assumed distance between the woman and the feminist set up here is somewhat false. When in "The Leech Woman's Revenge" Vivian Sobchack writes, "I'm an

intellectual, a feminist, and supposed to know better,”⁷² she exposes the way female, feminist and femininity often intersect. Moreover, as Christine Gledhill notes of feminist film analysis’ own readings of moments of resistance in mainstream cinema, “The question remains how far such readings are not still made through identifications and recognitions, albeit with a self-conscious awareness of the heroine or of the woman’s discourse as textual production.”⁷³ *The Haunting* might prove most useful to the feminist critics then in its ability to draw out such identifications and recognitions. For if *The Haunting* still has the power to create terror long after the decade of “the feminine mystique,” we might ponder the ways it engages our post-feminist selves and maps our imaginations onto the mise en scène of two distant pasts. We might consider Kevin Hetherington’s proposal that, “[w]hat has passed still has the power to haunt us because it has not fully gone away and because it can continue to come back- out of time but revealed in space.”⁷⁴

¹ Patrick Fuery, *New Developments in Film Theory* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2000): 144.

² Ibid., 182-83.

³ Ibid., 144.

⁴ Ibid., 146.

⁵ Ibid., 183.

⁶ This “memory” may, however, be coloured by a contemporary viewer’s possible knowledge of the slasher sub-genre which Carpenter’s film is credited with launching. David Greene’s *The Shuttered Room* (1967) features a remarkably similar opening sequence and, though the stalker is not embodied until the end of the

film, it is revealed to be a woman who has been confined to the attic of her family home. Though the slasher sub-genre has formed the basis for the influential feminist horror theories of Williams and Clover, attention to other sub-genres and historical periods, as exemplified by this thesis, may challenge or offer exceptions to these theories enrich the history of the horror film and illuminate the varied origins of the undoubtedly masculine slasher tradition.

⁷ Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, trans. Richard Howard (Cleveland: Case Western Reserve University Press, 1973).

⁸ Linda Badley, *Film, Horror and the Body Fantastic* (Westport and London: Greenwood Press, 1995): 42.

⁹ Mona Domosh and Joni Seager. *Putting Women in Place: Feminist Geographies Make Sense of the World* (New York and London: The Guilford Press, 2001): 4.

¹⁰ On this subject see: Barbara L. Marshall, *Engendering Modernity: Feminism, Social Theory and Social Change* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1994).

¹¹ Nancy Armstrong, "Some Call It Fiction: On the Politics of Domesticity," in *The Other Perspective in Gender and Culture*, ed. Juliet Flower McCannel (New York and Oxford: Colombia University Press, 1990): 68.

¹² Mark Girouard qtd. in Janet Wolff. *Feminine Sentences: Essays on Women and Culture* (Oxford and Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990): 15.

¹³ Katherine Grier qtd. in Domosh and Seager. *Putting Women in Place*, 7.

¹⁴ Walter Benjamin qtd. in Keith Bresnahan, "Housing Complexes: Neurasthenic Subjects and the Bourgeois Interior," *Space and Culture* 6, no. 2 (May 2003): 173.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 173.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 175, 173.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 176.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 175.

¹⁹ L. Tiersten qtd. in *ibid.*, 175.

²⁰ Vivian Sobchack, "Revenge of *The Leech Woman*: On the Dread of Aging in a Low-Budget Horror Film," in *The Horror Reader*, ed. Ken Gelder (London and New York: Routledge, 2000): 336.

²¹ Fuery, *New Developments in Film Theory*, 144.

²² In Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House*, this event is recounted with far less attention to the physical space of the room. While the "haunting" is also not physically manifest in the novel, Jackson devotes her words to Eleanor's interior dialogue as she describes the banging to herself and the sensations of her own body. Shirley Jackson, *The Haunting of Hill House*, rev. ed (New York: Penguin Books, 1999): 127-135. Obviously Wise had to accompany the film's dialogue, whether interior or spoken, with a visual image of something and, in one sense, chose the most obvious "something" in the architecture and objects of the house. Even if Wise's choice to document the objects of the house was merely a technical necessity, I suggest that this is made significant by the history of women's relationship to domestic space, the context

of the “domestic revival” in which the film was released, and cinema’s own particular address to women as consumers.

²³ Mary Ann Doane, “The Economy of Desire: The Commodity Form in/of the Cinema,” *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, 11 no.1 (1989): 23.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 27.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 30.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 30.

²⁷ Ellen Bayuk Rosenman, “More Stories about Clothing and Furniture: Realism and Bad Commodities,” in *Functions of Victorian Culture at the Present Time*, ed. Christine L. Krueger (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2002): 59.

²⁸ Steven Jay Schneider, “*The Haunting*, from Novel to Film...to Film,” *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 30, no.3 (Fall 2002): 168.

²⁹ Monica Degan and Kevin Hetherington, “Hauntings,” *Space and Culture* 11/12 (December 2001): 1.

³⁰ Doane, “The Economy of Desire,” 30.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 30.

³² *Ibid.*, 30.

³³ Rachel Bowlby qtd. in Doane, “The Economy of Desire,” 30.

³⁴ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).

³⁵ Barbara Creed, “Horror and the Monstrous-Feminine: An Imaginary Abjection,” in *Dread of Difference*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996): 65.

³⁶ Patricia White, “Female Spectator, Lesbian Spectre: *The Haunting*,” in *Women in Film Noir*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan (London: BFI, 1998): 144.

³⁷ Bresnahan, “Housing Complexes” 175.

³⁸ Didier Maleuvre qtd. in *ibid.*, 175.

³⁹ Doane, “The Economy of Desire,” 30.

⁴⁰ Bresnahan, “Housing Complexes,” 176.

⁴¹ Rosalind Rosenberg, *Divided Lives: American Women in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1992): 140.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 143.

⁴³ Wendy Webster, *Imagining Home: Gender, 'Race' and National Identity 1945-1964* (London: UCL Press, 1998): 165.

⁴⁴ George Wagner, "The Lair of the Bachelor," in *Architecture and Feminism*, eds. Debra Coleman, Elizabeth Danze and Carol Henderson (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1996): 187.

⁴⁵ This quality of the *mise en scène*, yet another layer in Hill House's palimpsest, is interesting in light of Kathleen McHugh's work on film and domestic labour. In *American Domesticity*, McHugh argues that the cinematic repression of domestic labour in favour of the representation of "unlaboured femininity," displaces class and racial differences and makes gender the central and defining difference. In this manner, "objective social and economic facts are turned into personal, subjective experience" (117) and "images take the place of character aspirations" (147). One is reminded of the image of Eleanor staring at herself in the polished floor, an image that speaks of Mrs. Dudley's labour but which is used to represent Eleanor's consumer desires/search for self. The banal details of domestic labour, however, return with a vengeance to haunt Eleanor's seeming escape from them. This issue arises again in chapter three, with Bette Davis's portrayal of the "white-face" former-star turned domestic, Baby Jane Hudson. Kathleen McHugh, *American Domesticity: From How-to Manual to Hollywood Melodrama* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

⁴⁶ Fuery, *New Developments in Film Theory*, 146.

⁴⁷ Justine Lloyd and Lesley Johnson, "The Three Faces of Eve: The Post- War Housewife, Melodrama and Home," *Feminist Media Studies* 3.1 (2003): 13.

⁴⁸ Domosh and Seager. *Putting Women in Place*, 24.

⁴⁹ In this sense, *The Haunting* has much in common with the "woman's film" and, more broadly, melodrama of the period. Thomas Elsaesser has traced "the sublimation of dramatic conflict into décor, color, gesture and composition of frame, which in the best melodramas is perfectly thematised in terms of the character's emotional and psychological predicaments." (53) Elsaesser goes on, however, to explore the logical opposite of this insight, noting that "[p]ressure is generated by things crowding in on [characters] and life becomes increasingly complicated because cluttered with obstacles and objects that invade their personalities, take them over, stand for them, become more real than the human relations or emotions they were intended to symbolize." (62) Lacking the physical action of the *film noir* or western, the domestic melodrama's suspense is created within and by the walls of the house in an oscillation between a sense of the character's control of their environment and the threat of the environment's control. This tension is fully exploited in the domestic horror film where the historical and contemporary connotations of home as an autonomous sphere, outside the world of legal, scientific, rational public authority threatens to engulf the identities of those who inhabit it. Thomas Elsaesser, "Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Melodrama," in *Home is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film*, ed. Christine Gledhill (London: BFI Publishing, 1987).

⁵⁰ Bresnahan, "Housing Complexes," 176.

⁵¹ Kate Ferguson Ellis, *The Contested Castle: Gothic Novels and the Subversion of Domestic Ideology* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1989): 3.

⁵² Diane Long Hoeveler, *Gothic Feminism: The Professionalization of Gender from Charlotte Smith to the Brontës* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998): 5.

⁵³ Juliann Fleenor, "The Female Gothic," in *The Female Gothic*, ed. Juliann Fleenor (Montreal: Eden Press, 1983): 24.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁵⁵ Sandra Bartky, *Femininity and Domination* (New York and London: Routledge, 1990): 29, 31.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 77.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 30.

⁵⁸ See: *Up Against Foucault: Explorations of Some Tensions Between Foucault and Feminism*, ed. Caroline Ramazanoğlu (London and New York: Routledge, 1993).

⁵⁹ Bartky, *Femininity and Domination*, 80, 76.

⁶⁰ In *The Acoustic Mirror*, Kaja Silverman notes the rarity of this kind of voice-over for a female character. Kaja Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988): 62.

⁶¹ Doane, "The Economy of Desire," 32.

⁶² Fuery, *New Developments in Film Theory*, 146, 183.

⁶³ Teresa de Lauretis writes that the female spectator of Hollywood cinema is "doubly bound" through "that very representation which calls on her directly, engages her desire, elicits her pleasure, frames her identification and makes her complicit in the production of her own woman-ness." Teresa de Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics and Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984): 3.

⁶⁴ Doane, "The Economy of Desire," 29.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 30.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁶⁷ Fuery, *New Developments in Film Theory*, 145.

⁶⁸ Doane, "The Economy of Desire," 32.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 32.

⁷⁰ Sobchack, "Revenge of *The Leech Woman*," 345.

⁷¹ See: Ann Brooks, *Postfeminisms: Feminism, Cultural Theory and Cultural Forms* (New York and London: Routledge, 1997): 187.

⁷² Sobchack, "Revenge of *The Leech Woman*," 340.

⁷³ Christine Gledhill, "Developments in Feminist Film Criticism," in *Re-Vision: Essays in Feminist Film Criticism*, eds. Mary Ann Doane, Patricia Mellencamp and Linda Williams (Frederick, MD: University Publications of America Inc., 1984): 39.

⁷⁴ Kevin Heatherington, "Phantasmagoria/Phantasm Agora: Materialities, Spatialities and Ghosts," *Space and Culture* 11/12 (December 2001): 25. There was, in fact, a remake of *The Haunting* in 1999 by Jan DeBont which has little in common with the original film. Alejandro Amenábar's, *The Others* (2001) is, however, a recent film that re-stages the woman's troubled relationship with the domestic sphere.

Beauty, Embodiment and Looking Feminine in/at Roman Polanski's *Repulsion*

"[N]othing separates female experience from male experience more sharply, and more early in life, than the compulsion to visualize the self."

Ellen Moers, "Female Gothic" (1976)

"At the farthest extremes, the practices of femininity may lead us to utter demoralization, debilitation and death."

Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight* (1993)

In chapter one *The Haunting* was used to insist that the horror genre has attempted to address a female audience, has grappled with problematic aspects of femininity, and, in so doing, has illuminated the dark side of an ideal that casts a shadow upon female experience in Western culture.¹ Specifically, it was argued that *The Haunting* exploits the assumed relationship of women to the visual representation of commodities to create fear around that "lack of viable identity" upon which consumerism thrives. The film's strategies, which stage a terrifying encounter with this culturally constructed self, work to expose mainstream cinema's call to and construction of the feminine imagination through the fearful engagement so closely associated with the horror genre. These same strategies, however, also inspire a kind of critical distance by provoking a "slippage in meaning and creativity,"² an effect that, while still founded upon recognition, suggests a self-consciousness more akin to a critical position like feminist criticism.

In this chapter I wish to examine Roman Polanski's *Repulsion* (1965) to extend my analysis of the ways horror has usefully exposed the terrors of femininity as an ideal that impinges upon lived experience. While my positioning of *The Haunting* as a "woman's horror film" rested upon its elicitation of the female consumer's look, in this chapter I

wish to also explore the ways consumerism manifests itself upon the Gothic heroine's body: in looking feminine. *Repulsion* is, therefore, more traditionally centered upon that infamous "male gaze" that stalks helpless horror heroines in so many films of the genre. I will, nevertheless, argue that this film's obsession with the visible surfaces of the female body reveals not only its beauty, but also the ways this body hinders, traps and exposes its occupant's history of victimization. This depiction is more than a matter of the traditional tyranny of the camera or even a straightforward feminist critique of patriarchal oppression. The body of *Repulsion*'s heroine is most valuable in providing a tool for exposing the horrors of a particular feminine embodiment in a culture of surveillance.

In making this argument, this chapter attempts to preserve "the slippage between representations and their material effects"³ upon which Judith Halberstam insists the horror film situates itself. It is this very slippage that makes a film like *Repulsion*, which depicts the horrors of inhabiting a beautiful body, an important film for feminist scholars and female spectators alike. For this film, like *The Haunting*, intersects with and makes problematic the ways female viewers have been conditioned to "look". Encouraging a Gothic reading of an idealized feminine body, *Repulsion* inspires a critical relation to self through a heightened awareness of the horrors of an ideal femininity. This film then also brings together the invariably linked, but often theoretically opposed, positions of the feminine and the feminist through fear and critical reflection and, in this respect, I will argue, it is a useful exercise in terror.

Femininity and Feminism: Representation and Reality

Mary Ann Doane's work in "The Economy of Desire," cited at length in chapter one, stresses the continuity of the commodification of objects with the commodification of the female body. She insists, "[t]he body becomes increasingly *the* stake of late capitalism. *Having* the commodified object [...] is displaced by *appearing*, producing a strange constriction of the gap between consumer and commodity."⁴ Doane's analysis here points to the body as a primary site of consumerism and to the cinema as a primary medium for instruction. Specifically, Doane notes, the female star is "proffered to the female spectator for imitation," and this body image works to "insure that what the woman is sold is a certain image of femininity."⁵

Despite this, Doane insists, " 'femininity' as a category is not the possession of women- it is not necessarily something we should strive to reclaim."⁶ Indeed, most feminist film critics have worked toward the destruction of cinematic femininity by exposing its roots in male psychic processes and by claiming its fundamental incompatibility with the lives of real women. This has been particularly the case in studies of the horror genre, where women tend to be represented as either fantastic monsters or fantastic victims to the extent that they appear completely devoid of any reference to the real. Here, we might recall Barbara Creed's claim that "the feminine is not a monstrous sign *per se*; rather, it is constructed as such within a patriarchal discourse that reveals a great deal about male fears but tells us nothing about feminine desire in relation to the horrific,"⁷ and note Carol Clover's observation that "images of women in fear and pain [...] have more to do with male vicarism than is commonly

acknowledged.”⁸

What is at issue in such statements is, in part, the relationship of representations of women in film to real women. This is a crucial and complex issue in feminist analysis and a comprehensive review of debates surrounding it is beyond the scope of this chapter. The editors of *Re-Vision: Essays in Feminist Film Criticism*, however, trace its troublesome contours succinctly when they write:

The feminist theorist is [...] confronted with something of a double bind: she can continue to analyze and interpret various instances of the repression of women, of her radical absence in the discourses of men [...] or she can attempt to delineate a feminine specificity, always risking a recapitulation of patriarchal constructions and a naturalization of ‘woman’.⁹

In this same volume Christine Gledhill, who recognizes the reluctance of her fellow feminist film critics to explore the intersection of representations of women and actual women’s experience, nevertheless insists, “the mass media produce their own definitions of women which [...] have a concrete existence and determining effect on social reality.”¹⁰ Gledhill intervenes in debates around the “double bind” of the feminist critic with the practical claim that “[s]tereotypes do not vanish with the production of real women [...] [t]hey are materialized in the way we live our lives, they are part of our reality.”¹¹ For Gledhill, this means “feminist cultural analysis needs to examine the nature of recognition.”¹²

This was precisely the strategy of chapter one, which sought to analyze *The Haunting*’s call to the consumer’s gaze, its offer to recognize, as a means to engage the female spectator in the pleasures of terror. While the extent to which any one spectator, male or female, recognizes this viewing position or inserts him or herself into the empty

image of terror it proffers remains debatable, *The Haunting* nevertheless poses the possibility of women's engagement with specifically feminine horrors in acute form, even echoing and making cinematic the concerns of the Female Gothic. In this chapter, I will argue that *Repulsion* poses a similar problem through its representation of the feminine body. For this is a site which, through conventional cinematic coding, urges a kind of "recognition" from its female viewers that attempts to break down those boundaries between representations and the real and is thus an apt subject for a genre which uses this collapse to create fear.

For, as Dorothy Smith insists, femininity itself exists in this vexed space between representation and the real, between images of women and actual women. "Femininity," she posits, is a "social organization of relations among women and between women and men which is mediated by texts, that is, by the materially fixed forms of printed writing and images."¹³ Within this Foucaultian conception of femininity as discourse, women are not "passive victims," but "are active; they create themselves."¹⁴ More importantly for the purposes of this chapter, Smith proposes that women are, because of the nature of femininity as a "distinctly textual phenomenon,"¹⁵ adept at interpreting the ideal bodies offered to their gaze. At the same time, women are often keenly aware of their bodies' inevitable failures and weaknesses, the fact that "[t]here is always work to be done."¹⁶ Smith's analysis points to the female body as *the* site where representation and reality meet, where femininity as a fantasy or ideal meets the limits of the real body via public textual images. It is with this in mind that I will analyze *Repulsion*'s depiction of the successes and failures of the feminine body to suggest an expansion of the sites where

feminist film critics seek out marks of oppression in the cinema and to propose the potential of the Gothic horror film in that critical process.

Repulsion and the Terrors of the Male Gaze

Roman Polanski's *Repulsion* is the story of a young woman's mental breakdown. Carol, played by Catherine Deneuve, is a beautiful, strange and withdrawn woman who lives in London with her sister (Yvonne Furneaux) and works as a manicurist in a salon. Through various means, Polanski communicates Carol's terror of the opposite sex, a terror that is exacerbated both on the streets and in her own home. When Carol's sister, Helen, goes on vacation with her lover, leaving her alone in their apartment, Carol begins to have hallucinations, seeing cracks in the walls, wiping away imaginary dirt, and eventually being raped in her bed at night. She barricades herself in her flat but the outside world invades this space. Colin (John Fraser), a young man who claims to be in love with Carol, breaks down her door to confess his feelings and a horrified Carol beats him to death. He is followed soon after by the landlord (Patrick Wymark) who attempts to rape Carol and is also murdered. When Helen and her boyfriend return from Italy, they find a filthy flat, two dead bodies and a catatonic Carol hiding under the bed. Polanski ends the film with a close-up on a photograph of Carol as a child; she stares suspiciously at an older man to her left, who smiles into the camera. This clue of childhood sexual abuse is seemingly the only explanation offered for Carol's distrust of men and her acts of violence.

Polanski is concerned in *Repulsion* to not only detail Carol's mental collapse, but the

collapse of the boundaries between the public and the private, the interior and the exterior. Though it is suggested that Carol's original trauma occurred during her childhood, her experience of the contemporary spaces she inhabits, the city and her flat, are the precipitating factors in her breakdown. The collapse of discrete, private spaces into modern spaces where one can always hear and be heard, see and be seen thus form the background for the aural, physical, hallucinatory and actual invasions which drive Carol to violence. A scene near the beginning of the film neatly demonstrates. As Carol sits alone in her apartment staring at her own distorted image in the teakettle, she hears noises outside her door and walks to the peephole where she sees a neighbour and her dog noisily arriving home. Carol moves away from the door to her living room and the camera glides over the mantle-piece littered with small animal figurines and a plant. The dog in the hallway barks but Carol looks outside the window opposite the hallway at the convent next door, whose bells ring out twice a day to mark the time. The camera continues to take in the room capturing an unused record player on a side table. The only music heard in the apartment during the film, however, is Carol's own singing, a three-man band that plays on the street and a distant piano, presumably from another apartment. The conglomeration of images and sounds in this scene points to the fundamental absence of boundaries between outside and inside: animals and plants exist inside, music invades and can seep out, a window offers the image of another space and sounds unite the interior and exterior and the past and the present. Finally, at the end of this scene, the camera settles upon the mysterious photograph that seems to hold the key to *Repulsion*'s mystery. It hints at the dissolution of family boundaries, the vulnerability

of physical and mental barriers and the inscription of the breach of these upon Carol. Her sensitivity to these boundary disruptions is thus not only tied to the mysterious family photograph but it is intimately related to her experiences as a grown woman in the modern city.

The time and place in which *Repulsion* was filmed is of central importance in this respect for, as Katherine Shonfield writes, Carol “takes to the streets of London when it was at its most exhibitionist. In 1965 it has the eyes of the western world on it: the following year it is dubbed ‘The Swinging City’ by Time Magazine.”¹⁷ Shonfield is sure to specify the gendered roles taken up on these city streets. She includes photos of boys, “sitting on Vespas watching girls,” and girls, “[m]ini-skirted [...] parading for the men.”¹⁸ Carol, played by the extraordinarily beautiful Deneuve, unwittingly falls into the role of the watched when traversing London’s streets, both the buildings and builders call attention to her “to-be-looked-at-ness”. As Carol leaves the salon for her lunch break, Polanski cuts to a young man, Colin, looking at her through a window and calling to her. Carol passes by with her head and eyes lowered, oblivious to her friend’s presence and approaches a work-site. A leering man stares at her, asking, “Fancy a bit of the other, darling?” Polanski tracks in on this man’s face as he grins into the camera with another man clearly visible behind him, also staring. There is then a cut to a greasy plate of food with Carol sitting behind it, gazing absently into the distance. Colin’s face appears again behind the window in front of which she sits, and he asks if he can join her. This brief walk through the city streets communicates a sense of surveillance that is totally independent from Carol’s own future hallucinations and is, rather, tied to a contemporary

situation which carves out gendered spaces for the watcher and the watched.

Shonfield elaborates on this phenomenon when she claims that the scene of the street-worker's harassment,

reveal[s] a moment of confident appropriation of the city as a whole and its female inhabitants as legitimate territory for the male sexual adventurer [...] the *flaneur* of earlier times so commands the street that he can sit or lounge, just as if they were in his own living room. The distinction between interior and exterior has indeed begun to disappear.¹⁹

Shonfield's essay is concerned with this collapse on an architectural level and reads *Repulsion* as a cautionary tale of construction failure. Indeed the problems Carol and her sister experience in their flat support this reading of the film. The cracks that appear in the walls are the most obvious and visible example of their building's immanent collapse. But Shonfield is also quick to point out the gendered nature of the dissolution of even these interior boundaries. She writes, "[a]t the threshold of any breach to the membrane of her physical security, there is a man, or the threat of one."²⁰ *Repulsion* thus offers its own contribution to that pile of victimized female bodies that litters the horror genre.

This victimization does not occur in a haunted manor but rather in the spaces of her day-to-day life; Carol's apartment and the city streets are thus made Gothic. Each time she leaves the house Polanski tracks her in close-up, rarely moving from her face, which seems to betray a sense of discomfort at being watched. Helen's married boyfriend begins spending the night at their apartment and the sounds of their lovemaking penetrate Carol's room while she tries to sleep. She tosses and turns in bed and finally crushes a pillow over her head. Michael pinches her cheek, calls her "Cinderella" and leaves his razor and toothbrush in the bathroom and his undershirt on the floor, marking the flat as

his own territory. When he disappears with Helen, other men begin to invade. Carol's "boyfriend" phones constantly and finally arrives to break down the door. The landlord also makes threatening phone calls and eventually arrives to threaten Carol in person. *Repulsion* thus takes care to depict the world as a dangerous place to its heroine because of the relentlessness of the "male gaze" and its appropriation of both public and personal space.

It is this representation of masculinity that prompts Cynthia A. Freeland to propose that *Repulsion* is an exceptional horror film, one that might warrant a feminist revision of their total condemnation of the genre. She claims, "what is really horrific in this movie is not the female killer [...] it is instead lechery, male attitudes of lust toward such a beautiful woman."²¹ While I agree that *Repulsion* offers a critique of the male gaze, I suggest that this film, like *The Haunting*, goes beyond a straightforward treatment of its heroine as a victim of the cruel and omnipotent powers of patriarchy. Rather, the film, through its visual fascination with Carol's face and body and, in particular, Deneuve's performance before the ever present camera, proposes a more complex and infinitely more frightening vision of the role of the feminine body in the dynamics of oppression. In order to present a case for this reading, I wish to contextualize the feminine body in question and explore various feminist analyses of its sources and effects.

The Watcher and the Watched: The Post-War Feminine Body and *Repulsion*

The Haunting, though particularly concerned with its heroine's relationship to objects within the mise en scène, does offer Eleanor another compatible route to "normal"

femininity which is of relevance here. Theo, who urges Eleanor to “always remain strictly visible,” is dressed by Mary Quant, a 1960s London designer who popularized the mini-skirt, hot pants and bold-coloured clothing for young women. Theo admonishes Eleanor to change her clothes and hairstyle and thus attempts to initiate her into a contemporary mode of femininity in which decoration of the body bears equal importance to decoration of the home. The fact that Theo is dressed by Quant underscores the film’s address to the female consumer’s gaze and its strange union of terror and consumer desire. It also emphasizes Susan Bordo’s claim that “femininity itself has come to be largely a matter of constructing [...] the appropriate surface presentation of the self.”²² For despite being dressed by Quant, whose designs exposed more of the female body to public view than ever before, Theo retains her “secret” sexuality (a rebuffed Luke claims that she is comprised of “more than meets the eye”).

Repulsion’s representation the female body, as Katherine Shonfield’s analysis makes clear, may also be read in light of the shifting relationship between women, public life and the discourses of femininity in the 1950s and 1960s. The increasingly visible nature of these discourses and the sense of visibility instilled through them underpin the horrors of this film and form, along with the male gaze which is its support, the central threat to the heroine. This threat thus comes from both inside and out, for Carol’s victimization by the “male gaze” is eventually pried away from its origins in reality and is rooted instead in her own mind. This shift of the gaze from its external source to an internal one is not merely a deflection of responsibility onto the woman and can, in fact, be tied to feminist’s own analysis of the ways discourses of femininity shape the female body and

mind.

In an essay on the work of artist Cindy Sherman, Laura Mulvey coined the term “democracy of glamour”, to refer to fifties America, “a time when [...] advertising, movies and the actual packaging and seductiveness of commodities all marketed glamour.”²³ She argues for the historical specificity of this phenomenon, claiming that “[i]n becoming a democracy of glamour, fifties America completed a process [...] that had been launched in the thirties and interrupted by the Second World War.”²⁴ Mulvey goes on to explore the ways the “democracy of glamour” was inscribed upon the female body and, in particular, the body of the movie star. Lesley Johnson, however, in her study of how young girls learned to become women in post-war Australia, employs Mulvey’s terminology to determine the ways the “democracy of glamour” transformed the bodies of everyday female citizens. In *The Modern Girl: Girlhood and Growing Up*, she claims, “[a]dvertising, the packaging and display of products and the movies [...] promoted the image that all women could and should participate in this world of glamour, this world of creating desirable appearances.”²⁵ Though Johnson focuses on girlhood in Australia, she draws upon a popular culture that was common to Britain, the US and Canada in the 1950s and 60s, a methodological choice that underscores the pervasiveness of the “democracy of glamour” as an ideal of femininity.

This geographical diffuseness was, in fact, a function of another spatial shift which saw the communication of the ideals femininity move from their former place in the home to a more public venue. Johnson elaborates:

the commercial culture of the 1950s and 1960s gave public visibility and a new emphasis to a set of trainings which had in the past been class differentiated and

primarily conducted in the privacy of the home, the ladies' school or particular working environments.²⁶

The project of creating a feminine self, despite the emphasis on the ultimate goal of becoming a housewife, was thus very much a public matter, a matter of both seeing and being seen. Johnson illustrates this point with a variety of magazine advertisements that positioned the male gaze as the impetus for maintaining a properly feminine appearance and bodily comportment. She includes an article from the *Sydney Morning Herald* titled, "You- From His Angle", which offers women advice on how to be beautiful from every conceivable male point-of-view. Such advertisements and articles, Johnson proposes, encouraged women to "imagine themselves as always observed" and to "acquire the technique of constantly watching themselves, keeping both their bodies and selves under close scrutiny and unrelenting surveillance."²⁷ The public gaze thus takes up a position within the woman by virtue of her exposure to advertising, television and cinema and intrudes on the most personal and private of her activities.²⁸ These representations have material effects on the reality of women's relation to themselves and to others.

This historical information sheds light on *Repulsion* in a number of interesting ways in terms of both the film itself and the spectatorial relationship it inspires. First, the representation of Carol's mental breakdown, in which men appear with increasing frequency in her hallucinations, is intimately tied to the internalization of this "male gaze" and techniques of self-surveillance. The first frightening hallucination Carol experiences is just after her sister has left for Italy. She goes into Helen's bedroom and moves to her wardrobe, taking out a lovely dress Helen had worn a few nights before. As she closes the door and holds the dress against her body to admire herself in the mirror, a

man's reflection suddenly comes into view, giving Carol and the film's viewers a jolt. This man begins to reappear with increasing frequency, eventually making his way into her bed and raping her in the night. These attacks are interspersed with Polanski's own invasive camera work, which occasionally represents an actual male but often exists as a disembodied stalker. The men on the street and the gaze of the camera become entwined with Carol's own visions here, so that the three are made almost indistinguishable. Indeed, Carol's imagined rapist often visits her when the convent bell tolls and, in a later scene, a "real" man attempts to rape her at the same moment. Thus, the same gaze with which she appraises herself in the mirror is collapsed with an external surveillance that functions to keep her immobile, frightened, and vulnerable: essentially feminine. Appropriately, as Carol's madness increases she turns to sewing, ironing the undershirt that once disgusted her and applying lipstick before being raped in the night. The shot of this dark lipstick smearing across her white pillowcase as her head is dragged across it seems to function here as a shorthand for the union of the practices of femininity and violence.

This reading of Carol's mental collapse as an internalization of the gaze of the Other is both lent credence and complicated through other narrative details. In Dorothy E. Smith's afore discussed conception of femininity as "textual phenomenon," she insists, "[t]he production of discursive appearances is a matter of conscious art and technique. The project is the production of the visible self as an instance of the image."²⁹ The modern feminine disciplines, which mediate the replication of representations upon the real body, are depicted in *Repulsion* through Carol's workplace, a downtown beauty salon. The

salon itself is a cacophonous factory, with rows of women under hairdryers and identically clad employees running about. Appropriately, the exterior of this building is not glass but marble, in which all passers-by are reflected. In the salon, notes Shonfield, "Deneuve works as assistant in holding back failures of the body's own external skin, with the language of feminine sensibility."³⁰ The project of self-beautification through paints, masks and sprays that takes place in this space is set against the disintegration of the walls in Carol's flat, the rotting food in her kitchen and the cracks that appear in the sidewalks. This contrast is extended to the bodies of the women in question, with Carol's slovenliness providing a stark, and eventually ironic, contrast to the self-consciously disciplined women.

The beauty salon is also set against the public space just outside the salon's doors where one is always seeing and being seen. What Polanski achieves in placing a beauty salon in the midst of a film that condemns "male attitudes of lust toward such a beautiful woman" is a vision of a system which indoctrinates both men and women into its gendered ways of looking. For men, this is manifest in the active, controlling "male gaze". Michael both tells Helen to "put on her best" for an evening out with him and then demands, when her change of clothes and make-up application take too long, "Come on, your not going into the Miss World competition." By the same token, the women in the salon are actively treating their bodies as deficient, covering them over, manipulating them, and submitting them to the sharp instruments with which Carol eventually slashes one. Rather than approaching the film as solely an indictment of the male gaze, I would suggest this film is also of interest to feminists in its revelations about the intersection of

femininity, that “male construct”, and the female, in other words, the ways in which discourses of femininity produce material effects upon the female body and mind.

Like *The Haunting* then, *Repulsion* offers a fictional, though historically relevant, account of the ways in which women’s “very subjectivities are structured within an ensemble of systematically duplicitous practices.”³¹ These films thus offer feminist film critics other sites for the exploration of oppression. Rather than a continual re-iteration of the violence of the cinematic male gaze, which is undoubtedly an essential point of analysis, *Repulsion* presents an exploration the way this gaze is maintained through practices of femininity and their effects on the bodies and minds of their practitioners. Indeed, the confusion between Carol, the camera and her actual pursuers, calls into question the very “maleness” of this gaze. If it is internalized to the extent that it is part of the woman, does it remain “male”? I do not propose to answer that question here, but what I wish to point out is the way this film complicates what has become a fairly standard feminist approach to horror films, the workings of which the label “regressive” or “progressive” is often hung.

It is important to note, however, that, like *The Haunting*, *Repulsion* makes this depiction of femininity as lived experience horrific and goes to lengths to place it in the context of a violently patriarchal space. It does not, therefore, attempt to shift blame or absolve blatantly oppressive social organizations. Both films do, however, explore the ways their heroines, as products of discourses of femininity and as beings rooted in a patriarchal culture, are implicated, however inadvertently, in their own victimization. In *The Haunting*, Eleanor’s internalized sense of lack and culturally constructed desire for

commodities to fill that lack, contribute to her final disappearance into Hugh Crain's Hill House. In *Repulsion*, Carol cannot be claimed to be so active; she is largely still, silent and scared. Freeland writes that *Repulsion* "presents the inability to act, a continual waiting, passivity and suffering. Even Carol's final acts of killing the two men seem to be reactions rather than genuinely intended deeds."³² If *Repulsion* does not give us insight into the culturally constructed desires of its heroine in the way *The Haunting* did, its obsessive tracking of its lead actress and her sensitive, often silent portrayal of madness offers us insight instead into the culturally constructed exterior: the feminine body.

The Feminine Body as Lived Space

The beauty rituals that take place in the salon and which construct the public, visible and feminine self are, like much else in *Repulsion*, subject to collapse. They collapse, however, through the unlikely figure of Carol, the great beauty who inspires desire in every man she meets. As Carol's mental health deteriorates, and even before, she refuses wear her hair properly despite being chastised by her employer, chews her hair and her fingernails, although she is a manicurist, forgets to bathe and will not dress. Carol's rejection of the practices and disciplines of femininity ought to mark her as visibly "monstrous", or at least as distinctly unfeminine, but she remains "indeed very beautiful"³³ to those around her. This beauty complicates Polanski's representation of his monster and provides insight into the other forces that discipline the feminine body.

The evolution of the "democracy of glamour" and its demands upon the female body, Johnson insists, are reflected in the practices of that body and in the ways that body exists

in space. She cites the work of Iris Marion Young, whose essay “Throwing Like A Girl: A Phenomenology of Feminine Body Comportment, Motility and Spatiality,” offers an analysis of the movement of the feminine body when undertaking a task. Though Young makes no claims for the universality of her discoveries, she insists they apply to “women situated in contemporary, advanced industrial, urban and commercial society.”³⁴

Johnson’s work, however, lends further specificity to Young’s analysis. Johnson proposes that the homogeneity of feminine bodily comportment observed by Young is directly linked to the emergence of an international consumer culture in the post-war period in which “all young women were now expected and provided with the appropriate information and technologies through the consumer culture to make their bodies according to a single set of norms.”³⁵ These norms, though undoubtedly employed and adapted according to the specificities of race, class, nationality and sexuality, existed to repress such differences and to define women as “first and foremost sexed identities.”³⁶

Young’s essay is concerned precisely with the dangers, conflicts and threats posed to and from within the feminine body. She begins her examination with the example from her title, of throwing a ball “like a girl”. Women, she observes, do not use their entire bodies when throwing a ball but rather keep their bodies fairly static, not even exerting their arm to its full capacity. They thus physically undermine the successful completion of the task at hand. This example serves to demonstrate what Young calls the “lack of bodily unity”³⁷ of the feminine body. Young also observes that women have a tendency to retreat from the incoming ball, to “take up the motion of an object coming *toward* them as coming *at* them.”³⁸ For women, she argues, the body is often experienced as “a

fragile thing, which must be picked up and coaxed into movement, a thing which exists as *looked at and acted upon*.”³⁹ This experience of the body, Young posits, reflects the ways in which women are socialized, the ways in which they are torn “between subjectivity and being a mere object.”⁴⁰ These words echo Sandra Bartky’s discussion of internalized oppression cited in chapter one, a process that disrupts “those modes of perception and of self- perception which allow a self to distinguish itself both from other selves and from things which are not selves.”⁴¹ Young’s analysis demonstrates the ways in which this situation shapes not only the woman’s relationship to commodities, as demonstrated in Mary Ann Doane’s work on the cinema, but also their very way of being in the world.

Young does not treat these modalities of the feminine body as natural, as part of an essential woman-ness, or as being related to female anatomy. She instead insists that feminine bodily comportment “is learned as the girl comes to understand that she is a girl,”⁴² a process Johnson explicitly links to the cinema and other visual media’s representations of femininity. She goes on to say that the “more a girl assumes her status as feminine, the more she takes herself to be fragile and immobile, and the more she actively enacts her own body inhibition.”⁴³ This inhibition stems in part from her experience of her body as both subject and object, a contradiction which is exasperated as she grows older and copes with “the ever present possibility that one will be gazed upon as a mere body, as shape and flesh that presents itself as the potential object of another subject’s intentions and manipulations, rather than as a living manifestation of action and intention.”⁴⁴ The woman’s bodily actions are, therefore, defensive, for a woman “lives

the threat of invasion of her body space [...] the threat of rape.”⁴⁵ Indeed, Ann Cahill, building on Young’s work, argues that rape is inscribed upon the feminine body, which, in its defensive movements and constricted occupation of space is already a “pre-victim.”⁴⁶

In Cynthia Freeland’s analysis of *Repulsion*, she makes the astute observation that this is a film in which “surface appearances can be deceiving.”⁴⁷ Freeland goes on to argue that *despite* the representation of Carol’s looks and behavior, the film “shows her to be a victim that merits our sympathy and empathy.”⁴⁸ I would argue, in the context of feminist philosophers’ and historians’ arguments presented here, that is precisely through these bodily features that we are able to understand Carol as a victim and are further made aware of her continuing vulnerability. Freeland notes that Carol “dresses demurely, speaks in a low voice, hides behind her hair”⁴⁹ to which one might add she is jumpy, jerking away from the slightest touch of a man, she walks with her eyes lowered, steps daintily (she wears pumps), she chews her nails, is unusually silent and is unable to concentrate on her work. Carol’s restricted movements and averted gaze, her covering of her face and her refusal of intimate contact expose her own sense of the danger in the world, a protective stance Young posits creates at least “some small area in which she can exist as a ‘free subject’.”⁵⁰

Deneuve’s performance of Carol’s bodily comportment, however, acts as a sign of her having already been victimized, alluding to the nature of that victimization much as the framed photograph does. The invading city and the paper-thin walls, the collapse of those boundaries which separate the public gaze of the modern-day *flaneur* from the private

“refuge” of the home, trigger the mental reenactment of her victimization, that original act of boundary dissolution. The church bells outside ring at midnight and Carol lay in bed listening to her sister and her boyfriend making love in the next room. The next time these bells mark the midnight hour, Carol has her own tryst with an imagined aggressor who viciously rapes her. If, in the first case, the bell marks nostalgia for the days when walls were built to keep secrets, in the second, it reveals the dangers of such secrets and the ultimate penetrability of both walls and bodies. Indeed as Carol’s insanity grows more complete, the audience witnesses the projection of her troubled mind onto these very walls and the resulting invasion of her body through these walls, a situation which destabilizes that most fundamental of oppositions between subject and object and thus reflects her own position within her feminine body. When the church bell rings a third time, however, Carol will be confronted with an actual threat, a violent man. Why, one might wonder, do Carol’s obvious defensive maneuvers continue to fail her?

Reading and Misreading the Feminine Body

Deneuve’s performance as Carol, her jumpiness, demureness and silence, invests the character’s every movement with her personal history of victimization. Curiously, these same characteristics exaggerate certain qualities culturally deemed as feminine. Though the audience has a privileged knowledge of Carol’s madness and fears, we witness again and again the misinterpretation of Carol’s bodily comportment, her silences and her surface read as acts of a coy and Other-centered femininity. In the opening sequence in the salon, Carol stares dreamily off into space and her client snaps, “I think you must be

in love or something.” When she rejects Colin’s dinner offer, pulling away from him and telling him she’s busy, he asks, “Who’s the lucky boy?” When she fails to arrive for their second date and he finds her on the street, intent upon a crack in the pavement, he asks, “Are you playing hard to get?” Carol’s failure to show up prompts her employer to knowingly wonder if she is “not in any trouble.” Her girlfriend at the salon has the same suspicions and observes, “You don’t look well, is it a man?” When Colin meets with his friends in a local pub, one man asks if Carol is “still keeping her legs crossed” and suggests inviting her over for “a big glass of iced gin with lemon or orange” to loosen her up. The implication here is, of course, that Carol’s shyness and reluctance to touch Colin is a product of feminine virtue. “Virgins are a disease,” the friend remarks.

Perhaps the most disturbing misunderstandings are the two that result in murder. Colin arrives at Carol’s flat to confess his love for her and, unintentionally but significantly mirroring her hallucinations, breaks down the apartment door. He professes his love, mimicking her movements as she turns her back to him and crosses her arms in an act of refusal. What Colin reads as innocent flirtation is also possibly a moment of pre-meditation. When Carol finally turns around, as Colin moves to close the door on a nosy neighbor who has been listening in, she beats him brutally with a candlestick and then dumps his body into the bathtub.

If Colin’s invasion is undertaken with fairly honourable intentions, the landlord who comes next is entirely malicious. He lets himself into the flat, demanding the rent, which is some weeks overdue. Carol gives him the money immediately and, after counting it, he then takes notice of her. In a point-of-view shot, we see Carol in a sheer nightgown she

has been wearing for days absently raised to expose her legs as she sits vacantly on the couch. Ivan Butler notes, Carol's "abstraction is apparently complete"⁵¹ in this scene; she says almost nothing, scratches herself as though dazed, and stares at the landlord's moving hands, not his face. Carol's passive acceptance of a glass of water and blanket and her silence as the landlord rambles endlessly on about the family photograph he manhandles, is, however, interpreted by this lecherous man as inviting. The convent bell sounds and the landlord falls on top of her. She pushes him off but he lunges yet again and Carol slashes him over and over with Michael's razor until he is dead.

The force of Carol's violence comes as a surprise here to the men to whom she is a suffering "Cinderella." Carol is, however, as Freeland points out, no *femme fatale*.⁵² Polanski and Deneuve make clear the sources of her violence in her past victimization and its reoccurrence in her adult life. The beautiful surface which hides a dangerous depth in the *femme fatale* is collapsed in *Repulsion* and Carol's surface is inscribed with both; her behavior explicitly exposing her unbalanced state but marking her as all the more feminine and desirable. This is a situation made horrific to Carol and to *Repulsion's* viewers too, who, as both Butler and Freeland insist, are engaged sympathetically with this woman.⁵³

Repulsion posits a complex relationship between femininity and violence; it is indeed the product of a hostile male gaze, but is also rooted in the internalization of this gaze and the beauty practices that help to instill it. More terrifying yet perhaps is the film's suggestion that victimization and femininity are quite indistinguishable, that the disciplines of the feminine body that make it socially acceptable also render it helpless to

the extent that vulnerability and fear can stand in for the most desirable surface image. In the final moments of the film, Carol's sister finds her under her bed in a catatonic state. No one will touch her for she has now crossed that boundary between the sane and the insane. Michael, Helen's married lover who has teased and flirted with Carol and has been the object of her extreme disgust, however, goes immediately to her, lifting her up and carrying her out of the crowded room. He looks down at her and, in a point-of-view shot, we see her limp body, her expressionless face and her directionless eyes staring out. Ivan Butler states, "[i]t is a quite unfathomable look, and one of the most disquieting moments of the whole film."⁵⁴ I would suggest that it is the moments that follow this image of Carol that, in the context of this analysis of *Repulsion*, are most disturbing. Polanski cuts back to Michael as he continues to stare, his eyes searching Carol's face. We recall he is he who called her "Cinderella" and, ironically, he now acts as her rescuing prince. Polanski continues to pull out as Michael gazes at the lifeless body. He then disappears with her into a darkened room, in a movement that cannot help but bring to mind the misinterpretations of Carol's silence and passivity that have characterized her exchanges with men in this flat. This moment, innocent or heroic in the context of another film or fairy tale, is made sinister here, as the thinly veiled violence inscribed upon the feminine body and in the masculine gaze is made utterly visible through this silent exchange.

Carol is, however, granted a form of speech in the film's very last image. As she is carried lifeless into the darkness, the camera glides away, over the mantelpiece and the floor towards the mysterious family photograph. In this photo, it is again Carol's body

language that tells her story. Here, however, it is more assertive, more direct and, much as it exposed her victimization through out *Repulsion*, it offers a final clue to her family secret. She stands behind her mother's chair and stares directly at the man beside her. Polanski tracks in for a close-up on her face and even closer to her eyes, which express both terror and anger in their purposely-directed gaze. This final image, and indeed *Repulsion* as a whole, revises that conception "of female beauty as artifact or mask, as an exterior, alluring and seductive surface that conceals an interior space containing deception and danger,"⁵⁵ that provokes those psychic mechanisms at work behind the male gaze. For to live in a culture of this violent gaze makes this surface, a surface whose perfections, fissures and abilities are the marks of its feminine discipline, dangerous to *the woman*.

The Gothicization of the Feminine Body

Like *The Haunting* then, *Repulsion* offers an astute, if unsettling, account of the horrors of femininity that can be claimed to have relevance for not only the castration-fearing male, but for female spectators who live with the material effects of femininity as discourse. In this section, I wish to investigate the implications of such a relation between the female spectator and horrific representation of feminine body. As was the case with my discussion of *The Haunting* and its vacant image of terror, it is not my intention to insist upon only one way in which spectators may respond to this complex film. Rather, I wish to bring together two theoretical ways of looking, one at the Gothic monster, the other at the feminine ideal, to suggest a range of possible responses to *Repulsion* that is

rooted not so much in the homogeneity of the female audience but their undeniable differences. This proposal, which grows out of my examination of Vivian Sobchack's personal essay "The Leech Woman's Revenge," and *The Haunting*'s strategies for confronting and exposing cultural conditioning, will be developed further in my final chapter to suggest the ways horror films might serve as a tool for addressing individual problems of both internalized oppression and fear of the Other.

Gothic horror, writes Judith Halberstam, is a genre "which works hard at dismantling the stable relations between representation and reality."⁵⁶ Indeed, this is the very process at work in both *The Haunting* and *Repulsion*, where these films' presentation of reality is skewed and made indistinguishable from their heroines' disturbed mental processes. This is, in part, a function of the very nature of mental illness but is also, as has been highlighted here and in chapter one, a function of the ways in which these films illustrate the processes of internalization. Both Eleanor's symbiosis with Hill House and Carol's hallucinations are not totally divorced from their reality but are instead an extreme reflection of their "real" experiences, their physical, emotional and mental oppression. The parallel between horror's attempts to destabilize the boundaries between the real and the unreal and the articulation of this very process as a product of a "psychological oppression" that attacks "the person in her personhood"⁵⁷ goes some way toward explaining why so many viewers feel victimized by the horror film and, perhaps, why it is assumed to be particularly difficult for women.

For, as was discussed earlier in this chapter, the female body is a site where representation and the real meet in a most problematic way. The address of multiple

media, the positioning of the woman as consumer and as commodity, the work she is encouraged to perform upon her own body to meet the image, all blur the lines between representation and reality. Dorothy E. Smith offers an example when she describes the woman “attempting to create in her own body the displays which appeal to the public textual images as their authority and depend upon the doctrines of femininity for their interpretation.”⁵⁸ This very project inscribes oppression upon the female body as it is inevitably made a resistant object to the woman’s efforts. This self-objectification is “created by the textual image through which she becomes conscious of its defects.”⁵⁹ *Repulsion*, a film which examines both the place of beauty practices within a regime of surveillance, the interiorization of the gaze of the other, and the failure of the feminine body’s defenses through this very disruption of representation and reality, would thus appear to pose the problem of female experience within patriarchal culture in acute form.

What is missing from *Repulsion*, and from my analysis of it thus far, is that textual image which dictates the boundaries of femininity and to which real women look to learn how to look. While the film seems more concerned with the practices and effects of modern femininity, it nevertheless offers its own image of the body beautiful in international film star Catherine Deneuve. Though *Repulsion* is by no means a glamour vehicle for the actress, this film marks the beginning of a career in which Deneuve came to stand as an icon of beauty and fashion. Only two years later in Luis Bunuel’s *Belle de Jour* (1967), Deneuve’s clothing would set off a buying frenzy for Yves St. Laurent originals and knock-offs.⁶⁰ Moreover, Polanski’s camera techniques - close-ups, extreme close-ups and tracking shots over the body - seem to signal this body as not only “to-be-

looked-at” but, as Mary Ann Doane suggests is its female counterpart, to be sold and imitated.

Deneuve’s role as the beauty/monster in *Repulsion*, however, seems to create an extreme contradiction in ways of looking. Judith Halberstam argues, “[t]he Gothic monster is precisely a disciplinary sign, a warning of what may happen if the body is imprisoned by its desires or if the subject is unable to discipline him- or herself fully and successfully.”⁶¹ Gothic monsters thus encourage viewers “to read themselves and their own bodies and scan themselves for signs of devolution.”⁶² In a curious twist, *Repulsion* positions an ideal feminine body as its monster and it is that body’s very successes at feminine disciplines, though unintentional, which are made a source of terror for the woman who inhabits it.

Though one cannot predict the ways in which each viewer will read this beautiful monster, one can imagine a kind of critical exchange between the idealized but terrorized body of Carol and the female viewer adept at both interpreting textual images of the female body and recognizing “the imperfections of *her* body.”⁶³ In the gothicization of the feminine body, *its* failures, vulnerabilities and horrors become obvious while viewers can read their own bodies for traces of this flawed femininity, both its surface and its embodied characteristics. This reverses the usual relation of looking and engages the viewer in a very different critical approach to her own body.⁶⁴ When Sandra Lee Bartky asks, “[w]here is the account of the disciplinary practices that engender the ‘docile bodies’ of women, bodies more docile than the bodies of men?”⁶⁵, we might propose that Gothic horror, which inscribes such secrets upon its monsters, might also offer insight

into the ways in which power is imposed upon and practiced by the female body.

While I have used the double position of the female spectator, engaged with the image through identification that traps her, to explore *Repulsion*'s disruption of this traditional look, it is my hope that I have avoided that "double bind" the editors of *Re-Vision* articulate so well. For I have attempted to forgo a reading of *Repulsion* which would reiterate women's "radical absence" in the face of her cinematic presence and have, instead, suggested ways in which the female body on film may be used to explore problematic aspects of women's experience above and beyond their subjection to the male gaze. At the same time, in proposing that this film encourages viewers to reflect on their own bodies and its various and differing manifestations of femininity, I support the feminist claim that "'femininity' as a category is not the possession of women,"⁶⁶ but insist that, by the same token, the two may not always be entirely disconnected. Few female viewers would scan their bodies to find a duplicate of Deneuve's, but few would also fail to recognize what June Jordan claims is "a universal experience for women [...] that physical mobility is circumscribed by our gender."⁶⁷ While this chapter thus "risk[s] a recapitulation of patriarchal constructions and a naturalization of 'woman'," ⁶⁸ it also risks exploring how these representations break down in film and how this corresponds with, disrupts or re-makes their "material effects" in reality, a potentially terrifying, thrilling, and, ultimately, useful tool for the woman who finds traces of the feminine, the feminist or both on her body.

¹ As stated in the introduction to this thesis, “femininity” is largely constructed in these films to mean a white, middle-class woman. Female viewers are, of course, not a homogeneous group and individual women respond to these feminine ideals in multiple and complex ways that may not involve gender first but rather class, nationality, sexuality or race. Nevertheless, as Ann J. Cahill states, “it is white femininity which has a dominant, albeit not solitary, place in the construction of gender.” For Cahill and for myself in this thesis, femininity, as a particularly classed and raced notion, remains an important area of study not because it can account for the lives of any particular women but because so many women are subject to it as a constant, if unattainable, ideal; as an ever present shadow. Ann J. Cahill, “Foucault, Rape and the Construction of the Feminine Body,” *Hypatia* 15, no.1 (Winter 2000): 50.

² Patrick Fuery, *New Developments in Film Theory* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2000): 183.

³ Judith Halberstam, *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1995): 145.

⁴ Mary Ann Doane, “The Economy of Desire: The Commodity Form in/of the Cinema,” *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, 11 no.1 (1989): 26, 27. Author’s italics.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 30, 29.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁷ Barbara Creed “Horror and the Monstrous-Feminine: An Imaginary Abjection,” in *Dread of Difference*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996): 63.

⁸ Carol Clover, “Her Body, Himself,” in *Horror: The Film Reader*, ed. Mark Jancovich (London and New York: Routledge, 2002): 85.

⁹ Mary Ann Doane, Patricia Mellencamp, Linda Williams, “Feminist Film Criticism: An Introduction,” in *Re-Vision: Essays in Feminist Film Criticism*, eds. Mary Ann Doane, Patricia Mellencamp and Linda Williams (Frederick, MD: University Publications of America Inc., 1984): 9.

¹⁰ Christine Gledhill, “Developments in Feminist Film Criticism,” in *ibid.*, 21.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 21.

¹² *Ibid.*, 21

¹³ Dorothy E. Smith, “Femininity as Discourse,” in *Becoming Feminine: The Politics of Popular Culture*, ed. Leslie G. Roman, Linda K. Christian Smith, and Elizabeth Ellsworth (London, New York and Philadelphia: The Falmer Press, 1988): 39.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 39.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 38.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 49.

¹⁷ Katherine Shonfield, *Walls Have Feelings: Architecture, Film and the City* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000): 71.

¹⁸ Ibid., 71.

¹⁹ Ibid., 73.

²⁰ Ibid., 60.

²¹ Cynthia Freeland, "Feminist Frameworks for Horror Films," in *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies*, eds. David Bordwell and Noël Carroll (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996): 213.

²² Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture and the Body* (Berkeley, LA, London: University of California Press, 1993): 170.

²³ Laura Mulvey, "A phantasmagoria of the female body: the work of Cindy Sherman," *New Left Review* 188 (1991): 148.

²⁴ Ibid., 149.

²⁵ Lesley Johnson, *The Modern Girl: Childhood and Growing Up* (Buckingham and Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1993): 119

²⁶ Ibid., 129.

²⁷ Ibid., 126.

²⁸ In her discussion of Foucault and femininity, Sandra Lee Bartky proposes that femininity is a bodily discipline and examines the endless ways in which women are encouraged to monitor, manipulate, and distance themselves from their bodies. She relates the advice of Sophia Loren on the 'problem' of facial expressiveness, which causes the face to wrinkle. Loren proposes this solution: "[a] piece of tape applied to the forehead or between the brows will tug at the skin when one frowns and act as a reminder to relax the face. The tape is to be worn whenever a woman is home alone." This anecdote illuminates the links between surveillance and beauty and also highlights the role of the star in creating an image of perfection, as well as her struggles to maintain that image herself, a topic which will be examined in detail in chapter three of this thesis. Sandra Lee Bartky, *Femininity and Domination: Studies in the Phenomenology of Oppression* (New York and London: Routledge, 1990): 67.

²⁹ Smith, "Femininity as Discourse," 44.

³⁰ Shonfield, *Walls Have Feelings: Architecture, Film and the City*, 61.

³¹ Bartky, *Femininity and Domination*, 80, 76.

³² Freeland, "Feminist Frameworks for Horror Films," 213.

³³ Ibid., 214.

³⁴ Iris Marion Young, "Throwing Like A Girl: A Phenomenology of Feminine Body Comportment, Motility, and Spatiality," in *The Thinking Muse: Feminism and Modern French Philosophy*, eds. Jennifer Allen and Iris Marion Young (Bloomington and Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1989): 53.

³⁵ Lesley Johnson, *The Modern Girl: Childhood and Growing Up*, 129.

³⁶ Ibid., 117.

³⁷ Iris Marion Young, "Throwing Like A Girl: A Phenomenology of Feminine Body Comportment, Motility, and Spatiality," 61.

³⁸ Ibid., 61. Author's italics.

³⁹ Ibid., 61. Author's italics.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 55.

⁴¹ Sandra Bartky, *Femininity and Domination* (New York and London: Routledge, 1990): 77.

⁴² Iris Marion Young, "Throwing Like A Girl: A Phenomenology of Feminine Body Comportment, Motility, and Spatiality," 65-66.

⁴³ Ibid., 66.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 66.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 67.

⁴⁶ Ann J. Cahill, "Foucault, Rape and the Construction of the Feminine Body," 56.

⁴⁷ Cynthia Freeland, "Feminist Frameworks for Horror Films," 212.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 213.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 212.

⁵⁰ Iris Marion Young, "Throwing Like A Girl: A Phenomenology of Feminine Body Comportment, Motility, and Spatiality," 67.

⁵¹ Ibid., 88.

⁵² Cynthia Freeland, "Feminist Frameworks for Horror Films," 212.

⁵³ Ibid, 212 and Ivan Butler, *Horror in the Cinema*, 3rd ed. (South Brunswick and New York: A.S Barnes and Co., 1979): 88-89.

⁵⁴ Ivan Butler, *Horror in the Cinema*, 3rd Ed, 87.

⁵⁵ Laura Mulvey, "Pandora: Topographies of the Mask and Curiosity," in *Sexuality and Space*, ed. Beatriz Colomina (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1992): 58-59.

⁵⁶ Judith Halberstam, *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters*, 145.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 29.

⁵⁸ Dorothy E. Smith, "Femininity as Discourse," 44.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 50.

⁶⁰ "Shoes to Lust After," *Harper's Bazaar* March 2004, 148.

⁶¹ Judith Halberstam, *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters*, 72.

⁶² Ibid., 72.

⁶³ Dorothy E. Smith, "Femininity as Discourse," 48. My italics.

⁶⁴ This is not, of course, to suggest that male viewers cannot respond to this monster in a similar way but, working within the gendered gazes usually offered by cinema, one could imagine his relationship to this image might be quite different.

⁶⁵ Sandra Lee Bartky, *Femininity and Domination*, 65.

⁶⁶ Mary Ann Doane, "The Commodity Form in/of the Cinema," 31.

⁶⁷ June Jordan qt. in Gillian Rose, *Feminism and Geography: The Limits of Geographical Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993): 34-35.

⁶⁸ Mary Ann Doane, Patricia Mellencamp, Linda Williams, "Feminist Film Criticism: An Introduction," 9.

(Dis)Possessions:

Imagining a Critical Horror Spectatorship through Bette Davis and Baby Jane

“Female and feminist consciousness stand in complex relation to each other: clearly they overlap, for the female is the basis of the feminist, yet the feminist arises also out of a desire to escape the female.”

Linda Gordon, “What’s New in Women’s History” (1986)

“As laudable as [an] emphasis on sisterhood is, we may gain more by acknowledging the power struggles that go on among us than by perennially disavowing them.”

Tania Modleski, “Feminism and the Power of Interpretation” (1986)

Robert Aldrich’s 1963 film, *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?*, opens with the sound of a girl sobbing. As the date 1917 appears on the black screen, we hear a man’s voice say, “Wanna see it again little girl? It shouldn’t frighten you!” Suddenly, a jack-in-the-box pops into sight and we witness a young girl clinging to her mother’s skirt, transfixed by what she perceives to be a terrifying sight. Though the man’s voice seems to proclaim the inappropriateness of her response, a fearful reaction to humor, she cannot contain her horror. While she cries, Aldrich cuts back to the jack-in the box, which also has tears streaming down its wooden face. In this exchange, the frightened spectator imitates the image before her, or it imitates her, and, in either case, the boundaries between image and viewer are collapsed with each mirroring the other. The girl also reacts with hostility, however, drawing away in fear, announcing her difference from this horrible sight. *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?* thus signals at the moment of its opening the complex emotional relationship of spectators to horrific representations.

As a film centered upon the relationship of the star to her own image and the “fan” to

the image of the star, *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?*¹ is particularly concerned with relationships among female spectators and will thus form the basis of this chapter's elaboration upon the critical potential of horror spectatorship. In chapters one and two I examined how *The Haunting* and *Repulsion* exploited feminine ways of looking to create both terror and a space for the interrogation of femininity as an ideal that shapes the body and the self. *Baby Jane*, I will argue, also deals with a particularly gendered look: the look of the female spectator at the feminine ideal. Bette Davis's Baby Jane² enacts the double position of the woman to this image, a position riddled with traps and terrors that both feminist theorists and the Gothic horror films discussed have exposed. Torn between an extreme identification, a desire to possess and a rage at this position, a desire to dispossess, Davis's performance as Jane reveals both what lies beneath the image of the female star and the impossibility of replicating that ideal image by the female spectator. The frustration and fury this provokes fuels the horrors of this film and, in this respect, *Baby Jane* expresses a specifically female anger at the inequalities, oppressions, and blatant omissions perpetuated by cinematic representations of women.

While this will form part of my argument for the critical potential of the film, I also wish to stress its more problematic, less straightforwardly feminist, aspects. Though *Baby Jane* gives an angry voice to all that cannot be represented in the image of the star, it also sets up an explicitly antagonistic relationship between women and the feminine, women and other women, and, as in *The Haunting* and *Repulsion*, between the woman and herself. Rather than dismissing these clashes as misogynist fiction, I will suggest through various examples that they offer a useful place for examining the differences among and

within women that are often ignored or downplayed but erupt within and around this film. Using these differences to dislodge the woman from her exclusive place as Other to the man and to acknowledge that Otherness exists in multiple forms across multiple selves, I wish finally to propose that horrific representations of femininity, race, sexuality, disability, any and all forms of "Otherness," and the responses they elicit might be employed as a tool of critical self-awareness. To take one's fears and anxieties toward the Other and the self seriously illuminates both the conditions of one's own oppression and the ways in which one oppresses and represses Others.

Horror, Otherness and the Female Spectator

In an influential essay on the horror genre, Robin Wood insists, "the true subject of the horror film is the struggle for recognition of all that our civilization *represses* or *oppresses*."³ Central to this definition is the notion of "the Other." Wood defines Otherness as that which deviates from bourgeois ideology and erupts in the horror film only to be destroyed or repressed in the course of the film's narrative. His list of horror's staple Others include: other people, the proletariat, other cultures, ethnic groups, alternative ideologies, homosexuals, children and women. This last Other has, as outlined in the introduction to this thesis, spurred a wealth of feminist criticism of the horror film which has sought to expose its roots in specifically white, middle class, male fears and its fundamental failure to address female fears. This thesis has challenged this wholesale condemnation of the genre by demonstrating the way two Gothic films of the 1960s exploit specifically feminine ways of looking to create both fear and critical insight into

the troubled relation of the female to particular ideals of femininity. Given my argument that these films attempt to address a female audience,⁴ those who many feminists since Simone de Beauvoir have understood as the embodiment of Otherness,⁵ to stage a horrific encounter with Otherness, we might wonder what can stand as Other to this paradigmatic Other?

The answer to this question might lie in two striking images from *The Haunting* and *Repulsion*: Eleanor gazing into the shiny floor of Hill House where she has come to find a new self and Carol admiring herself in the mirror when a man appears from her own imagination to attack her. Defined as always and already Other, these women find Otherness and its attendant horror within themselves. Mary Ann Doane's insights in "The Economy of Desire," an essay which has provided the basis for my own analysis of the ways in which these films exploit the assumed relationship of women to the image, eerily echoes these moments of self-terrorization and internalized difference in the assertion that the female spectator/consumer's "subjectivity becomes synonymous with her objectification."⁶

Though my argument for *The Haunting* and *Repulsion*'s dialogue with femininity, and potentially with a female audience, has rested upon Doane's articulation of this one self-defeating subject position mainstream cinema has offered the woman, I have used her work only to account for the strategies, terrors and traps *within* these films' representations of and address to women. As stated in chapter one, though female spectators, a highly heterogeneous group, may be encouraged to take up this position and engage in its pleasures, Doane's theory cannot account for the range of possible

responses to this address. As I have suggested, one can claim at the very least that female spectators are adept at recognizing this gendered, raced and classed address, regardless of its failure to account for them. Indeed, in my analysis of their horrors, these films hinge upon this very dialectic: assuming a viewer versed in the discourse of femininity, “a structuring of desire articulating it to objectives (the appearance of her body), means and method established in its media and available commodities,”⁷ and sensitive to the failures, traps, and potential terrors of this discourse. These two horror films, in other words, propose a more complex relationship between the female viewer and the “mirror/trap” than Doane’s essay allows. Dislodging the collapse of the feminine viewing position and the actual female viewer, best defined perhaps only by her necessary difference from the image of femininity, (Dorothy Smith observes, “Even the exceptional woman whose face and body approximate the textual image closely is always imperfect. There is always work to be done”),⁸ it is clearly femininity itself which is made Other in these films, not only to the white, male bourgeois subject, but to the female viewer as well.

The relationship of the woman to the horrific image of femininity outlined here intersects with the theoretical proposition of Teresa de Lauretis, who writes that the female spectator is “doubly bound” by “that very representation which calls on her directly, engages her desire, elicits her pleasure, frames her identification and makes her complicit in the production of her own woman-ness.”⁹ In these Gothic films, however, this dual relationship is foregrounded, it is made the subject and source of these films’ horrors. Conflicted feelings about femininity as an image ideal, one which necessarily

intersects with lived experience, are thus given the opportunity to emerge through these horror films and the “natural” relation of self to this cinematic Other is probed, exposed and employed to terrifying ends.

The internalization of damaging ideals of femininity and the horror film’s exploitation of these deep-seated oppressions and their means of integration into the self are obviously problematic issues for feminist scholars. It is worth noting, however, that feminists have themselves sought to make representations of femininity Other to women, to insist that “‘femininity’ as a category is not the possession of women.”¹⁰ Moreover, though female spectators as a unified group have been assumed to be “trapped” by the image, many feminist critics have pointed to the disjunction between image and reality, to their own conflicted feelings about the image of femininity, the experience of watching the image of their like and knowing, “[s]he was not us.”¹¹ These paradoxes, which seem to tear female spectators and scholars between desire and rage, identification and “passionate detachment,”¹² failure and fury, parallel the very responses I have argued these Gothic horror films may inspire. This chapter will explore the ways this intersection may be employed to illuminate one’s relation to oneself and to the image of an Other. This will be argued via Bette Davis’s performance as Baby Jane Hudson in yet another Gothic horror film of the 1960s, one of several that found fresh talent in a population of aging women stars.¹³

Bette Davis’s Baby Jane: Everything the Star is Not

In *Skin Shows* Judith Halberstam notes, “Monsters have to be everything the human is

not and, in producing the negative of human [...] make way for the invention of human as white, male, middle-class and heterosexual.”¹⁴ But cinema, particularly mainstream Hollywood cinema, has also been responsible for producing a specific female as human and as the norm by which all other women are judged. She is invariably white, middle-class and heterosexual but also importantly, young and beautiful. She is a star. Mary Ann Doane argues that the domination of the star system by women and the development of the woman’s film in the 1940s both “insure that what the woman is sold is a certain image of femininity.”¹⁵ Stars are thus central to the “economy of desire,” they both announce the task of the woman “to approximate the image”¹⁶ but, “glowing in the light,”¹⁷ also announce the very impossibility of such a task.

In her 1987 memoirs, *This ‘N That*, Bette Davis acknowledges the function of the female star as glamour ideal but holds herself apart. She writes:

there is no question that the glamour actresses made Hollywood the famous place it is today. The glamorous actresses at that time were Jean Harlow, Rita Hayworth, Joan Crawford, Lana Turner, Hedy Lamarr and, of course, Marilyn Monroe. The non-glamorous types, in which I include myself, were Hepburn, Tracey, Cagney, Fonda, Bogart.¹⁸

This rejection of the “glamour treatment”, whether in dedication to her craft or as an admission of her own distance from the beauty ideals of the day, is often cited as part of Davis’s appeal to fans and feminists alike. Maria LaPlace observes that Davis was “popularly thought to be neither beautiful nor elegant, and unconcerned about fashion or glamour.”¹⁹ Tara Brabazon, who writes admiringly about Davis as a feminist icon, notes that she “played roles that required sensible shoes. Her face was padded and rouged: her costumes were neck-to-knee nightmares [...] She took enormous risks on film, including

shaving her head and plastering her face with powder.”²⁰ Though few feminist critics have taken Davis’s work in the horror genre seriously, it is here that, as one 1963 review of *Baby Jane* observes “she has at last been able to give free reign to her curious penchant for making herself look hideous on the screen.”²¹

Whatever Happened to Baby Jane? is the story of a star turned monster. It begins in 1917 with Baby Jane Hudson, a perky, blond child star, performing on stage as her envious sister Blanche gazes on. This situation is quickly reversed as we jump forward to 1935 and learn through studio heads that Jane’s fame has dwindled and Blanche is now “the biggest thing in movies today.” A mysterious car accident, for which Jane is blamed, disables Blanche and when we finally see the two actual aging stars of the film, Blanche (Joan Crawford) is confined to her room and Jane (Bette Davis) is reduced to the role of nurse, housekeeper and devoted “fan”. Jane does not easily accept this cruel reversal and fantasizes about her former fame, dressing as Baby Jane and rehearsing her now classic number “I’ve Written a Letter to Daddy” in front of the living room mirror. As her sanity deteriorates, she begins to torture Blanche, confining her to her room, starving her and beating her. Jane eventually murders the hired help to keep this abuse a secret but the police eventually arrive and Jane is forced to escape with Blanche to a nearby beach. Lying on the sand on the verge of death, Blanche confesses that the car accident was her own fault, that it was she who had tried to kill her sister on that fateful night but, instead, crippled herself. The film ends when Jane, on the verge of arrest, dances before a crowd of onlookers, returning to the spotlight once again.

Davis does indeed look “hideous” as Baby Jane: her appearance in the film has

troubled even feminist scholars for whom Davis does no less than directly challenge “common feminist wisdom about the controlling male gaze located in the persona of the male director.”²² In *From Reverence to Rape*, Molly Haskell writes, “Joan Crawford and Bette Davis were turned into complete travesties of themselves in *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?*”²³ while Linda Williams dismisses the two stars’ performances by observing that, no longer fit for the role of “spectacle-objects [they] nevertheless persevere as horror-objects.”²⁴ The critical reaction to both women’s work in this film stands in stark contrast to their reputation among feminist scholars as powerful and unconventional stars and insists rather upon their total passivity and victimization by the horror genre.²⁵

Though Davis readily admits of both Crawford and herself, “we were not considered box-office. We were not *bankable*,”²⁶ this is also precisely why she claims,

Baby Jane was a breakthrough in women’s pictures. Not in ten years had there been a successful woman’s film. Actresses had owned the industry for the previous twenty years and the men were entitled to their turn in the fifties and sixties [...] Given that trend, *Baby Jane* was truly a break for both Joan and me.²⁷

The collapse of the studio system, and with it the star system, the shifting demographic of the film-going audience, and the advent of television, (each represented to some degree in *Baby Jane*) all took their toll on Davis’s career. She writes, however, “Bette Davis and her career are one and the same thing [...] I would not want to live if I could never act again,”²⁸ and, for her string of roles in horror films, Stephan Farber credits her with the creation of a new genre in the era of dying genres: “the Bette Davis monster movie.”²⁹ For, despite the protests of Haskell and Williams, Davis actively contributed to the creation of her own cinematic monstrosity and madness and, in fact, the anxieties

expressed over Davis's grotesque appearance correspond to the very element in *Baby Jane* over which she exerted the most control.

In a chapter entitled "*Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?*", Davis writes of her decision to do her own make-up for the film: "What I had in mind, no professional makeup man would have dared to put on me."³⁰ She elaborates:

I felt Jane never washed her face, just added another layer of makeup each day. I used a chalk white-base, lots of eye shadow- very black- a cupid's bow mouth, a beauty mark on my cheek and a bleached blonde wig with Mary Pickford curls. Jane always wanted to look like a baby doll.³¹

What emerges from this description, and certainly from watching Davis in the film, is her imitation of not only the appearance of the child-star Baby Jane, but also the image of the young, white, feminine star. But, as Sianne Ngai notes, "emulation [...] often works to produce the exact opposite of identification: to make manifest an incongruity or disjunction, to forcefully assert one's difference from that which one emulates."³² In this respect, Davis's Baby Jane becomes the negative of the star, all which is repressed in her ideal image, the embodiment of Otherness.

bell hooks insists, "the obsession to have white women film stars be ultra-white was a cinematic practice that sought to maintain a distance, a separation between that image and the black female Other; it was a way to perpetuate white supremacy."³³ Davis's Baby Jane draws attention to these politics: Jane's desire to be a star, the idealized feminine, is enacted precisely by making herself "ultra- white" through that most feminine of commodities, make-up. Before heading to the bank, Jane leans into the camera, using it as a mirror. She checks her ghastly white face and draws in her lipstick, characteristically extending it beyond the borders of her lips, in a gesture that both marks her distance

from the ideal of white femininity and calls attention to it as an unnatural cinematic practice, an illusion, a representational lie.³⁴ In creating a monster who never washes her face and instead lets the layers of white foundation build up over her skin in an effort to approximate the image ideal, Davis foregrounds her own difference, her dis-identification through those very practices through which feminine identification is so often inscribed.

Jane's non-whiteness is also inscribed in her proximity to the only black woman in the film, Elvira (Maidie Norman). These two women, though visual opposites, are united through domestic labour, work to which Aldrich pays an unusual amount of attention. Jane is often seen cleaning, preparing and delivering food, tidying her sister's room, as is Elvira. Both women play the role of caregiver, housekeeper and "fan" to Blanche and, though Blanche is positioned as Jane's primary rival, Elvira also poses a threat. In *American Domesticity*, Kathleen McHugh argues that the absence of representations of domestic labour in Hollywood film served to keep issues of race and class invisible. The continual representation of a "leisured white femininity" repressed a whole range of social differences and domestic labour itself "came to be represented as antithetical to the duties of wife and mother, which were to love and suffer well, to look good, and to shop a lot."³⁵ Elvira's continued presence in the Hudson home thus becomes problematic, not only because she finds Blanche locked in her room and tied to her bed, but also because she reminds Jane of her own difference from the white star "Blanche," who retains her unlaboured appearance only by virtue of her disability. Thus, as the film progresses and Jane plots her comeback, Elvira becomes a central obstacle. She is first fired and banished from the Hudson home, and then, upon breaking in and finding Blanche, she is

murdered.

If there is any doubt that Elvira functions as an affront to Jane's illusion of herself as an unlaboured star, the film underscores Jane's hostile relationship to both her own classed, raced position and the feminine ideal by making her domestic chores increasingly a source of the film's horror and an outlet for her vengeance. Jane removes Blanche's birdcage from her room to clean it and then serves the pet on a bed of lettuce for Blanche's lunch. Later, Jane feeds a starving Blanche a dead rat from the cellar on the same silver platter. Jane's fury at her own diminished position and at Blanche's elevated one is communicated here through the labour of domestic chores, a "repressed" which emerges in this horror film to signal all that is Other to the image of the white, middle class *woman* in mainstream cinema.

Jane's Otherness is, however, multiple and another dimension is added early in the film when her neighbour, Mrs. Bates, has a conversation with her daughter (played by Davis's daughter B.D.) about their mutual desire to see Blanche Hudson, whose films are being revived on television. "All I ever see is that fat sister slouching around," bemoans the daughter, reiterating Jane's devaluation as a commodity. Jane's dreams of stardom thus fail not only because she is classed and raced but because she is old and "fat". This monster is a constellation of social, cultural, and physical differences which are exempt from the image of the star but which exist, nevertheless, in a subject whose very identity "is vested in the effects she's successful in creating."³⁶ This situation creates a particular relation within the woman to her self and her body, perhaps best demonstrated in the disjunction between Jane's desires and her grotesque embodiment of them, that is

distinctly mediated by the “textual image,”³⁷ as was argued in chapter two. It also, however, creates a particular relation *between* women, as demonstrated by Jane’s eradication of the Other (Elvira) who frighteningly intersects with herself and, her attempt to eradicate Blanche, the image ideal who is frustratingly Other.

One of the most powerful and disturbing scenes in the film brings together these issues in a soliloquy delivered by Davis. As she sits at her piano, a drink in the foreground of the shot, she plays her theme song, “I’ve Written a Letter to Daddy.” Suddenly she hears herself as a child singing this song and looks toward the Baby Jane doll that sits in front of a wall-sized mirror. Davis communicates surprise, nostalgia and pleasure in a matter of moments and then rises to stagger toward her ideal miniaturized self. With tears in her eyes she reaches out to fix the bow on the doll’s head and as suddenly as it began, the singing stops. Davis hesitates, laughs, shoves the doll in a child-like way, plants the bow on top on her own head, and picks up where the doll left off. As she strokes the doll’s face, singing in a crackly, uncertain voice, Aldrich cuts to Blanche upstairs who, though terrified, moves to listen more closely. Davis steps to the centre of the living room, just behind a large hanging light, and faces the mirror. She stops, poses and begins to recite:

Now when I’m very good and do as I am told, I’m Mama’s little angel and Papa says I’m good as gold. But when I’m very bad and answer back and sass then I’m Mama’s little devil and Papa says I’ve got the brass. Now I wish that you would tell me ‘cause I’m much too young to know...

At this line, Davis steps forward into the glaring light which reveals every line, wrinkle and trace of make-up on her face and catches sight of herself in the mirror. She stares in horror, shaking her head and then covers her face with both hands and begins to scream

and cry. As she doubles over sobbing, Blanche begins to buzz her from upstairs. She buzzes over and over again while Aldrich cuts rapidly from Blanche to the buzzer, to Jane. Jane slowly, malevolently rises, takes a deep breath and belts out, "Alright Blanche Hudson! Miss big, fat movie star, Miss rotten, stinkin' actress! Press a button, ring a bell and you think the whole damn world comes running, don't you?" She affects a servile demeanor, "Lunch Miss Hudson? Why certainly Miss Hudson." With increased hostility she screams, "I'm sure we can find something appropriate for you Miss Hudson!" as she smashes the piano and knocks her drink to the floor.

In this scene Davis stresses Jane's divided relationship to the image of the star. On the one hand, she gazes with desire at Baby Jane and attempts to replicate that which she once was through her blond hair, white skin and obedience to Daddy. At the moment when she sees the impossibility of this replication inscribed in her own aging reflection and is reminded of all her Otherness, the buzzer rings. Jane has quite another relationship to this star. Though, much like her own reflection, Blanche's buzzing reminds her of her position as laborer, she reacts not with sadness, defeat or horror but with hostility, anger and violence, each of these emotions reflected in Davis's physicality. This fury will result in the death of one woman and the brutal torture of another who is Jane's wheelchair-bound sister.

Baby Jane's appearance and behaviors, brought to life through Davis, offer a trenchant commentary on the "humanity" of the star. Without colour, work, or a body, a truly impossible ideal, the star nevertheless offers her image for replication, a process captured in a shot of boxes upon boxes of Baby Jane dolls waiting to be sold. It is captured more

frighteningly upon Jane herself who, in her pathetic attempts to copy, exposes the very artifice of the star. Davis's exaggerations of cinematic femininity, much like disorders such as hysteria, agoraphobia, and anorexia, "may be viewed as a surface on which conventional constructions of femininity are exposed starkly to view."³⁸ This monstrous creation that so horrified Molly Haskell and Linda Williams, as well as paralleling these "feminine" disorders, also has much in common with the work of feminist critics who seek to expose the unnaturalness of cinematic femininity. Rather than an unambiguously "progressive" figure, this Gothic monster seems to draw out the complications, intersections and blurred boundaries between images of femininity, the female and the feminist.

In a recent publication, *Vanishing Women*, Karen Beckman nevertheless attempts to rehabilitate this film's bad reputation along with Davis's monstrous performance in it. Commenting on the active, noisy and assertive female fans in the film, she writes that *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?* "deconstruct[s] the opposition of star and spectator" and "opens a space where women appear on screen as viewing figures [...] presenting spectatorship itself as a mode of acting, which is in turn both a performance that shapes identity and a form of agency."³⁹ Beckman positions the film in a much more positive light than feminist critics before her but, in so doing, never really addresses the most problematic aspects of the film. Taking her insights seriously, however, we might ponder why a film that so forcefully asserts the agency of the female spectator, simultaneously depicts her extreme identification, her rage, her jealousy and her aggression? How might such "negative", "regressive" responses be conceived as both a way of shaping identity

and a form of agency?

Envy, Inequality and the Female Fan

If *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?* assumes a female consumer/spectator who is more than “a passive subject who is taken in by the lure of advertising, the seduction of the image,”⁴⁰ feminist scholars writing since the publication of “The Economy of Desire” have also granted her more agency and complexity. In *Star Gazing*, Jackie Stacey polled and analyzed the responses of British women who attended the cinema in the 1940s and 1950s to address the issue of real women’s relationship to images of idealized femininity and the call to consume. While Stacey’s research is specific to post-war Britain, her findings raise more general questions and will be employed here to examine the horrific representation of female fandom in *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?* and to address broader issues of hostility between women and toward representations of femininity.

For Mary Ann Doane, the star is the pivot upon which women’s objectification by the image turns. She writes, “[t]he female spectator is invited to witness her own commodification and, furthermore, to buy an image of herself insofar as the female star is proposed as the ideal of feminine beauty.”⁴¹ Jackie Stacey’s work takes issue with this claim and the “hopeless passivity of women”⁴² it implies. Examining consumption from the point-of-view of consumers, rather than cultural production, Stacey argues that women’s consumption is a site of pleasure and resistance as well as objectification and exploitation. Like Doane, Stacey insists the female star is central to this process. Rather

than a relationship of pure domination, however, Stacey posits an intimacy between the female spectator and the female star. She writes:

Forms of recognition of the self in the idealized other, or indeed recognition of the desired self in the idealized other, inform the choices and selection of stars made by spectators. What is at stake is the love for an ideal that literally embodies the desired self in an intimate negotiation between feminine images involving forms of expertise and knowledge firmly based in the culture of femininity.⁴³

What Stacey stresses here is not only the creation of a booming industry around the cinema's address to women but, more importantly, the relationship to self and to others formed in connection with this address. She insists, "[f]orms of intense intimacy and attachment within feminine culture, potentially separate from individual women's connections to men [...] are [...] central to understanding the role of consumption within female spectatorship."⁴⁴ Consumerism thus not only shapes the woman's relationship to self and to the "male gaze", topics explored in chapters one and two, but also to other women.

While Stacey's articulation of the love between the woman and the star and within the female culture surrounding the cinema seems to propose a utopian ideal to counter Doane's nightmare, she does remain aware of the dark side of women's relationship to the image of her ideal. Stacey claims that cinema's stars not only inspire love and admiration but also "the feelings of mismatch, of failure and of frustration."⁴⁵ These feelings are born from what Stacey terms "the impossibility of femininity." She roots the particular "failure" of British women in the 1940s and 50s to economic pressures, class distinctions, and political concerns. She notes, however, that attempts to replicate the ideal image of femininity are, in general, "always thwarted by the impossibility of such a

successful transformation, and the endless reproduction of new, desirable images.”⁴⁶ This “impossibility” can thus extend well beyond the boundaries of post-war Britain and indeed, by its very nature, seeks to apply to every female spectator. A feeling of deviance, abnormality, otherness, whether due to race, sexuality, weight, age, ability, class, or attractiveness seems, therefore, to be a shared feature of female spectatorship that may, however incongruously, coincide with feelings of love and desire.⁴⁷ This is again compatible with the notion of a “split subjectivity”⁴⁸ or a double bind that characterizes the female spectator and was the starting point for this thesis’ exploration of horrific representations femininity and female horror spectatorship.

It is this gap between the image and the self that gives rise to those feelings of frustration and failure to which Stacey’s respondents admit. Stacey briefly mentions, however, another commonly recurring reaction to this situation that, while related to frustration and failure, is active, hostile and violent. She writes, “[a]n important, and often neglected, component of female spectatorship is the feeling of envy.”⁴⁹ The distance between cinematic ideals and reality creates an awareness of a lack that Stacey claims is not merely rooted in the female psyche but is, rather, the product of cultural conditions and material circumstances. This knowledge inspires the kind of violence that is envy, a response which Ann and Barry Ulanov claim if “[u]nimpeded [...] would eviscerate everyone and everything, leaving nothing but shells.”⁵⁰ Although Stacey herself does not delve into this issue in any depth, her very categorization of the relationship between women and their star ideals as both “intense” and “impossible” suggests an inevitable oscillation between love and envy, between the wish to be and to

destroy.

The wish to be, Stacey's research indicates, is most often enacted upon the female body. It is through both the purchase of commodities and maintenance of the body that female spectators attempt to reproduce the Other's image upon the self. In her chapter called "Feminine Fascinations," Stacey cites several extra-cinematic identificatory practices through which the ideal is approximated: pretending, resembling, and the two upon which I wish to focus, imitating, and copying. Imitating involves mimicking the chosen star's behavior, voice and movements while copying involves replicating physical appearances. Stacey admits these two are closely linked as both "involve[] an intersection of self and other, subject and object."⁵¹ Though she stresses the relation of these behaviors to cinematic forms of identification: devotion, worship, transcendence, and aspiration, it is within these very everyday practices that the failure of femininity takes place. We might then question the relationship of imitation and copying to the more "positive" aspects of female spectatorship. Indeed, Stacey's claim that in copying the star female spectators make her "marginal and [...] only relevant in so far as the star identity relates to the spectator's own identity,"⁵² suggests a kind of domination of the image, a desire to obliterate it.

Whatever Happened to Baby Jane? and the Paradoxes of Female Fandom

The "intense" relationship of the female fan to the star that oscillates between love and envy, the desire to possess and to dispossess is enacted by Baby Jane Hudson in her response to her own star image and that of her sister's. Davis's costume and make-up

decisions reflect the desire to be the image that was once herself. In making this image a child, the film underscores the impossibility of adequate replication. Davis's grotesque appearance exaggerates and highlights those failures and frustrations to which the female spectator is subject. These failures are rooted in the body's inevitable processes. Though Jane keeps and distributes her Baby Jane dolls to any and every one, trying to keep her image in circulation, stressing her continuing commodity value, she is betrayed by her body at every turn. Stepping into the light, catching sight of herself in the mirror, she sees the "mismatch" and "finds herself wanting" and then Blanche buzzes.

Like Jane, Blanche is an aging woman. Moreover, she is not able-bodied and she thus deviates from the ideal in numerous ways. Blanche's youthful, able-bodied image, however, remains in circulation and so she remains a star. We first see the still stunningly beautiful Crawford as Blanche in medium close-up, watching her own image intently on the television. She talks to the screen, insisting the director "should have held that shot longer." Aldrich cuts to Jane downstairs, where she slugs away at her drink, contorts her face in a yawn and speaks in a guttural slur. In contrast to Crawford, Davis's ugliness is arresting. She goes upstairs to turn off Blanche's T.V and returns to her daily chores. Mrs. Bates then rings the bell with flowers for Blanche and Jane accepts them abruptly but refuses to let her see the star, her only means of keeping Blanche's image out of circulation. Another buzzer interrupts Jane's work, this time Blanche is ringing. The sound of the buzzer stands in for the final word of Jane's response: "you miserable bitch." Aldrich then cuts to a portrait of a young Crawford that hangs prominently above her bed. Jane drags her feet up the stairs to deliver lunch and to report Mrs. Bates' "going

on about your picture last night.” Blanche erupts with a smile and asks, “Oh really? Did she like it?” The music shifts from the syrupy “woman’s film” theme that accompanies Blanche to the jangling sounds of Jane’s theme as she grins, cranes her head forward and, in Crawford’s voice mimics, “Oh really? Did she like it?”

Making this somewhat innocuous scene of mimicry a moment of horror suggests the hidden violence of copying and imitating. The afore discussed infusion of domestic work with terror is complimented and often overlaps with the film’s focus upon copying as a form of terrorization. Later, Jane will use Blanche’s voice to order alcohol from the grocery store against Blanche’s instructions. Still later, Blanche finds an autographed photo of herself in Jane’s room with the face scratched off but the signature practiced over and over again; Jane now has access to Blanche’s bank account. Blanche calls the doctor to beg for help but Jane arrives home and finds her on the telephone. She beats her brutally, then calls the doctor back and, with Crawford’s deep, melodious tones, tells him they will not need him after all. The escalation of violence through mimicry is completed in the final scene of the film when Blanche confesses why she had tried to kill Jane. She explains: “you’d been so cruel to me at the party, imitating me, making people laugh at me.”

In Sianne Ngai’s essay on gender and envy, she explores the subject of women emulating other women and draws out the hostile implications to which Stacey only eludes but in which *Baby Jane* revels. She argues:

it seems incontrovertible that emulating someone does not necessarily entail that one wishes to *be* that someone[...] In fact, it seems fairly easy to imagine antagonistic situations in which emulation is performed for reasons entirely other than a wish for adequation; here one emulates the other in order to overtake or

eclipse her, even 'dispossess' her by claiming exclusive recognition for the attributes that define her.⁵³

It is indeed Jane's intention to dispossess Blanche, to acquire her money and to put an end to her life. Within the context of her performance as Other to the star, moreover, Davis enacts the revenge of those who experience "feelings of mismatch, of failure and of frustration." Davis's performance thus becomes largely discernable within the dynamics of the spectator/star relationship which she knew so well, both in her inhabitation of the ideal image and as an "unglamorous" "old broad"⁵⁴ who failed to live up to it.

Though envy has been largely dismissed as a petty, embarrassing and illegitimate emotional response, Ngai insists it in fact, contains a "potential critical agency- as an ability to recognize, and antagonistically respond to, potentially real and institutionalized forms of inequality."⁵⁵ Envy's historical yoking to the female subject as a natural and, therefore, dismissible emotional state, Ngai insists, is particularly indicative of "a larger cultural anxiety over antagonistic responses to inequality made specifically by women."⁵⁶ *Baby Jane* gives this antagonism its full attention and Davis's performance as the aging star enacts precisely the inequality of the star as image ideal.

On the one hand then, Davis's performance in *Baby Jane* might easily be categorized as "feminist" insofar as it disrupts a naturalized image of woman to insist upon its falseness and inscribes multiple differences upon the body of Jane. On the other hand, *Baby Jane*, like *The Haunting* and *Repulsion*, is also easily reconcilable with those cinematic strategies that "locate and characterize woman as absence, lack or destructive negativity."⁵⁷ *Baby Jane*, despite its "potential for the subversion of bourgeois patriarchal

norms,” is, as Robin Wood writes of all horror films, “never free from ambiguity.”⁵⁸ Rather than use *Baby Jane* as an example of a “progressive” film that saves the horror genre from its bad reputation with feminist scholars then, I wish to draw out the implications of what I have argued is the film’s central occupation: the complicated, hostile and sometimes textually-mediated relationships between women. While *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?* offers a cinematic representation of this relationship, Bette Davis’s memoirs enact a more direct confrontation between two real female stars. Her account of working with Joan Crawford offers a glimpse of the divisions that can nominally separate women, as does some feminist criticism of Davis’s work in *Baby Jane*. These examples will provide a means of exploring the dark and tangled recognitions and rejections horror films may inspire in even the most “enlightened” viewer.

Bounded Selves: Recognitions, Rejections and Feminist Identities

The editors of *Feminism and Autobiography* write, “the narration of a life or a self can never be confined to a single, isolated subjecthood. Others are an integral part of consciousness, events and the production of a narrative.”⁵⁹ This is indeed the case with Bette Davis’s *This ‘N That*, a memoir recounting her mastectomy, stroke and remarkable recovery. Though her narrative is ostensibly the story of her triumph over the limitations imposed by her body and her return to the silver screen, the chapters are structured largely around her relationships with other people: her daughter B.D., her husbands, her assistant Kath, and more reluctantly, Joan Crawford.

Her chapter on *Baby Jane* begins with a contradiction that plagues the entire chapter.

She writes:

Twenty years after we had worked together, and half a dozen years after her death, we are still a team in the public's mind. We finished only one film and started another. We did not compete for parts since we were opposing types of actresses. I have never been questioned by an audience, or by the press, without someone asking me about Crawford.⁶⁰

Here Davis points to the distance between she and Crawford while, at the same time, admitting that their star personas are mutually dependant. This dependence is built, however, not upon a companionable sisterhood, but upon a relationship of hostility, jealousy and revenge.⁶¹

Though Davis writes, "Did Bette Davis and Joan Crawford ever feud during the filming of *Baby Jane*? No!"⁶² her chapter is largely given over to documenting her differences with and *from* Crawford. Consider, for instance, Davis's account of her own physical transformation for *Baby Jane* and her struggle to stay ugly against the wishes of Aldrich in relation to her claims about Crawford's performance:

It was a constant battle to get her not to look gorgeous. She wanted her hair well dressed, her gowns beautiful and her fingernails with red nail polish. For the part of an invalid who had been cooped up in a room for twenty years, she wanted to look attractive. She was wrong.⁶³

Davis goes on to explain Crawford's desire in terms of the "glamorous and non-glamorous types" of which Hollywood is made up. She separates herself from Crawford in terms of looks again and again and, through she admits, "I was jealous" of seeing Crawford's lipstick of Franchot Tone's face⁶⁴, she increasingly positions Crawford's glamour, her "vanity"⁶⁵ as counterproductive to both their positions as actresses. She recounts, "Miss Crawford owned three sizes of bosoms. In the famous scene in which she

lay on the beach, Joan wore the largest ones[...] The scene called for me to fall on top of her. I had the breath almost knocked out of me.”⁶⁶ She also recounts, “One scene called for me to hit her, and as a theatrical trick I knew how to do it without hurting her [...] But she had her double play the scene with me. It wasn’t easy to play this tense and awkward scene with her stand-in.”⁶⁷ She lists numerous other events and incidents which hindered the filming of *Baby Jane*, each of which is largely centered on Crawford’s obsessive desire to appear beautiful on screen.

She repeats, “we were opposing kinds of actresses,”⁶⁸ “[n]ever were there two more opposite performers on a film than Joan Crawford and Bette Davis,”⁶⁹ and “Miss Crawford was just not my kind of actress.”⁷⁰ What becomes apparent in this chapter, is Davis’s desire to distance herself from not only Crawford as an individual, but also traditional femininity as embodied by Crawford’s brand of stardom. Crawford’s concerns on-set, which largely play for laughs in the book, are represented as trivial, exasperating and antithetical to the professionalism of Davis and her type: “Hepburn, Tracey, Cagney, Fonda, Bogart,” who were “all from the theatre.”⁷¹ This is underscored even more forcefully by Davis’s recollection of a conversation between she and Robert Aldrich before the shoot, in which she, knowing “Miss Crawford was famous for developing a ‘meaningful relationship’ with either her male star or director,” asks Aldrich if he’s slept with her. She includes his response: “The answer is no... not that I didn’t have the opportunity.”⁷²

I include Davis’s words here, which may or may not be true, to point to conflicts between these two women that comply in many respects with traditional divisions

between femininity, as embodied by Crawford, and feminism, as embodied by Davis.⁷³ Davis, a woman who “spoke out firmly about the general male domination of women,”⁷⁴ who is remembered as a “firebrand woman who [is] tough, resolute and passionate,”⁷⁵ who valued her career above her relationships with men and her own image as a glamorous star, sets herself against Crawford, who she represents as vain, unprofessional and male-centered. Clearly this disrupts an unproblematic or romantic vision of Davis as a feminist ideal, dependant as her identity appears to be upon the negation of the feminine Other, who, at the same time she admits, is central to her very identity as Bette Davis the star. Rather than attack Davis’s personal politics or choices here, I wish rather to use this piece of self-representation to point to larger issues around the ways women choose to define themselves.

The tension between a wish to dismiss Crawford and the recognition of her centrality to “Bette Davis” which drives Davis’s chapter emerges as well in two critical responses to this film and Davis’s performance in it. Molly Haskell writes of *Baby Jane*:

This is society’s final revenge on Davis’ and Crawford’s star image and on their power: the implication, by the exaggeration of their exaggerations, that they were never real, never women, but were some kind of joke, apart from women and a warning to them.⁷⁶

Haskell’s words here bespeak her own desire to distance herself from the horrors of femininity represented by Davis and Crawford. Haskell clearly finds these images false, they do not correspond to the “real” women who are Davis and Crawford, or confusingly, to their star images. Given the uses to which the image of the female star has been put, we might ponder Haskell’s defense of her, her investment in maintaining that that image is “real” and her failure to heed the “warnings” of *Baby Jane*. If this statement betrays an

acceptance of the homogeneity of the star and a rejection of the Otherness which lies beneath it and emerges through Davis's performance, we have again arrived at a place in which the boundaries between self and Other have been drawn through an engagement with the horror film.

In contrast is Vivian Sobchack's response to Jane. She writes:

there is a passion that speaks to me in Bette Davis's grotesque performance as the child star who never grew up but did grow old. That painted face, expressing glee and spite, pleases and excites me in its outrageousness and its outrage [...] I feel her somewhere deep within me even as I want to avert my eyes and not look upon my possible future.⁷⁷

While, in one sense, it can be claimed that horror is engendered here by an identification with and internalization of the cultural degradation of the feminine and, especially, the aging feminine, Sobchack's shame is not born from a misogynist loathing of all things female. She writes of looking at her own face with "fear and desire": "I am, of course, appalled more by desire than by fear. I'm an intellectual, a feminist, and supposed to know better. But I still care."⁷⁸ The struggle Sobchack wages within herself in this essay suggests a kind of Otherness within oneself that emerges out of a clash between the co-existence of femininity, in this case, a desire to remain young and beautiful by cultural standards, and an awareness of this as an impossible and oppressive goal, a distinctly feminist consciousness. By giving expression to these dueling forces through her own physical responses to this image, Sobchack illuminates both her own fears of the aging feminine Other and the ways this fear shapes her relation to her self as both a woman and as a feminist.

It is Baby Jane, a figure who herself oscillates between extreme identification and

violent denial, who inspires the opposing personal and critical responses of these two respected feminist critics. That these differences emerge around this film or, in the case of Crawford and Davis, on this film, illustrates the ways in which such “extreme” material can draw out existing differences by threatening the borders that constitute the security of the self. If Jane terrifies us we might question our own culturally conditioned hatred of the Otherness she embodies. Likewise, if we “feel her within” yet still fear her, we might ponder our relationship to our own “Otherness”. This unique exchange between horrific images and the selves who engage with them will form the basis for what I will propose can be a critical horror spectatorship.

“It shouldn’t frighten you!”: Horror Viewing as Critical Practice

This foray into the relationship of Bette Davis and Joan Crawford and Molly Haskell and Vivian Sobchack, seems far from the concerns of the horror genre and the complaints of the feminists who study it. I wish to return, however, to Robin Wood’s insight that began this chapter that “the true subject of the horror film is the struggle for recognition of all that our civilization *represses* or *oppresses*.” While Wood is concerned with the ideology embedded in the horror film, *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?* suggests that spectators are also essential to the creation of horror and cinematic culture in general. Within this film, spectators are both subject to influence and are unpredictable, they may react in “traditional cringing ways,”⁷⁹ or they may revel in the revenge of the Other and they may be pulled in multiple directions, caught between desire and disgust, terror and transgression.

Exploring the ways femininity can function as Other to women, as is the case in envious responses to cinematic ideals, Davis's relationship to Joan Crawford, and feminism's stance toward cinematic images of women, thus becomes a means to insist that women, though often positioned as Other to the male, also create boundaries around themselves which necessarily create Otherness. Unleashed in the horror film, the Other may inspire terror in female spectators who hold themselves apart from, opposed to, and different than. While I have used the example of femininity here as a part of my specific project, any number of representations of Otherness might inspire fear, depending largely on the ever changing conceptual boundaries within which viewers define themselves. Susan Wendell observes: "Under the disciplines of normality, everyone must fear becoming a member of the subordinated group; everyone who does not die suddenly will become a member of a subordinated group. Who does not suffer from these standards?"⁸⁰

In her essay "Abjection and Oppression," Iris Marion Young argues that in our contemporary culture of political correctness where outright expressions of racism, sexism, homophobia, able-ism, etc. have been made unacceptable, such aversions are more easily read in unconscious physical responses. She employs Julia Kristeva's notion of the abject, that which threatens the self by "expos[ing] the boundaries of the self and other as constituted and fragile,"⁸¹ to explain these bodily responses. She argues:

Now that the Other is not so different from me as to be an object- indeed discursive consciousness asserts that the Blacks, women, homosexuals, disabled people are like me [...] The face-to-face presence of these others [...] threatens my basic security system, my basic sense of identity, and I must turn away with disgust and revulsion.⁸²

Young argues that such physical responses to the Other need to be recognized, pinpointed and politicized in order to eradicate deeply ingrained prejudices and oppressions. While Young claims that “cultural images, stories, expectations of speech and comportment, interactive habits and the like foster the oppression and domination of some people,”⁸³ she also admits that fear of the Other is deeply rooted in human subjectivity and identity as it is currently constructed. “Cultural revolution,” she maintains, “entails revolutionizing the subject’s self-recognition, to allow for a plural and shifting process, rather than insisting on being a single coherent identity.”⁸⁴

The route to such a change, Young writes, lies in consciousness raising, “the process of politicizing the habits, feelings, aesthetic judgments of a dominant cultural framework [...] through discussion, experiment and play.”⁸⁵ There is perhaps no one single cultural form better suited to such a project than horror. With little concern for political correctness, intended to elicit those responses not suitable elsewhere, and deeply concerned with representing Otherness in all its many forms, the genre simultaneously violates the ideals of equality and social justice of which Young writes while providing a forum for the kind of self analysis she advocates. As I have suggested, if we shudder at the sight of Baby Jane, a constellation of all the differences absent in the image of the female star, we might then ponder our investment in maintaining the homogeneity of that image. Does Jane offend because of her age, her weight, her work, her rage, or her refusal to be invisible? Horror films provide a means for feminists, and all others interested in the eradication of oppression, to explore their own relation to Otherness and the boundaries upon which their own identities and safety depend.

I am extending my discussion of horror spectatorship here to embrace a wider group than has concerned me for most of this thesis by arguing that the horrors of the horror film may affect any and everyone, depending upon the borders which constitute their own sense of self. It has, however, been my primary concern to demonstrate the ways in which the horror genre has attempted to engage female spectators and illuminate problems of femininity. This broader argument also clearly opposes horror criticism that insists upon the genre's relation only to male fears and desires. I do not, however, wish to suggest that the genre indiscriminately appeals to the deep-seated fears of those who are not white, male, and middle-class. I recognize the work of horror critics who point to the genre's blatant sexism, homophobia, racism, and other such offenses. While I have suggested that these problematic representations might work to expose the repressed antagonisms of all viewers, despite any "differences" they themselves might possess, I also agree that such representations can be damaging. Indeed, my arguments in each of the chapters of this thesis have depended to some degree on the notion that mainstream cinematic representations of femininity have proved damaging to women, whether in their address to her as consumer, their positioning of her as object of the gaze, or their limiting ideals of beauty and "true womanhood." I have also argued, however, that the horror films examined here work to expose the problematic relation to self and body created by the dissemination of images of femininity: the films both depend upon and expose the internalization of social norms.

Young addresses this very issue when she asks, "What about the subjectivity of members of these groups themselves?"⁸⁶ She writes that, despite their exclusion from the

dominant position of subjectivity, “members of these groups carry the cultural knowledge that the dominant groups fear and loathe them, and to that extent carry the position of the dominant subjectivity towards themselves and other members of the group with which they identify.”⁸⁷ *The Haunting*, I have argued, operates upon this premise, it attempts to engage the feminine gaze constructed by mainstream cinema which positions her as always wanting only to reveal the horrors of such a recognition. *Repulsion* also represents the process of internalization, uprooting the male gaze from its external sources and locating it in its heroine’s mind. Baby Jane has clearly internalized the norms of Hollywood femininity and while she, like Eleanor and Carol, goes mad with the strain, she seeks her revenge on one of her own group, the star with which she identifies.

If women are frightened by such horrific representations, if they respond in sympathy with these troubled heroines or in disgust at their madness and monstrosity, might these films not provide a way of recognizing our own internalized Otherness, our “split subjectivity”⁸⁸ in relation to ourselves and those we consider like ourselves? Horror films may then work to expose our hostile relation to Otherness but they may also prove useful in assessing our relation to ourselves. This is particularly true for any and all individuals excluded from the subject position of the “unified, disembodied reason identified with white, bourgeois men.”⁸⁹ While many feminist theorists have attributed ownership of the horror genre to this very group, I propose that it can be employed in multiple ways and potentially be used against any and all forms of domination from without and within. As is the case with Vivian Sobchack’s personal criticism, awareness can be generated through an engagement with B-movies that “let[] their cultural fears ‘all hang out’.”⁹⁰

Such a revealing process can clearly be difficult even for feminists who seek to end domination in all its forms. Cora Kaplan, however, notes, “[t]here is no feminism that can stand wholly outside femininity as it is posed in any given historical moment.”⁹¹ Though *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?* tells us, “you shouldn’t be frightened,” images of the monstrous Other in all its multiple forms may nevertheless disturb, frighten, terrify and beckon. To identify, own, and analyze the ways these horror films elicit our hidden aversions to Others and to ourselves may then be a useful critical tool in the very fight against real and increasingly subtle oppressions. These Gothic films’ regressive terrors and pleasures offer a space in which we are free to explore our self as “engendered across multiple representations of class, race, language, and social relations,”⁹² and both fear their insistence that “[e]scape is not possible,”⁹³ while we continue to feed our “desire for escape.”

¹ Hereafter referred to as *Baby Jane*.

² It is upon Davis who I will focus in this chapter despite Crawford’s interesting performance in *Baby Jane* and her career as a horror star (*Straightjacket* (William Castle 1964), *I Saw What You Did* (William Castle 1965) *Berserk!* (Jim O’Connolly 1968)). This is because of Davis’s unique autobiographical account of the making of the film, her reputation among feminist scholars and her “curious penchant for making herself look hideous on the screen.” T.M., Review of *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?* (Seven Arts), *Monthly Film Bulletin* 30 (June 1963), 81.

³ Robin Wood, “An Introduction to the American Horror Film,” in *The American Nightmare: Essays on the Horror Film* (Toronto: Festival of Festivals, 1979): 9. Author’s italics.

⁴ Again, I wish to stress that I do not intend to account for the responses of any and all female spectators but, rather, to suggest that these horror films *attempt* to engage women through cinematic techniques they may recognize as they have been traditionally employed to disseminate ideals of femininity. Assuming, as Sandra Lee Barky does, that “Femininity as a spectacle is something in which virtually every woman is required to participate,” one can also assume that cinematic spectacles of feminine ideals and their modes of transmission also have a unique relationship to female spectators as a multiple but, in this sense, united

group. Sandra Lee Bartky, *Femininity and Domination: Studies in the Phenomenology of Oppression* (New York and London: Routledge, 1990): 72.

⁵ See: Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. and ed. H.M Parshley (New York: Knopf, 1953).

⁶ Mary Ann Doane, "The Economy of Desire: The Commodity Form in/of the Cinema," *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, 11 no.1 (1989): 32.

⁷ Dorothy E. Smith, "Femininity as Discourse," in *Becoming Feminine: The Politics of Popular Culture*, ed. Leslie G. Roman, Linda K. Christian Smith, and Elizabeth Ellsworth (London, New York and Philadelphia: The Falmer Press, 1988): 47.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 49.

⁹ Teresa de Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics and Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984): 3.

¹⁰ Doane, "The Economy of Desire," 31.

¹¹ bell hooks, *Black Looks* (Boston: South End Press, 1992): 120. bell hooks' is a most famous example of a feminist critic who practices personal criticism, a concept discussed in relation to Vivian Sobchack's work on the horror film in the introduction. Much as I have argued Sobchack's essay does, hooks' approach breaks down the theoretical boundaries of feminist critics who spoke only from their own raced and classed position to insist upon another way to look at cinema.

¹² Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989): 26.

¹³ These include not only Crawford and Davis but also Tallulah Bankhead *Fanatic* (Silvio Narizzano 1965), Barbara Stanwyck *The Night Walker* (William Castle 1964), Joan Fontaine *The Witches* (Cyril Frankel 1966) and Olivia de Havilland *Lady in a Cage* (Walter Grauman 1964), *Hush, Hush Sweet Charlotte* (Robert Aldrich 1965).

¹⁴ Judith Halberstam, *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1995): 22.

¹⁵ Doane, "The Economy of Desire," 29.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 32.

¹⁷ Richard Dyer, *White* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997): 222.

¹⁸ Bette Davis with Michael Herskowitz, *This N' That* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1987): 111, 112.

¹⁹ Maria La Place, "Bette Davis and the Ideal of Consumerism," *Wide Angle* 6, no.4 (1984): 41.

²⁰ Tara Brabazon, "The Spectre of the Spinster: Bette Davis and the Epistemology of the Shelf," *Senses of Cinema*, 13 (April/May 2001), www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/01/13/spinster.html, Visited: 03/28/2003. There is no mention of *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?* in this essay.

²¹ T.M., Review of *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?*, 81.

²² Judith Mayne, *The Woman at the Keyhole: Feminism and Women's Cinema* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990): 93.

²³ Molly Haskell, *From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in the Movies* (New York: Holt, Rineheart and Winston, Inc., 1974): 328.

²⁴ Linda Williams, "When the Woman Looks," in *The Dread of Difference* ed. Barry Keith Grant (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996): 21.

²⁵ It also ignores contemporary critical responses to Davis's monstrous performances. Davis received a Golden Globe and an Oscar nomination for her work in *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?* and reprised this role in the equally popular and profitable *Hush, Hush Sweet Charlotte* (Robert Aldrich 1965) which was also nominated for several Oscars. Also, two other horror films in which she starred in the 1960s, *Dead Ringer* (Paul Henreid 1964) and *The Nanny* (Seth Holt 1965), were produced by Hammer Studios, whose critical esteem has risen considerably during the recent revival of interest in the horror genre. Despite this, feminist film critics have generally shied away from engaging with Davis's work in horror films. A recent exception is Karen Beckman's *Vanishing Women: Magic, Film and Feminism* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2003).

²⁶ Davis with Herskowitz, *This N' That*, 109.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 110.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 1.

²⁹ Stephan Farber, "New American Gothic," *Film Quarterly* XX, no.1 (Fall 1966): 26.

³⁰ Davis with Herskowitz, *This N' That*, 110.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 110.

³² Sianne Ngai, "Jealous Schoolgirls, Single White Females, and Other Bad Examples: Rethinking Gender and Envy," *Camera Obscura* 16, no.2 (2001): 194.

³³ hooks, *Black Looks*, 119.

³⁴ It is these very exaggerations of femininity which make Davis a gay icon and which explain her frequent treatment as a drag queen. See: Martin Shingler, "Masquerade or Drag? Bette Davis and the Ambiguities of Gender," *Screen* 36: 3 (Autumn 1995): 179-192. While I am more interested here in treating Davis as a "real woman" through her memoirs and performances and examining her relationship to other women, this type of identification supports my argument that Davis's performance as Baby Jane is a site for multiple identifications of "Otherness".

³⁵ Kathleen McHugh, *American Domesticity: From How-to Manual to Hollywood Melodrama* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999): 194.

³⁶ Smith, "Femininity as Discourse," 44.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 44.

³⁸ Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture and the Body* (Berkeley, LA, London: University of California Press, 1993): 174-75.

³⁹ Beckman, *Vanishing Women: Magic, Film and Feminism*, 187.

⁴⁰ Doane, "The Economy of Desire," 24.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁴² Jackie Stacey, *Star Gazing: Hollywood Cinema and Female Spectatorship* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994): 185.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 209.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 212.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 212.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 212.

⁴⁷ This is a generalization that, like all generalizations, may not account for any and all spectators. Given the reality of the differences among women, however, this seems one conceptual way of uniting women as a group while preserving their variable or even opposing experiences. While it might be argued that this defines female spectators from a position of lack, I will argue later in this chapter that it is this position which also inspires hostile, critical or feminist responses.

⁴⁸ Sue Thornham, *Feminist Theory and Cultural Studies: Stories of Unsettled Relations* (London: Arnold, 2000): 84.

⁴⁹ Stacey, *Star Gazing*, 215.

⁵⁰ Ann and Barry Ulanov, *Cinderella and Her Sisters: The Envied and the Envyng* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1983): 9.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 167.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 170.

⁵³ Ngai, "Jealous Schoolgirls, Single White Females, and Other Bad Examples," 193.

⁵⁴ Davis with Herskowitz, *This N' That*, 109. Davis recounts the tale of producers urging Aldrich to re-cast Baby Jane, saying they would not invest in those "two old broads." Davis later told this story on the *Tonight Show* and, shortly afterwards received a note from Crawford telling her "never to refer to her as an old broad again."

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 180.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 181.

⁵⁷ Mary Ann Doane, Patricia Mellencamp, Linda Williams, "Feminist Film Criticism: An Introduction," in *Re-Vision: Essays in Feminist Film Criticism*, eds. Mary Ann Doane, Patricia Mellencamp and Linda

Williams (Frederick, MD: University Publications of America Inc., 1984): 11.

⁵⁸ Wood, "An Introduction to the American Horror Film," 23.

⁵⁹ Tess Cosslett, Celia Lury and Penny Summerfield, "Introduction," in *Feminism and Autobiography*, eds. Tess Cosslett, Celia Lury and Penny Summerfield (London and New York: Routledge, 2000): 4.

⁶⁰ Davis with Herskowitz, *This N' That*, 106.

⁶¹ Oddly, this connection through female rivalry and hostility extends even to Davis's and Crawford's daughters. While Davis is quick to point out in her memoirs that the events of Christina Crawford's *Mommie Dearest* (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1978) were no doubt related to Crawford's alcoholism, Davis's own daughter published a tell-all memoir about her own mother: B.D Hyman, *My Mother's Keeper* (New York: William Morrow, 1985) which Davis dismisses in the final chapter of *This N' That*. Again, the intersection of identities and star personas is stressed through these "negative" relationships with other women.

⁶² Ibid., 106.

⁶³ Ibid., 111.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 107.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 112.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 112.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 113.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 106.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 112.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 112, 113.

⁷¹ Ibid., 112.

⁷² Ibid., 108.

⁷³ I recognize that feminism, like female, is also not a homogeneous category and that the term encompasses multiple identities. Though I use Davis here as an example of a feminist there are, no doubt, other feminists who would take issue with this designation and with her retrospective canonization. In using Davis as a feminist figure, it is not my intention to position her as representative of feminism as a whole, in fact, I wish to use her to draw out the inevitability of differences even within a group unified around a common goal.

⁷⁴ June Sochen, *Enduring Values: Women in Popular Culture* (New York, Westport, London: Praeger, 1987): 51.

⁷⁵ Brabazon, "The Spectre of the Spinster: Bette Davis and the Epistemology of the Shelf."

⁷⁶ Haskell, *From Reverence to Rape*, 342.

⁷⁷ Vivian Sobchack, "The Leech Woman's Revenge: On the Dread of Aging in a Low-Budget Horror Film," in *The Horror Reader*, ed. Ken Gelder (London and New York: Routledge, 2000): 345.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 340.

⁷⁹ Williams, "When the Woman Looks," 32.

⁸⁰ Susan Wendell, *The Rejected Body: Feminist Philosophical Reflections on Disability* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996): 90.

⁸¹ Iris Marion Young, "Abjection and Oppression: Dynamics of Unconscious Racism, Sexism and Homophobia," in *Crises in Continental Philosophy*, eds. Arleen B. Dallery, Charles E. Scott and P. Holley Roberts (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990): 208.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 209.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 212.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 213.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 211, 212,

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 210.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 210.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 211.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 210.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 342.

⁹¹ Cora Kaplan, "Wild Nights: Pleasure/Sexuality/Feminism," in *Formations of Pleasure* (London, Boston, Melbourne and Henley: Routledge and Kegan, 1993): 29.

⁹² Teresa de Lauretis, "Feminist Studies/Critical Studies: Issues, Terms and Contexts," in *Feminist Studies/Critical Studies* ed. Teresa de Lauretis (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986): 14.

⁹³ Juliann Fleenor, "The Female Gothic," in *The Female Gothic*, ed. Juliann Fleenor (Montreal: Eden Press, 1983): 27.

Conclusion: Horror Begins at Home

This thesis' investigation of Gothic horror's engagement with femininity, a female audience and issues in feminism began by evoking the unlikely image of Hitchcock's Mrs. Bates, a figure upon whom feminist film criticism's condemnation of the horror genre has often been founded. It has been the intention of this project, however, to shift the emphasis from this "defining moment" in the evolution of the horror film and horror criticism to an exploration of other contemporary films equally as popular, profitable and pulse pounding. I wish to conclude then by discussing another Mrs. Bates from the era of the Gothic revival; one who insists upon her presence as a 'real' female film spectator while also alluding to the secret horrors of a representational ideal.

Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?'s Mrs. Bates is an intrusive, cinema-savvy, house-proud, suburbanite who thwarts Jane's schemes through her undying neighborliness. Determined to catch a glimpse of her favourite star, this Mrs. Bates also sees all, but she obeys her own will, stays out of the shadows, and refuses to be anyone but her own nosy self. Her unwillingness to disappear, to be a passive spectator, and to avoid the horrors of the haunted Hudson home, make this Mrs. Bates an apt model for the female horror spectator imagined in this thesis and by the films discussed. Engaged by an image that evokes desire and terror, pleasure and danger, and that demands both a fearful abandon and a determination to look, this spectator, like Aldrich's Mrs. Bates, revises and complicates her predecessor by insisting upon her very real presence as a horror viewer who both shapes and is shaped by the cinematic culture in which she participates.

Mrs. Bates, however, like so much else in *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?*, also functions as an in-joke for the film's spectator. Naming this over-friendly, middle-class housewife after one of horror's most frightening "females" pokes fun at an idealized version of femininity whose horrors were already exposed a year earlier in Betty Friedan's best-selling *The Feminine Mystique*. Like the idealized female star, the happy housewife is also questioned in this film; her cheery façade disrupted by the implications of her name. In this respect, this Mrs. Bates is distanced from those watching her. Like Eleanor and Carol, whose point-of-view we are often forced to adopt, and Jane Hudson, in whom we might see our own desire and rage, Mrs. Bates also stands "apart from women and [as] a warning to them." She reveals the dark side of an image-ideal that, according to the representational codes of Hollywood, is without a shadow.

Like the other horror heroines discussed in this thesis then, Mrs. Bates is a figure that may inspire recognition and identification while, at the same time, encouraging a critical distance. It has been the intention of this project, drawing upon the gaps in the work of some feminist film critics and the revelations of others, to explore the ways in which this double position, this dialectic of "me and yet her" so often attributed to the female spectator, has been exploited and exposed by the horror genre. Beginning from Vivian Sobchack's investigation into the ways in which horror drew out her own culturally conditioned fears of self and the Other, this thesis has attempted to extend her insights to another group of films which take femininity, its sources, practices, and its impact upon the individual's relation to self and to other women, as their terrifying subject matter. Rejecting the notion that such representations of femininity are meaningless to actual

female spectators, I have argued that these films instead illuminate critical issues within feminism including the relation of the feminine to the female, the impact of representational practices upon female subjectivity and embodiment, the anger of the woman at the image ideal and the feminist's own inextricable entanglement in these same issues.

This project has thus attempted to collapse, to a certain extent, the distance between the critic and the text, between the feminist and the image of the feminine, by insisting that these films are useful precisely because they stage a frightening and illuminating encounter with the culturally conditioned self. Robert Wise's *The Haunting* attempts to exploit female viewers' assumed relationship to commodities to both inspire fear and elucidate the Female Gothic preoccupation with internalization. The notion of the self as both subject to and instrumental in oppression is also central to Roman Polanski's *Repulsion*. This film, it was argued, revises the cinematic treatment of idealized feminine beauty to expose its traps and pitfalls and to ask viewers to look differently at its exquisite monster. Bette Davis's *Baby Jane*, a creature of pathos for anyone who ever strived for and failed to achieve the glamour of the Hollywood star and also a figure so outrageously Other she inspires disgust, is perhaps the best example of the particular doubled relation to self created by the discourses of femininity and made the subject and target of these film's affective techniques.

The analysis of each of these films has depended to a large degree upon the scholarship of feminist film critics, historians and philosophers. Though I have used their work to illuminate these horror films and to support my own propositions about female

spectatorship, I contend that these films also hold insights for feminism as a critical practice and for feminists as individuals who are concerned with ending multiple oppressions rooted both without and within. Thus, while these films suggest the ways discourses of femininity shape women's desires, bodies and relationships to other women, they also encourage one to examine the ways these discourses take shape in oneself. They afford us the opportunity to watch their horrible or horrified heroine and "feel her somewhere deep within." As a cinema that by its very nature crosses boundaries, violates dearly held beliefs and disturbs ingrained "truths", horror understandably creates the need to dismiss, defer and discredit the responses it elicits. Taking our responses to such troublesome representations seriously, however, contributes to feminism as a critical and self-critical practice, as what Teresa de Lauretis calls "a politics of experience, of everyday life."¹ As Vivian Sobchack writes in another of her personal critical essays, "[a]t home and regrounded in our bodies, we have dimension, gravity, and the enabling power to regain our sense of balance and to comport ourselves differently- first, perhaps, *before* our images, and then, one hopes, *within* them."²

¹ Teresa de Lauretis, "Feminist Studies/Critical Studies: Issues, Terms and Contexts," in *Feminist Studies/Critical Studies* ed. Teresa de Lauretis (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986): 10.

² Vivian Sobchack, "Is Any Body Home?: Embodied Imagination and Visible Evictions," in *Home, Exile and Homeland: Film, Media and the Politics of Place*, ed. Hamid Naficy (New York and London: Routledge, 1999): 60. Author's italics.

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