

THE REHEARSAL FOR TERROR: FORM, TRAUMA, AND MODERN HORROR

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This dissertation questions the aesthetic, affective, and ethical dimensions of the relationship between film form and sexual/sexualized violation and trauma, in primarily but not exclusively American feature-length horror films after 1960. I take sexual trauma as the conceptual occasion to initiate an alternative generic genealogy, beginning not with Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960), but with his psychosexual melodrama *Marnie* (1964), which hinges on a rape depicted in un-depiction by a wayward camera movement. My subsequent analysis of cinematic horror's relationship to rape advances two central propositions. First, against the widespread critical and popular reduction of modern horror to increasingly graphic spectacles of harm and female exploitation, I theorize the genre's formal counter-tendency toward patterns of opacity, representational instability, and visual restraint. My readings contend that sexual verifiability—presiding over what counts as violation and who says so—poses a problem of knowledge, and that the event of rape reproduces this difficulty in any attempt to describe it or to struggle with its depiction. In this context, modern horror's turn toward “the real” vis-à-vis scientifically explicable monstrous figures and mundane settings expands to acknowledge a sustained threat of rape that is not assuaged but rather intensified by familiar milieux such as home and the family. Second, I show that a monster-based philosophy of horror fails to account for the second voice of much modern genre cinema, in which what appears on the surface to be its monstrous threat is challenged within the texts themselves by an emphasis not on monsters or survivors, but on victims. Through close engagements with key filmic examples, this dissertation ultimately

discovers an insightful affinity between horrific dramatizations of sexual violence and the cinematic life of gaslighting: a horror to which all socially vulnerable populations are susceptible. By tracing the ways that targeted violence and gaslighting have formally and affectively shaped modern horror while remaining historically under-accounted for, I treat horror cinema as a privileged site for epistemological trouble: the trouble of collective knowledge, shareable vision, and traumatic experience.

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

1.1 QUESTIONS

Here are three questions, ordered from general/conceptual/abstract to specific/textual/concrete: How does inevitability scatter the proposition of event through sustained anticipation and hindsight? How do the expectations for and experiences of captivity, violation, and murder exert a spectral presence on their fictive dramatizations? When feminist artist Kate Millett writes that Sylvia Likens, an Indiana teenager who was held, tortured, and starved to death in 1965, “was the terror at the back of the cave,” what affective or formal lubricant encourages her to describe this particular case study as tantamount to inevitable allegorical peril?

Variations of these questions motivated this project’s inception and persist in their urgency as subsequent readings and discussions continue to develop. In 2008, in the midst of researching artistic responses to the Likens captivity, including Millett’s memoir *The Basement: Meditations on a Human Sacrifice*, I became fixated on the question of how one relates to crimes against women—what affects cluster around the scene of relation, and what does one do with sensations of proximity or knowingness?¹ For Millett, as the above likely demonstrates, relation takes the form of identificatory overlap; her speaker finds in Likens’ death a “story,” one that fits

¹ Kate Millett, *The Basement: Meditations on a Human Sacrifice* (New York, NY: Simon & Shuster, 1979).

her lifelong expectation for violence. She experiences something akin to Barthes' heautoscopy, encountering herself not strictly as herself, elsewhere in time and space but with some unmistakable quality of doubling.² As a result, her speaker evacuates Likens' tortured existence of its discreteness, treating it as a vessel for the acting-out of fearful feelings and intimations specific to her own life.

In a sense, this feels right. In light of the current resurgence in popularity of true crime analyses and enthusiasm, there's a case to be made for why women respond to and even build community around the consumption of stories detailing their destruction.³ Such enthusiasm responds to the deep ambivalence surrounding the subject of women fearing for their lives, ambivalence produced by conflicting cultural messages broadcasting vigilance (i.e., the social conditioning to foster awareness of one's surroundings, to arm oneself, or to avoid harmful scenarios through prudent comportment and social behavior) on one hand, and paranoia (the "you're imagining things" school of gaslighting) on the other. Encounters with the story at the back of the cave, as Millett puts it, validate the very structure of fear that much of contemporary culture simultaneously fosters and dismisses. The radical empathy of her reading, which I discuss in further detail in Chapter 1, indicates a way in which the category of lived experience may complicate the scalar relationship between the individual and the collective.

And yet, toward the end of this process, I learned about the critical limitations of empathy from Saidiya V. Hartman's *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth*

² See Roland Barthes, trans. Richard Howard, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (New York, NY: Hill and Wang, 1981), 12.

³ For a helpful discussion of true crime's contemporary currency, see Allison Stewart, "'My Favorite Murder' and the growing acceptance of true-crime entertainment," *The Washington Post*, May 7, 2017.

Century America.⁴ Thinking with anthropologist Jonathan Boyarin, Hartman accents the repressive effects of empathy, which occasion “the facile intimacy that enables identification with the other only as we ‘feel ourselves into those we imagine as ourselves.’ ...as a consequence, empathy fails to expand the space of the other but merely places the self in its stead.”⁵ Hartman’s objects here are abolitionist John Rankin’s letters relaying the cruelties of endurance and torture under slavery, to a presumably unknowing but potentially sympathetic audience. Rankin’s reports rely on the literary device of persona; his narrator speaks as if the experiences he’s witnessed have happened to him and his loved ones. Where Rankin seeks to amplify the impact of his reportage on a white audience by bringing suffering near, Hartman questions how such an empathetic performance—the apotheosis of putting oneself in another’s shoes—might better respect its subject(s) by maintaining its distance.

If I arrived to this project through my interest in one writer’s extreme empathy, and ultimately find myself thinking with another writer’s critique of empathy, it’s not to suggest that the latter is a perfect corrective to the former. This dissertation hopes to grapple with the function of empathy as a spectatorial mode, rather than simply foreclosing its possible utility, and thus failing to understand its appeal. *The Rehearsal for Terror* begins from the sense that rape is both a problem and a motor for horror: a motor, insofar as cinematic horror traffics in sexual violation as a specific form of what violences can be done to a body, and a problem, because rape holds an unruly position relative to verifiability (what counts, and who knows), and also punctures the premise of fantasticism (exemplified by an “it’s just a [scary] movie” attitude) typical of horror films—even when they aspire to realism.

⁴ Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1997).

⁵ Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 19-20.

Horror has long explored literal penetrability, whether by suggestively instrumentalizing foreign objects to plot rapes at a narrative's margin, or by privileging rape at its center.⁶ Had I focused on rape as the motor, the resultant project might have conducted an inventory of horror films containing explicit rape scenes, mapping patterned formal strategies to compare degrees of spectacle with developing censorship standards and cultural contexts. Instead, I gravitated toward the problem: not only, what do rapes scenes do in and for horror films; but also, how does the event of rape reproduce epistemological difficulty in cinematic attempts to struggle with its depiction?

By setting forth a gendered, real-life source of fear, rape highlights cinematic horror as a productive site for engaging questions of human atrocity and survival by way of threat and violation. This entry point also surfaces the centrality of assessment and belief—or of telling failures thereof—to the horror genre, insofar as rape plots amplify one of the genre's most vital aspects: the horror of perceptive and epistemological isolation; of seeing knowing what others can't, and knowing what they won't. D.L. White has written, "[T]he most pervasive fear found in the horror genre is that of being cut off from others."⁷ If we're accustomed to envisioning the sensation of isolation in spatial terms, via a lone figure entering or becoming trapped within a structure of some kind, this project is curious about other, more interior but no less structural,

⁶ For implied foreign object rapes, see sentient tree branches in *The Evil Dead* (Sam Raimi, 1981) and a curling iron in *Sleepaway Camp* (Robert Hiltzik, 1983); for iconic horror films in which rape is a central plot device, see *Rosemary's Baby* (Roman Polanski, 1960); *The Last House on the Left* (Wes Craven, 1972); and *I Spit on Your Grave* (Meir Zarchi, 1978).

⁷ D.L. White, "The Poetics of Horror: More Than Meets the Eye," in *Film Genre: Theory and Criticism*, ed. Barry K. Grant (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1977), 136.

ways in which a sensation or condition of being cut off from others may emerge in a film's formal vocabulary.⁸

To investigate, *The Rehearsal for Terror* studies formal tendencies in examples of cinematic horror from the 1960s to contemporary texts. 1960 is generally recognized by much horror scholarship as the transition point between the prominence of classical horror, characterized by fantastic monsters, secure narratives, and relative graphic restraint, and a comparatively modern mode, which shifts its focus to scientifically explicable monsters and paranoid narratives.⁹ As a result of this development, horror's modern turn familiarizes both the threats encountered and the contexts in which such conflicts play out. Concurrently, this progression understands cinematic horror as increasingly privileging graphic gore, from the slasher film cycles of the 1970s-1980s, up through what some critics term torture porn in the early-to-mid 2000s.¹⁰ In these senses, though classical horror can also be said to allegorize familiar or historical traumas, the modern horror film is understood as taking an emphatic turn toward the real.

⁸ I mean "structure" here as a mutable form that may contain, whether organic like a forest or constructed like a house.

⁹ For accounts of or modeled on this chronology, see *American Horrors: Essays on the Modern American Horror Film*, ed. Gregory A. Waller (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1987); Wheeler Winston Dixon, *A History of Horror* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2010); Rick Worland, *The Horror Film: An Introduction* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006); Introduction to *Horror, the Film Reader*, ed. Mark Jancovich (London, UK: Routledge, 2002).

¹⁰ In no way do I presume that "torture porn" enjoys widespread critical acceptance, but many prominent genre critics have either engaged with the phrase's common usage, or developed their own alternative language for describing extremism in contemporary horror. See: Tanya Horeck and Tina Kendall, eds. *The New Extremism in Cinema: From France to Europe* (Edinburgh, Scotland, UK: Edinburgh University Press, 2011); Beth A. Kattelman, "Carnographic Culture: America and the Rise of the Torture Porn Film," *At the Interface/Probing the Boundaries*, Vol. 70 (2010): 3-15; Adam Lowenstein, "Spectacle horror and *Hostel*: why 'torture porn' does not exist," *Critical Quarterly*, Vol. 53, Issue 1 (April 27, 2011): 42-60.

In response to this chronology, my work attempts to make two interventions. First, I theorize horror's formal counter-tendency to show less, or to show more than can be seen, through patterns of visual opacity and restraint thought exceptional to modern horror. The view that modern horror is increasingly or even exclusively spectacular in its visual address not only perpetuates a narrow sense of spectacle, but both neglects contemporary horror's continued innovations in understatedness, and misunderstands earlier films, such as Val Lewton's atmospheric productions, as "inhibited" by historically specific cultural and technological constraints. Second, I argue that a monster-based philosophy of horror fails to account for the "second voice" of much modern genre cinema, in which what appears on the surface to be its monstrous threat is challenged within the actual text by an emphasis not on survivors or monsters, but on victims.¹¹ I argue that this tendency bears out the terms on which horror imagines gendered danger rooted not only in the ordinary, but also in the hypothetical: the fear of what may happen, or will eventually happen—what Millett calls "the danger of maybe."

Criticism that reads modern horror as exemplifying graphic spectacle, and categorically collapses rape with other acts of torture and death, risks purchasing a coherent sense of the genre at the expense of textual specificity. I started this work in pursuit of that specificity; my aim was to use sexual trauma to indicate the possibility of an alternative history of modern horror film, one based on a set of hitherto unexplored and unexplained formal features that comprise moments of profound representational instability and obliquity—a disruptive camera movement, a blurry or tampered photograph, implicit offscreen action, silence, and even invisibility. Every "how" became "precisely how," as I lived with urgent, contemporary questions of aesthetics

¹¹ My sense of a victim-centric view of horror emerges in contrast to Noël Carroll's monster-based view in *The Philosophy of Horror, or Paradoxes of the Heart* (New York, NY: Routledge: 1990).

(how films look, sound, and organize) and spectatorship: how is cinematic form uniquely equipped to express what's historically, legally, or anecdotally inexpressible? And how does horror put an aesthetics of inexpressibility to use? By tracing the ways that rape has shaped modern horror while remaining historically unaccounted for, this work values horror as a privileged site for epistemological trouble: the trouble of shared knowledge, shareable vision, and traumatic experience. The following essays thus aspire to be in conversation with scholarship that investigates what this popular, often derided, often fantastic genre may nonetheless offer by way of theorizing everyday life.¹²

Grappling with Rankin, Hartman asks, *why is pain the conduit to identification?*¹³ My dissertation extends this question, asking, why is identification the conduit for an ethical response to another's pain? Both scholarly and popular work on the horror film has long hovered around identification, thanks in part to formal conventions (like the cinematographic imposition of an uneasy POV) and narrative protocols (like the "us vs. them" oppositions torture films tend to map onto various identities).¹⁴ And yet, even groundbreaking work on gender and sexuality in relation to cinematic horror has produced telling silences in limiting its purview to identificatory spectatorship.

¹² For examples of this work, see: Jonathan Lake Crane, *Terror and Everyday Life: Singular Moments in the History of the Horror Film* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc., 2004); Kier-La Janisse, *House of Psychotic Women: An Autobiographical Topography of Female Neurosis in Horror and Exploitation Films* (Surrey, UK: FAB Press, 2012); and Isabel Cristina Pinedo, *Recreational Terror: Women and the Pleasures of Horror Film Viewing* (New York, NY: SUNY Press, 1997).

¹³ Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 20.

¹⁴ Filmic examples of horror's usage of POV include *Peeping Tom* (Michael Powell, 1960), *Halloween* (John Carpenter, 1978), *The Eyes of Laura Mars* (Irvin Kershner, 1978), and *Hannah's Gift* (Zac Baldwin, 2008).

For example: one of the central questions galvanizing Carol J. Clover's *Men, Women, and Chainsaws* asks how slasher films are so popular with young male viewers, given that most of these films depict the eventual triumph of a female survivor over a male monster.¹⁵ Clover's greatest critical legacy hailing from this work is her formulation of the Final Girl: the resourceful survivor whose terror and triumph lend structure and significance to slasher films. Clover argues that slashers masculinize their final girls while feminizing their male killers, such that this "misgendering" allows for a kind of diegetic doubling between survivor and monster, as well as for spectatorial cross-gender identification between viewers (men) and heroes (women). Methodologically, Clover doesn't so much solve the problem as domesticate it, reabsorbing the transgression of cross-gender film consumption back into a primarily identificatory framework. Her argument indicates that identification doesn't seem to account for the genre's popular reception, but her answer ultimately re-genders on and offscreen figures so identification once again makes sense. What would it mean to remain with Clover's original thought, and question the utility of identification altogether?

This project forwards recognition as a possible alternative. Where identification stitches a viewer's engagement to the corpus of a particular character, recognition enables a looser relation: more amenable to the fluctuations inherent to spectatorship, and no less acute for its ambience. I go to recognition to describe a mode of spectatorial affinity between viewer and image that necessarily acknowledges, and thus validates, planes of sensation and existence that introduce some measure of the real to an otherwise fantastic world. The effect is akin to the pinhole of feeling theorized by Roland Barthes as the *punctum*: the wound, prick, mark, sensitive point,

¹⁵ Carol J. Clover, *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992).

speck, cut, little hole, or accident, that leaves Barthes' photographic spectator both bruised and moved.¹⁶ What interests me, and motivates this project, is the prospect that this encounter may be reciprocal, as when the image articulates a familiar anxiety that itself may not adhere to a particular prior event. As such, recognition encourages a more expansive understanding of the conditions under which spectatorial contact may occur, the scale of said contact, and its effects on an individual or collective sensorium. If horror's most pervasive fear is that of being cut off from others, its most radical potential is to articulate belonging—even if that belonging obtains through an acknowledgement of lived vulnerability and modes of survival.

1.2 OBJECTS

Each of the four subsequent chapters looks closely at a single filmic example, supported and contextualized by references to or readings from related films. Individual films take up a lot of space in this work to accommodate the kind of close reading that can allow the films themselves to emerge as theoretical texts, rather than as demonstrative proofs of an external conceptual paradigm. The questions that began this introduction emerge in juxtaposition to the films themselves—from problems they pose for prevailing understandings of spectacle, violence, and lived experience.

Part 1 of this work looks at two “crazy woman” films: *Marnie* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1964) and *Repulsion* (Roman Polanski, 1965). In each case, a woman's pathologized instability links specifically to the event, memory, or specter of sexual trauma. Chapter 1, “Danger Given Shape:

¹⁶ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (New York, NY: Hill and Wang, 1980-1981), 27; 42-55.

Marnie,” uses Alfred Hitchcock’s *Marnie* to register how the movement typically associated with a film camera’s “look” also includes its capacity for a “not-look,” or an expression of something by way of movement around or away.¹⁷ The rape in *Marnie* is definitive—marked by Tippi Hedren’s shrill, unforgettable “No!”—yet it’s not shown onscreen, on account of the camera ostentatiously wandering off along the nearby wall. Though the entirety of *Marnie* exhibits conspicuous style (via washes of vivid red, canted camera angles, and ostentatious rear projection, etc.), this movement in particular suggests gender be an added dimension of how scholars anthropomorphize and theorize camera movement, and implies that rape uniquely complicates the relationship between film aesthetics and ethics. Though *Marnie* isn’t typically considered a precursor to modern horror, I argue for reading its rape scene in the same vein as *Psycho*’s infamous shower, as articulating on the level of form a formative violence that’s indirectly depicted. *Psycho*’s shower scene exemplifies the way in which the film as a whole traffics in surprise: narratively, viewers don’t expect the desultory elimination of their protagonist, and formally, the scene’s grammar of quick cuts refuses the viewer a stable orientation toward the action. *Marnie*, on the other hand, being about rape instead of murder, accordingly focuses on the ubiquity of sexual violence, and on recovering what’s already known—its insistence on surfacing almost a response to *Psycho*’s undermining of submergence.¹⁸ By starting with *Marnie*, I ask how modern horror might be seen differently, if

¹⁷ This phrase comes to me from Barbara Creed, who offers it in the context of horror spectatorship: “Given that death is represented in the horror film as a threat to the self’s boundaries, symbolized by the threat of the monster, death images are most likely to cause the spectator to look away, to not-look.” See Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (London, UK: Routledge, 1993), 29.

¹⁸ I’m thinking here of how *Psycho* sinks the evidence of Marion Crane’s car only to end with dredging it from the depths, and how Norman Bates is diagnosed as having a scientifically explicable mental condition, yet displayed with the enigmatic skull superimposition as Mother’s

its central investments trace back not to murder and surprise, but to sexual trauma and familiarity.

Chapter 2, “Home’s Invasion: *Repulsion*,” looks at a film that typifies a subgeneric form I call domestic horror. In these texts, the gradual mutation of an ostensibly safe space (i.e., the home) into something not only potentially gruesome, but also ontologically unstable, expresses the particular horror of violation undergone within the family. As a result of protagonist Carol’s paranoid visions, *Repulsion* mutates and disperses the mise-en-scène typical of an apartment plot, finding horror in the hyperbolic porousness of urban domestic space. If the first chapter’s focus is on camera movement, this chapter pays special attention to mise-en-scène, noticing that *Repulsion* exhibits a compelling preoccupation with photography—specifically, with family photos that partially resist photography’s indexical function, producing aporia rather than definitive answers.¹⁹ *Repulsion* repeatedly cuts to shots of what appears to be a framed family photo, in which a pigtailed young Carol looks at an older man. The photo is prominent within the film’s setting of the apartment and in the film itself, which concludes with a prolonged movement in on the image. Such repetition confirms the image’s significance and reproduces its nagging magnetism for the viewer, but equally important is what we *don’t* see: the image is always obstructed somehow; seen from a distance, or, as in the ending, through panels of shadow that frame out Carol and the older man from the others, while withholding explanation for their

voice sounds. Both are key moments in the film that refer to unseen depths, then visually depict something coming to the surface.

¹⁹ For a discussion of photographic indexicality, see Tom Gunning on photography’s “truth claim” in “What’s the Point of an Index? or, Faking Photographs,” *NORDICOM Review* Vol. 5 (2004): 39-49; see also André Bazin on photography’s erosion of subjective human interference, in “The Ontology of the Photographic Image,” *Film Quarterly* Vol. 13 No. 4 (Summer 1960): 4-9.

isolation. In this film, the photograph—historically and theoretically linked to indexicality and dependable forensic evidence—shows and obscures, such that the image’s obliquity *is* a form of evidence, befitting the inexpressibility of domestic horror.

Part 2 examines two further ways in which rape discourse animates contemporary horror, as the threat of violation genders the proposition of survival. Chapter 3, “Can I Fuck This?,” reads two touchstones of contemporary posthuman cinema, *Ex Machina* (Alex Garland, 2015) and *Under the Skin* (Jonathan Glazer, 2013), which promote to-be-fuckedness to the status of an insidious arm of the Turing test. These films foreground nonhuman woman characters in the form of a humanoid alien in *Under the Skin* and a humanoid A.I. called Ava in *Ex Machina*. In both texts, the initial problem of ontological assessment (i.e., what are you?) gives way to one of possible penetrability, with the latter quite naturally emerging from the former. The question of whether nonhuman woman-things can be fucked illustrates not only the objectifying impulse familiar to rape culture discourse, but a humanizing one as well, insofar as passable humanness messily becomes the premise for objectifying treatment. Like other films that stage encounters with human and nonhuman figures—where the nonhuman enjoys some visual resemblance to the human, whether through suggestive evocation or obvious likeness—*Ex Machina* and *Under the Skin* indicate the centrality of rape plots to speculative fictions. At the same time, these films also feature crucial moments of representational opacity. If penetration is figured as one way to question, and therefore know, the body, these films’ tendencies toward ambiguous, evocative, untranslatable imagery demonstrate a countertendency that resists interpretive certainty.

In *Under the Skin*, this comes across through mysteries of what the alien truly is: from the editing that temporarily pauses continuous time to wash her face in golden superimpositions, to the spatial enigma of the black room where she seduces her victims, to the internal processes of

digestion and copulation that mark her failure to function: in each case, we see enough to know there's more to know, without getting to know it. This visual proclivity culminates in the alien's confrontation with her "true" face: a static black form that forecloses facial expression. While more conventionally informative on the level of its narration, *Ex Machina*, too, pivots on scenes shaped by visual withholding, particularly around the relatively minor non-speaking character, Kyoko. Thought together, these filmic examples aren't equally informative or equally withholding, but they compel us to pay special attention to what's withheld, and to locate horror in the ambivalent desire to use something (some *thing*) both as it is, and is not, "designed" to be used.

Finally, Chapter 4, "See Something, Say Nothing," reads *Get Out* (Jordan Peele, 2017) with Hartman's *Scenes of Subjection*, to demonstrate the vital importance of selective vision and gaslighting to contemporary horror. By "selective vision," I mean an ability to detect danger in one's surroundings that corresponds to one's systemic vulnerability within the world.²⁰ In its juxtaposition of neurosurgical possession and relatively mundane (but wholly horrific) interracial relationship drama, *Get Out* perpetuates a history of genre films whose horror resides precisely in the interstice between what's conventionally understood as spectacular, and traumas that are incommensurable with the image. *Get Out* centers, endangers, and ultimately affirms Black vision, radically enhancing the generic tradition of seeing—and believing—beyond what's manifestly perceptible.

This reading of *Get Out* began as a conference presentation, linked by genre but otherwise unrelated to my ongoing work. But reading with Hartman, I discovered a

²⁰ I adapt this phrase from J.P. Telotte's discussion of *Halloween* (John Carpenter, 1975) in "Through a Pumpkin's Eye: The Reflexive Nature of Horror," *Literature Film Quarterly* Vol. 10 Issue 3 (1982): 139-149.

methodological framework not only powerfully suited to unpacking the variable horrors of *Get Out*—as well as accounting for its hybridity of horrific and comedic elements in and receptions of the film—but also deeply aligned with the central aims and investments of this dissertation. Throughout the preceding chapters, I’ve been motivated by an aesthetic approach more attuned to the small, the anticipatory, the ambient: filmic aspects and moments that don’t necessarily register as horrific on their surfaces, compared to more explicit depictions of suffering. Though this chapter took me away from rape and toward a related but distinct form of embodied violation (in conscious embodied possession, which also entails the loss of agency and sustained experience of voicelessness), its arguments nonetheless crystalize this project’s conviction in horror’s deep capacity to make visible profound experiences of vulnerability—through the prospect or endurance of gaslighting, and the bittersweet pleasure of recognition made possible when horror is close to home.

1.3 METHODS

My methodology is governed by two primary practices: juxtaposition and close reading. Wayne Koestenbaum has explained how juxtaposition operates in his own work by describing form as lighting scheme: “I impose the parataxis to make the edges between two things clean enough that each will be flatteringly lit.”²¹ This work is also crafted to scrutinize the clean and unclean ways that films, theories, critiques, and paratexts illuminate productive points of contact, divergence,

²¹ Wayne Koestenbaum, “Wayne Koestenbaum on finding freedom in form,” interview by Amy Rose Spiegel, *The Creative Independent*, April 11, 2017, <https://thecreativeindependent.com/people/wayne-koestenbaum-on-finding-freedom-in-form/>.

and complication. For most of the years I've worked on these essays, I've been teaching composition students to consider the ways in which source texts, theoretical texts, and secondary texts may be assembled "in conversation." In my experience, this commonplace tends to be synonymous with "in dialogue," but in practical application, analytical and conversational dialogue differ, insofar as the former model is more or less unidirectional (where relevant voices are gathered in anticipation of a unique intervention). Chapters 1 and 2 more or less proceed this way, identifying structuring absences in the existing scholarship to carve adequate space for my own interpretation. For example, Chapter 1 considers several theoretical approaches to camera movement and anthropomorphism in relation to ethics, to dwell on angles these approaches neglect: gender (in relation to cinematographic anthropomorphism) and withdrawal (in relation to movement's depiction "of" a subject). In Chapter 2, I suggest that extant readings of Polanski's *Repulsion* fixate on the source of Carol's unstable behavior, without sufficiently accounting for the instability inherent to the film's dispersed urban geography. In both, my arguments spring from, but are also potentially limited by, the claims I see these sources making.

However, the longer this project has persisted, the more deeply I've considered that dialogue is only one argumentatively amenable conversational form. Alternative forms may more closely resemble monologues, tirades, even well-matched debates—not all of which are equally suited for scholarly application, but the sheer variety of which suggest there must be other ways of arranging one's materials, of demonstrating how even seemingly disparate works may resonate in collusion. The arguments I've summarized above are formed in inextricable relation to my sense of what's been said; this approach to secondary literature honors receptivity and addition (as in, addition on to) as active modes of scholarly invention.

Rather than relegating secondary literature to the status of a straw man awaiting corrective mediation, this work is thus interested in dwelling with the insights of other critics and thinkers to scaffold its own analyses. My aim is not for these readings to only reiterate other authors' theses or survey preexisting research, but instead to illuminate what textual particularities leap forward in significance, perhaps even in direct conflict with a work's articulated objectives. In Chapter 3, such a moment hazards a visual answer to a textual question, where I position a reading of Caleb and Nathan's "love scenes" with Ava and Kyoko in relation to Elizabeth A. Wilson asking, "When we contemplate the possibility of machines with feelings [...] What kinds of human-computer interaction do we wish for?"²² And in Chapter 4, the moment of textual collision is also linguistic, as I read the origin meaning(s) of the word "retreat" in light of both the physical backward movement of *Get Out*'s camera in key moments identifying possible danger, and Chris's repeated back-pedalings in response to his girlfriend's conversational hostility.

When I characterize my method as privileging close reading, what I mean is the ambitious deployment of attention and description to handle audiovisual objects in their full, non-narrative (or, not strictly narrative) textual specificity. Because the critical questions motivating this dissertation emerge from the forms of the films themselves, I pay close attention to these forms to approach the films "as they are," in hopes of discovering unforeseen patterns and deviations that may enrich my sense of what each text offers to our perception (if not always, or immediately, to our understanding).

²² Elizabeth A. Wilson, *Affect and Artificial Intelligence* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2010), 18-19.

It's a pleasantly impossible task to slow a film into its discrete component parts, and then to authentically yet creatively translate that breakdown for a reader. The closeness here pursued refers less to a measure of the readings themselves—say, of their accumulation of technical detail—than to my felt proximity to these films: a critical intimacy which this work attempts to recreate for its reader. If the phrase “critical intimacy” evokes a kind of haptic encounter, it's because this project is informed by, if not wholly obedient to, strains of phenomenological film theory that privilege a sense of embodied spectatorship, and the urgency of sustaining attentiveness toward cinema's sensational address/effects.²³ My approach to spectatorship is rooted in imagining the phenomenological approach's “dynamic, transitive” relationship between viewer and viewed, while retaining an exploratory attitude toward collective experience—specifically, toward the prospect of theorizing genres of experience that take form in relation to collectives.^{24,25} Lauren Berlant offers one formulation of the fundamental connection between genre and collective experience:

If a genre is an affective event that is organized aesthetically, that is, by way of a sensually invested conventional form, and if the historical present makes itself available to us as a structure of feeling prior to its conventional nominalization, there's a political imperative to be sensitive and creative about all the genres a scene could be, because a genre accounts for and makes available collective experience.²⁶

²³ For phenomenological approaches to film theory that especially undergird this work, see Vivian Sobchack's *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), drawing from Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception* (London: Routledge, 1962); Elena del Rio, “The Body of Voyeurism: Mapping a Discourse of the Senses in Michael Powell's *Peeping Tom*,” *Camera Obscura* Vol. 15, No. 3 (2001): 115-149; and Anne Rutherford, “Cinema and Embodied Affect,” *Senses of Cinema*, Issue 25 (March, 2003).

²⁴ Vivian Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye*, 49.

²⁵ See Teresa Brennan, *The Transmission of Affect* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004).

²⁶ Lauren Berlant, “Conversation: Lauren Berlant with Dana Luciano,” *Social Text*, January 13, 2013, https://socialtextjournal.org/periscope_article/conversation-lauren-berlant-with-dana-luciano/.

In this view, genre, experience, and form comprise a dynamic Venn diagram where genre emerges from experience yet takes particular forms, for which the generation of apt language carries a political charge based on the space such naming makes for a sufficiently wide range of experiences. Genre thus defined envisions the taxonomic process as one of discovery and inventive description. If we ask what these conditions of sensitivity and creativity look like in practice, this work suggests: like reading.

In the final meeting of my Violence and Visual Representation seminar, we revisited the course's framing questions, many of which emerged in relation to Dana Schutz's 2016 painting "Open Casket" and its subsequent critical response. Our questions were, *How do we make sense of the relationship between this painting, the photographs of Emmett Till that preceded and inspired it, and the actual torture killing whose result is recorded by both? Is it better to remove the spectacle altogether, to make it more or less graphic, or to destroy it? Does that destruction also constitute violence?*²⁷ Trying to understand critics' objections to the painting's exhibition, as a way of theorizing how to engage with difficult artworks, we asked, what ethical or potentially reparative thing is there to do with violent representations?²⁸ The resulting discussion

²⁷ Dana Schutz's "Open Casket" (2016) is a portrait of murdered Black teenager Emmett Till. The painting first exhibited in Schutz's solo show at Contemporary Fine Arts in Berlin, Germany, and was included in the 2017 Whitney Biennial, where artist Parker Bright protested the painting by sitting in front of it wearing a shirt reading, "Black Death Spectacle." Other protestors suggested that the painting be not only removed, but destroyed. Schutz commented in the *The New Yorker*, "I really feel any subject is O.K., it's just how it's done. You never know how something is going to be until it's done."

²⁸ I intentionally use the word "difficult" here in light of Jennifer Doyle's suggestion that consumers and scholars of contemporary art enact a terminological/theoretical shift from "controversy" to difficulty: "The defensive critical posture we adopt in the face of controversy fails us because it does not give us room to acknowledge how much failure, refusal, and rejection inform the poetics of the works in question." See Jennifer Doyle, *Hold It Against Me: Difficulty and Emotion in Contemporary Art* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), 13.

suggested, rather than remove or modify or destroy these representational objects, we read them. Reading thus construed is a patient process of examining objects so forensically that our relations to their propositions may be shaped dynamically in accordance. “Open Casket” is an explicitly (but not uniquely) loaded example, insofar as Schutz’s whiteness adds the meta-violence of cultural appropriation to the “diegetic” violence rendered by, and within, the painting. In a cultural moment when audiences are paying increasing critical attention to media makers’ subject positions, privilege, and politics, the practice of reading—and the investment of time it requires—is vulnerable to dismissal as an insidiously neutral exercise, a stance which partakes in the documented animosity between close reading as a method, and the theoretical objectives associated with the humanities’ affective turn(s).²⁹ In the preface to her book-length application of what she terms “radical formalism,” Eugenie Brinkema argues for recovering close reading for the implicit purposes of affective criticism—among them, sensitivity to the range of experience to which Berlant refer above.³⁰ She catalogs the myriad formal matters to which readings must attend in order to be “close,” the apprehension of which values and practices a critical openness over closure: “difference, change, the particular, the contingent (*and*) the essential, the definite, the distinct, all dense details, and—again, to return to the spirit of Deleuze—the minor, inconsequential, secret, atomic.”³¹ It’s to these Deleuzean formal

²⁹ See Michael Hardt, “Foreword: What Affects Are Good For,” in *The Affective Turn: Theorizing the Social*, ed. Patricia Ticineto Clough and Jean Halley (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007); Gregory J. Seigworth and Melissa Gregg, “An Inventory of Shimmers,” in *The Affect Theory Reader*, ed. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 1–26.

³⁰ Eugenie Brinkema, Preface to *The Forms of the Affects* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), xvi.

³¹ Ibid.

revelations this work turns, to revel in horror's affection for minor populations, inconsequential aesthetic inclusions, and the secrets films may keep even from themselves.

1.4 DREAMS

My fourth chapter begins with an epigraph from William Paul's *Laughing Screaming* that reads, "Explaining a nightmare is comforting because the dream is disturbing, but explaining a pleasurable dream is not comforting because the explanation itself brings on a disturbance."³²

I'm drawn to this quotation because of the power it ascribes to explanation; these essays been written in pursuit of explaining the nightmare, but also of explaining what is nightmarish about certain pleasurable, amusing, or comforting visions, depending on the dreamer in question. The methodological imperative of *The Rehearsal for Terror* posits that a film's potent enunciations occur not only in its graphic spectacles, but also in its quietest, most endurable moments. Where I see this project going is further in the direction of vulnerable modes of experience, beyond that modeled by Millett's recognition of her prospective destruction in Sylvia Likes' torture.

Specifically, I want to extend the gesture begun in Chapter 4 by investigating the myriad ways in which horror grapples with racially specific modes of experience and reception, regardless of whether and how Black bodies, living or dead, are depicted onscreen. I see this work in conversation with poet Justin Phillip Reed's autobiographical lyric essay "Killing like they do in the movies," which braids murky memories of family members' deaths with close readings of deaths by hanging in popular 1990s-2000s slasher films like *Scream* (Wes Craven, 1996) and *I*

³² William Paul, *Laughing Screaming: Modern Hollywood Horror and Comedy* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1994), 69.

Know What You Did Last Summer (Jim Gillespie, 1997). That Reed's essay is a compelling object is inextricable from its value as a method: as it demonstrates how ostensibly unrelated texts may nonetheless traffic in visions that evoke Black death, and should therefore be thought together with non-fictional imagery that too theorizes the aesthetics of minority suffering.³³

This approach to the horrific argues that the realism attributed to modern horror films is not only narrative and visual, but also partakes in what Ien Ang has called emotional realism: a representational quality that produces a true-to-life feeling by enacting recognizable subjective experiences.³⁴ For Ang, the tacit attachment fostered by emotional realism is what enables audiences to overlook the empirical absurdity of soap opera storytelling; I see a parallel function at work in horror, particularly where the concerns of horror and melodrama overlap. Areas of this overlap include some discussed here—e.g., sexual coercion within marriage and the family; gaslighting within and beyond the province of interracial romantic relationships—and others that I hope the next incarnation of this project will discover, as I continue writing about and through objects that counterpoise pleasurable potential with spectacles of pain.

It feels appropriate to close this introduction by following my brief allusion to future subjects for writing with an even briefer gesture toward the future for writing itself. At the end of a 2013 conversation with Dana Luciano, Lauren Berlant describes her political and theoretical commitment as fundamentally “anti-erotophobic,” and in the final clause of her explanation, she

³³ Examples of non-fictional imagery include the Rodney King videotape (1991) and the cell footage of Oscar Grant III's shooting (2009), both of which continue to circulate. For more on their textual presence, see Elizabeth Alexander, “Can you be BLACK and Look at This?": Reading the Rodney King Video(s),” *Public Culture* Vol. 7 (1994): 77-94.

³⁴ See Ien Ang, “*Dallas* and the Melodramatic Imagination” in *Imitations of Life: A Reader on Film & Television Melodrama*, ed. Marcia Landy (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1991), 473-495.

suggests this commitment is stylistic as well, insofar as she works “to produce a style that’s genuinely exploratory, as undefended as possible from fear of incoherence and its vicissitudes.”³⁵ This notion of a style that’s undefended in general, and from the fear of incoherence specifically, is at once incompatible with the requirements and destiny of this document, and profoundly impactful as a possibility for life beyond it. Berlant’s resistance to the thrall of coherence reminds me of Brinkema’s call to hold reading and affect together—not in a radical combination of disparate things, but in acknowledgment of their compatibility—which in turn makes me think of what Barthes writes in *Camera Lucida* about long experiencing a dilemma between two languages: one expressive, and one critical.

...by ultimate dissatisfaction with all of them, I was bearing witness to the only sure thing that was in me (however naïve it might be) : a desperate resistance to any reductive system. For each time, having resorted to any such language to whatever degree, each time I felt it hardening and thereby tending to reduction and reprimand, I would gently leave it and seek elsewhere: I began to speak differently.³⁶

This project was written in resistance to genre as a reductive system, assured instead of its generative capacity. For now, the prospect of following these imperatives to marshal thought and language agnostic of disciplinary or generic conventions is a dream, but it’s a dream I choose to remain with, so I may intend to leave languages at the moment they turn reductive, and to summon the courage to seek elsewhere: expressively, critically, and, above all, intellectually.

³⁵ Lauren Berlant, “Conversation: Lauren Berlant with Dana Luciano,” *Social Text*, January 13, 2013, https://socialtextjournal.org/periscope_article/conversation-lauren-berlant-with-dana-luciano/.

³⁶ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (New York, NY: Hill and Wang, 1981), 8.

2.0 DANGER GIVEN SHAPE: *MARNIE*

2.1 TO BE FEMALE IS TO DIE

In *The Basement: Meditations on a Human Sacrifice*, feminist artist Kate Millett documents, therapeutically processes, and manipulates literary voice to personify the 1965 captivity and murder of Indiana teenager Sylvia Marie Likens. Under the care of 37-year-old guardian Gertrude Baniszewski, Likens was held in a basement, starved, and subjected to protracted rape and torture by Baniszewski and over a dozen neighboring kids.³⁷ Sylvia and her 15 year-old sister Jenny Faye Likens were boarded with Baniszewski by their itinerant parents for a fee of \$20 per week; their abuse allegedly began as punishment for a late boarding payment, but escalated systematically to a degree of sadism then-chief trial deputy Leroy K. New called “the single worst crime perpetrated against an individual in Indiana’s history.”³⁸ Likens was paddled, tackled, forced to write fraudulent testimonial letters detailing her promiscuous behavior, forced to eat feces, repeatedly penetrated with a glass bottle, and held captive in Baniszewski’s basement until her death on October 26, 1965. When Likens finally expired, she had been Baniszewski’s charge for approximately three months. Along with extensive muscle, nerve, and skin damage, Likens’ autopsy revealed internal brain hemorrhage and shock as the specific causes of death. Her malnourished body displayed the words “I’m a prostitute and proud of it!” carved into the abdomen, reportedly with a hot sewing needle.

³⁷ Kate Millett, *The Basement: Meditations on a Human Sacrifice* (New York, NY: Simon & Shuster, 1979).

³⁸ Leroy K. New quoted in “Avenging Sylvia,” *TIME Magazine*, May 27, 1966.

Likens' captivity has inspired numerous fictionalized and reported case studies, from Jack Ketchum's fictional novel *The Girl Next Door* (1989) to John Dean's true crime book *The Indiana Torture Slaying* (1999), with *The Girl Next Door* serving as source material for one of the crime's two 2007 feature film adaptations.³⁹ Among these texts, Millett's lengthy composite of trial reporting, literary criticism, and speculative persona prose stands out as a generic anomaly. In a review titled, "To Be Female Is To Die," Joyce Carol Oates describes *The Basement* as the culmination of a 14-year-long obsession with Likens' murder, speculating that the considerable time Millett spent dwelling with Likens' fate factored into *The Basement's* radically, even pathologically empathetic mode of narration.⁴⁰ Though we might imagine a project like this functioning in part as an exorcism of a painfully heavy subject, the book's publication did nothing to suspend or taper Millett's obsession. As recently as 2007, in an essay responding to the theatrical release of Likens biopic *An American Crime*, Millett describes Likens' torture as "the story of the suppression of women. Gertrude [Baniszewski] seems to have wanted to administer some terrible truthful justice to this girl: that this was what it was to be a woman."⁴¹

This characterization is typical of the expansive interpretative approach that centrally defines Millett's book. Its voraciousness for seemingly insignificant detail—such as an inventory of Baniszewski's limited kitchen cutlery—seems to acknowledge and even fetishize the particularity of Likens' story in all its gruesome, idiosyncratic detail. At the same time, her sustained fixation on the crime allows Millett to read something relatable—and, crucially,

³⁹ See *The Girl Next Door* (dir. Gregory Wilson, 2007), *An American Crime* (dir. Tommy O'Haver, 2007).

⁴⁰ Joyce Carol Oates, "To Be Female Is To Die," *The New York Times*, September 9, 1979.

⁴¹ Millett quoted by Pat H. Broeske, "A Midwest Nightmare, Too Depraved to Ignore," *The New York Times*, January 14, 2007.

inevitable—about a gendered experience of violence in the world. Her reflection on the book’s composite of objective criminal case history and subjective creative memoir acknowledges these modes, only to undermine any meaningful distinction between them:

*I was Sylvia Likens. She was me. ... She was the terror at the back of the cave, she was what ‘happens’ to girls. ... We all had a story like this, and I had found mine. The danger was made apparent, given shape, the always present, real and imaginary and generally amorphous danger around us. Even the danger of maybe.*⁴²

When Millett first read the *The New York Post*’s report of Likens’ murder, she was an instructor at Barnard College. Something about the brutality and duration of Likens’ captivity resonated with her own felt experience of living vulnerably in the world. Similarly, I became interested in Likens through Millett, when I was an instructor at the University of Notre Dame, also young and well aware of my precarity. If Millett’s entry point was a sensed opening for empathetic imagination, mine was precisely the multiplicity of collapses she narrates in the passage above. Millett simultaneously folds the past into contact against the present (*she was me*), positions the specificity of this event against a dramatic generalization (*she was what ‘happens’*), and fuses the actual event to literary allegory (*she was the terror at the back of the cave*). The folds produce startling generalizations; on one hand, this passage might be read as terrifically imprecise, with its “We all had a story like this” flattening women and women’s experience into stable, monolithic categories with inexplicable assurance. On the other hand, there’s something mesmerizing in Likens’ invocation of the interpretable, via her references to story and form. Danger here is sensible, but amorphous, and thus challenging to articulate, study, or convey—until a sufficiently horrific story gives danger its shape.

⁴² Kate Millett, *The Basement*, 14.

Another feminist creative who took considerable time to literally trace the contours of this shape is visual artist Marlene McCarty, who depicted Likens in her “Murder Girls” drawing series in the 1990s.⁴³ McCarty’s “Murder Girls” are large-scale illustrative portraits of actual young women who’ve killed. She began the series focused on matricidal murders, exploring violent intensifications of the complex and intimate relationships between mothers and daughters. Later, McCarty broadened her focus to include a wider range of homicide types and scales. Among these killers, Likens was one of the series’ rare exceptional victims. In her portrait, Likens is framed from the thighs up with a transparent oxford shirt knotted under her visible breasts.⁴⁴ She looks off to the left. Feathered hair falls below her shoulders. She’s at ease, healthy, with a slight smile playing at the corner of her mouth. The exclamatory “Prostitute” inscription on her stomach circles her navel like a tattoo.

McCarty created the detailed drawings using no. 2 pencils and ballpoint pens, and the resultant images are aptly evocative of dreamy notebook doodles: diaphanous and careful, from the ultrafine line work to the transparent or missing clothing worn by each girl. The portraits present the ghostly impression of drawings that were partially or half-heartedly erased, and their delicacy poses a stark contrast to the nipples and labia visible through or in lieu of clothing, and to the accompanying captions that detail each subject’s grisly biography. McCarty’s choice of pen and pencil, inspired by her sense of how these girls would picture or represent themselves, also affected the temporality of the project, requiring her to labor over each portrait and thus to stay with its subject and surrounding story. For McCarty, the compulsory duration was intimate

⁴³ See Holland Cotter, “ART IN REVIEW; Marlene McCarty,” *The New York Times*, February 22, 2002, <https://www.nytimes.com/2002/02/22/arts/art-in-review-marlene-mccarty.html>.

⁴⁴ Marlene McCarty, *Sylvia Likens - October, 1965, 1995-1997*, graphite and ballpoint pen on paper.

and aberrant: “When you spend that long on one drawing you kind of merge with the drawing in a way that is not normal.”⁴⁵

McCarty and Millett’s projects are in many senses dissimilar—they emerge from different production and exhibition/circulation contexts, and take shape with different media. Yet they each compromise feminist artistic engagements marked by duration and empathy, and both are attentive to the particular details of Likens’ torture, while remaining convinced of its broader resonance. Elsewhere in her memoir, Millett envisions this sense of inevitable trauma through the generic image of a woman—any woman—onscreen in a horror film, and describes this motif as a rehearsal for terror. Terror thus envisioned is the performance for which women are indiscriminately scheduled, a performance that’s deferred until it isn’t, and in the meantime, rehearsed for, so underneath the ostensibly escapist dimension of cinematic spectatorship one may hear the instrumental memorization of screaming. *The Basement* instructs its reader to interpret Sylvia Likens’ killing as the Sylvia Likens “event,” which itself is expressive of a genre, embodied by particular visual tropes and implicit viewing practices. While McCarty describes the duration of her process as producing an transgressive consolidation of artist and subject (“not normal”), there seems to be something about sexual sadism and extremity that engenders this two-prong response: of contact (I am her, she is me), and genre-fication (this is what happens [to girls]).

Describing her experience of watching Anne Claire Poirier’s 1979 *A Scream from Silence* [*Mourir à Tue-Tête*], Shana MacDonald narrates a collapse between herself as viewer and the viewed violent object in strikingly similar terms:

⁴⁵ McCarty quoted in Amy Kellner, “The 90s Were Intense,” *Vice Magazine*, October 31, 2010, https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/8gmqnk/the-90s-were-intense-592-v17n11.

The despair I feel watching [*Scream*'s] Suzanne raped is tied to a deep-seated fear of such violence. I do not feel the lack of symmetry between her experience and mine because my body becomes interchangeable with hers...while Suzanne is not visible in the scene, the scene is from her perspective, or one very close to hers, making visible the untenable role she is fixed in within this violent dynamic.⁴⁶

In MacDonald's account, "symmetry" is not sufficiently proximal to describe the overlap she experiences between herself as embodied spectator and diegetic Suzanne. Crucially, the film makes Suzanne's rape visible not only through her character's onscreen figuration, but also by using a camera position whose very slipperiness MacDonald's description admits: "the scene is from her perspective...or one very close to hers." Though MacDonald's phrasing suggests that "her perspective" and "one very close to hers" are exchangeable alternatives—much as her body and Suzanne's body are figured as "interchangeable"—her inclusion of both possibilities evokes the film camera's capacity to distinguish between the two: to craft a "very close" perspective, paradoxically expressive of and yet unattached to explicit perceptual subjectivity.

These disparate texts form the axes of this chapter's inquiry: the extreme, proximal encounter between readers of violence and victims of violence, and the relationship between sexual violence and aesthetic form. Millett's talismanic attachment to Sylvia Likens' murder presupposes that gendered violence relates to a particular kind of learned and practiced fear within the world, which affects the sensorium in all kinds of ways—bristling at the sound of footsteps in the dark, or calculating exits in enclosed or secluded spaces, all of which Millett might describe as cultivated in response to the "danger of maybe." Through the notion of the rehearsal for terror, Millett hitches this conditioning to horror—a connection on which Oates comments directly in her review, which opens with the assertion, "'The Basement,' so bluntly

⁴⁶ Shana MacDonald, "Materiality and Metaphor: Rape in Anne Claire Poirier's *Mourir à tue-tête* and Jean-Luc Godard's *Weekend*," in *Rape in Art Cinema*, ed. Dominique Russell (New York, NY: Continuum Books, 2010), 67.

and appropriately titled, is about a tragedy that has little to do with art and everything to do with horror, sickness, inhumanity.”⁴⁷ Here Oates distinguishes between art and horror to set a perimeter around “tragedy,” so the word may describe the subject of suffering without retaining the aesthetic baggage of cathartic pleasure.⁴⁸ I want to understand the function of Oates’ art/horror dichotomy without assenting to it, because the relationship to horror Oates identifies in Millett’s work has very much to do with art: from the invocation of narrative transforming Likens’ death into a story, to the rehearsal for terror as an image invested in cinematic horror specifically, and the onscreen spectacle of women’s suffering in general.

If horror movies, as Carol J. Clover put it in her 1992 study of gender in the modern horror film, “spend a lot of time looking at women,” the practices and ethics of looking at women connect horror to broader concerns in film studies and visual culture writ large.⁴⁹ Millett’s obsession with Sylvia Likens, which has in turn obsessed me like a transdisciplinary, time-traveling chain letter, presses me to the following questions: What if we were to center rape, or the fear of rape, in our critical sense of what constitutes modern horror? If modern horror is most often theorized as more spectacular, more graphic, and more invested in realism (as opposed to the fantastic or scientifically inexplicable) than its classical antecedent, how could this theoretical shift alter how we think about modern horror’s defining terms, i.e., spectacle and the real? This chapter is inspired by the ways these works see, in the specificity of one woman’s captivity and torture into death, a recognizable form: a story they have told themselves about themselves, not unlike an alternative present somehow averted, or a future not yet realized.

⁴⁷ Joyce Carol Oates, “To Be Female Is to Die,” *The New York Times*, September 9, 1979.

⁴⁸ For Aristotle’s discussion of tragedy, see Aristotle, *Aristotle's Poetics* (New York, NY: Hill and Wang, 1961).

⁴⁹ Carol J. Clover, *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 8.

According to my own embodied spectatorial experience of films designed to evoke fear, nothing feels more real than the fear of rape.⁵⁰ The category of modern horror, at once a historical period and an aesthetic shift, is critically formed by turns toward the real (as in, the scientifically explicable, the proximal, the mundane) and increasingly spectacular depictions of harm and violence.⁵¹ While some genre critics have posed significant challenges to this history, Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* still enjoys acceptance as the hinge that joined classical horror to a new way of envisioning danger.⁵² This chapter tries on an alternative touchstone—also Hitchcock, and also featuring a less showy but equally compelling formal analogue to the shower scene that's helped proliferate writing on the director: 1964's uneven psychosexual melodrama *Marnie*. Centering *Marnie* allows me to advance sexual trauma as the conceptual occasion for founding an alternative generic genealogy, as the horror of *Marnie* hinges on a rape depicted by an enigmatically wayward camera movement. The movement suggests two things: that gender must be considered a dimension of how scholars anthropomorphize and understand camera movement, and that rape uniquely complicates the relationship between film aesthetics and

⁵⁰ This is an observation smoothed by years of enjoying and studying horror films, despite or perhaps because of their capacity to cross a certain threshold of fidelity, after which their integration as “just a movie” is impossible.

⁵¹ For accounts of or modeled on this chronology, see *American Horrors: Essays on the Modern American Horror Film*, ed. Gregory A. Waller (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987); Wheeler Winston Dixon, *A History of Horror* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2010); *The American Nightmare: Essays on the Horror Film*, eds. Richard Lippe and Robin Wood (Toronto, ON, Canada: Festival of Festivals, 1979); Rick Worland, *The Horror Film: An Introduction* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006); Introduction to *Horror, the Film Reader*, ed. Mark Jancovich (London, UK: Routledge, 2002).

⁵² For a discussion and reframing of the continued critical positioning of *Psycho* as the representative modern horror film, see Adam Lowenstein, *Shocking Representation: Historical Trauma, National Cinema, and the Modern Horror Film* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2005), 8.

ethics. I read the rape scene in the same vein as *Psycho*'s frenetic shower, articulating on the level of form a violence indirectly depicted. Against the widespread association of horror's modern turn with graphic spectacle and female exploitation, this chapter thus celebrates horror's formal counter-tendency toward moments of representational instability and occlusion, and positions rape and its associated horrors at the forefront of the genre's vocabulary of fear.

2.2 IMPURE READING

In his 1993 essay "The Point of View of the Wandering Camera," Kenneth Johnson highlights camera movements that suggest a presence "independent of [their] conventional function in cinematic discourse," and thus raise questions regarding camera anthropomorphism.⁵³ Amid his catalog of examples, Johnson makes the following enigmatic reference to *Marnie*:

Remember the trespassing camera that opens *Citizen Kane*? The voyeuristic camera in the opening sequence of *Psycho*? Perhaps you also experienced the haunting camera movements in *The Shining* or the camera's 'discrete' pan-away at the moment when Mark Rutland rapes Marnie in the Hitchcock film.⁵⁴

The first three referenced films allude to cinematographic virtuosity (via a supple or even seemingly impossible movement, not unlike the camera's investigative float through the window in *Psycho*), relative duration (or, shot length), and formal prominence (these movements are largely unaccompanied by dialogue/unencumbered by any filmic obligation beyond keeping

⁵³ Kenneth Johnson, "The Point of View of the Wandering Camera," *Cinema Journal* 32.2 (1993): 49.

⁵⁴ Johnson, "The Point of View of the Wandering Camera," 49.

certain objects and figures in frame). If “conventional function in cinematic discourse” is the conveyance of information, effectively pointing to action before or as it happens, Johnson’s descriptive language—trespassing, haunting, voyeuristic—characterize these movements, ascribing each an attendant attitude, if not an outright motivation.

Marnie is the exception: where most critical discussions of the film are to some extent caught on the narrative question of how to accurately describe what takes place between Marnie Edgar and Mark Rutland in their honeymoon suite, Johnson’s reference is uncertain at the level of a different grammar. He calls the camera’s pan “discrete,” from the Latin *discretus*, meaning separate; the word looks and sounds like but is not the same as “discreet,” related to the Latin but arising from *discretion*: careful, circumspect. As homophones, these words enjoy understandable confusion—but while the word as written suggests a movement apart from the movements preceding and ahead, or perhaps even separate from the film itself, its placement in the structure of the list teaches us to read it as an attitudinal adjective: discreet, as in, deliberate in its turning away. What might it mean to willingly enter confusion regarding Johnson’s meaning in order to grasp the meaning offered formally by the film? To read according to the textual specificity of a rape, rather than an afternoon rendezvous or a trike ride down a hotel hallway?

It’s been argued that the event of rape has the capacity to trouble cinematic vision at the very instant of its depiction. In Eugenie Brinkema’s rereading of Kurosawa’s *Rashomon* (1950), for example, the camera’s attitude is necessarily shaped by what it struggles to depict.⁵⁵ Calling out conventional critical approaches to the film’s aesthetics for their blindness to its particular violences of content, Brinkema writes, “We cannot approach Kurosawa’s ever-mobile camera,

⁵⁵ Eugenie Brinkema, “The Fault Lines of Vision: *Rashomon* and *The Man Who Left His Will on Film*,” in *Rape in Art Cinema*, ed. Dominique Russell (New York, NY: Continuum Books, 2010).

too often discussed in purely formal terms, without remembering this aggressivity of the breeze, how it exposes the young wife, how it effortlessly damns her.”⁵⁶ This intervention on “purely formal” criticism doesn’t just call for a fuller reading of Kurosawa’s film; it also points to a broader methodological problem of form/content bifurcation, and indicts film criticism with severing formal observation from simultaneous engagement with narrative, characterization, and especially with feeling. Like a breeze, cinematic tonality is at once invisible and tactile, available to our sensibility, and thus to our reading, even when what is read for is left unpictured. If a camera’s expression of something as ontologically fraught as the onscreen threat or event of rape demands an expansion of relevant terms, how should we corrupt the existing critical approach to arrive at a sufficiently “impure” formal reading? How may a rape scene elicit a felt encounter, the intensity of which exceeds the logic/purview of a narrative-based model of identificatory spectatorship? And how must gender be thought a dimension of how camera movements are anthropomorphized—or positioned⁵⁷—both within the formal architecture of films themselves, and within the language of film theory and criticism?

In a condensed genealogy of the relation of camera movement to ethics, Daniel Morgan underlines the significance of Serge Daney’s essay “The Tracking Shot in *Kapo*,” the title of which refers to critic Jacques Rivette’s indictment of director Gillo Pontecorvo’s cinematographic track toward and reframing of a dead woman on an electric fence.⁵⁸ Differentiating the camera’s avoidance of death in *Ugetsu* (1953) from its aestheticizing focus in *Kapo*, Daney credits the presence (or absence) of authorial “fear and trembling” with the films’ divergent aesthetics: “It’s

⁵⁶ Ibid., 31.

⁵⁷ Daniel Morgan (lecture, Film and Aesthetics seminar, Pittsburgh, PA, September 2011).

⁵⁸ Daniel Morgan, “Max Ophuls and the Limits of Virtuosity: On the Aesthetics and Ethics of Camera Movement,” *Critical Inquiry* 38 (2011): 127-162.

[Mizoguchi's] fear, this desire to vomit and flee, which issues the stunned panoramic shot...Pontecorvo neither trembles nor fears; the concentration camps only revolt him ideologically. This is why he can inscribe himself in the scene with the worthless but pretty little tracking shot.”⁵⁹ Daney’s bifurcating reading calls to mind Rosalind Galt’s important work on what’s at stake in the systematic devaluation of ‘prettiness’ as less meaningful, less political, even less cinematic than aesthetic austerity.⁶⁰ Tracing this tendency back through classical and modern film theory, Galt attributes film culture’s exclusion of the decorative and picturesque to a masculinist aesthetic agenda, and works to reinvest prettiness with its capacity to hold not only meaning, but a transgressive political charge. Though her book explores at length the lexical nuances involved in defining prettiness (for instance, her work moves through the ornamental, the arabesque, the colorful, textural richness, and so on), central to Galt’s ‘pretty’ is an initial opposition of surface to depth; in denoting a quality of the surface, prettiness not only fails to express the significances situated at a text’s “depth,” but may exist at the expense of such significances (worthless, but pretty).

Daney’s proposition both supports and complicates this dichotomy. Rather than opposing empty surface to meaningful depth, Daney values affect (i.e. fear, with trembling as the physiological expression of an ethically sound respect for death) over cognition (i.e., inadequate ideological response), while simultaneously valuing panorama over a tracking shot, and shared over singular experience. The sense of surface vs. depth thus remains intact, as fear is understood as an emotion felt deeply and thus in earnest, while ideological revolt skitters across the

⁵⁹ Quoted in Serge Daney, “The Tracking Shot in *Kapo*,” in *Postcards from the Cinema*, trans. Paul Douglas Grant (New York, NY: 2007), 17.

⁶⁰ See Rosalind Galt, *Pretty: Film and the Decorative Image* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2011).

emotional and ethical surface, neglecting to delve sufficiently deeply, and thus producing a shot that looks well and means nothing. This specific mapping of ideology-contra-emotion maintains the oppositional framework Galt observes, even if it elevates rather than feminizes reception's affective register.

In other words, though the terms of these respective formulations differ, both point to the notion that formal film analysis is troublingly ambivalent toward beauty. In its most explicitly feminist register, Galt's argument goes something like, we as film enthusiasts and critics may become habituated to denigrating a "merely" beautiful film as one may reduce a beautiful woman, interpreting her beauty as diminishing the likelihood of profound characteristics (e.g., seriousness or substance) "beneath" the surface (and, to extend the metaphor a bit further, this might go double for a self-consciously beautiful film, like Jean-Pierre Jeunet's highly composed and color-saturated *Amélie* [2001]). Indeed, Galt focuses on the feminizing dimension of hostility toward the pretty, in order to lay bare the specific gendered agenda of this value system. Daney's reading, too, creates room to ask how further stylistic decisions may project ethical values or bankruptcies. If tracking shots truly are matters of morality, how do camera movements of various kinds relate to ethics on the part of the film, the filmmaker, or the images themselves—and how does a rape plot narrow that arena to an ethics of consent?

Returning to Kenneth Johnson's appeal to our memories of significant camera movements, we see this opening gambit not only asks viewers to recall these moments as having in common what he later calls "traces of enunciatory activity" on the part of the auteur; he also opens the notion of the wandering camera up to broader questions surrounding motivation and attitude.⁶¹ Though Johnson's explicit argument remains with how these camera movements

⁶¹ See Seymour Chatman's discussion of the wandering camera in *Antonioni, Or, the Surface of*

exhibit a residue of authorial activity—a claim to which Hitchcock scholarship is particularly amenable—his descriptions also evoke a kind of sensate camera, one that not only wanders but, depending on the objects or events perceived, may give the appearance specifically of watching, or of *kinds* of watching, such as intentional approach and withdrawal.

The form of cinematographic withdrawal in *Marnie*'s rape scene is a wandering pan-away. Though the movement shares a quality of mobile framing with the “matter of morality” tracking shot, the technique is otherwise technically and visually distinct. If a tracking shot is a mode well suited to following, to unspooling space as if a carpet underfoot, a pan-away is closer to an explicit departure-from, a way not of gradually revealing space *to* the viewer, but of abandoning the viewer to a space. Not anticipatory, but indifferent, or even hostile. A pan-away is also not a cut: less like a blink than a wandering eye. I make these distinctions to map what isn't happening in Hitchcock's *Marnie*, because given the formal grammar of its rape scene, the film poses a unique problem for thinking about rape and camera movement. Unlike film examples that depict rape in such a way as to emphasize cinematic endurance—the paradigmatic example for which is Gaspar Noé's *Irréversible* (2002), well known for its nine minute single-take anal rape scene—*Marnie* works in a different register, strategically neglecting to let the film audience directly in on whatever Marnie herself must endure.

Pinpointing the precise moment of expressive conveyance is itself an issue for scholars of camera movement. Opposed to an account that might translate movement into expressive meaning based on bare technical fact, Vivian Sobchack rails against descriptions of cinematography that relegate an initial, felt experience of motility to “rather lame, objective, and

the World (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1985), 196.

static reflections.”⁶² The notion that camera movement is first understood as mechanical, and later interpreted as expressing emotional character or broad significance, is false:

We understand the ‘sweep’ and ‘scope’ of a landscape or the ‘fragile vulnerability’ of a particular object not because mechanical locomotion has somehow been transformed into cognitive and emotional codes. Rather, we understand the movement precisely because we never regarded it as mechanical in the first place.⁶³

In lieu of understanding movement as fundamentally mechanical, Sobchack’s imagined spectator views the vehicle of movement primarily as an ‘other’: a differentiated presence not unlike an interlocutor, moving intentionally and legibly, but *discretely*, with the ‘Here’ of its perception and expression always ultimately a ‘There’ for us, no matter how proximal, and regardless of content. In fact, the mobile camera in Sobchack’s account is always at risk of behaving in such a way that may displace its spectator from the otherwise coherent illusion of shared vision and embodiment:

When the camera inhumanely (but not inhumanly) moves through carnage and does not shudder, or caresses violence, when it breaks a taboo and tries to get a better look at something we regard as visually forbidden, we may turn our eyes away from the ‘other’. If the camera moves erratically in its interest or seems bored with its previous objects (following, for example, a wire up a wall or moving out a window when something more central to the narrative it has been expressing is happening elsewhere), we become aware of its bodily, perspectival difference from ourselves.⁶⁴

“Inhumanely, but not inhumanly”: in other words, the camera may move as if expressing feeling, and we will feel said movement sensorially (as opposed to mechanically), but the camera may simultaneously lack all feeling, insofar as it lacks humanness. In such instances, its attitudes remain mysterious. Sobchack’s language highlights the moving camera’s hapticity, its capacity not only for enunciating different looks, like a distracted, dreamy gaze that wanders out

⁶² Vivian Sobchack, “Toward Inhabited Space: The Semiotic Structure of Camera Movement in the Cinema,” *Semiotica* 41 (1982), 320.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Vivian Sobchack, “Toward Inhabited Space,” 330.

the window, but responsive modes of contact as well: the shudder, the caress. While Sobchack's thinking is invested in according embodiment and intentionality to the filmic apparatus, she understands these moments as breaking with something like conventional perception, or conventional movement; where *we* might shudder, avert our gaze, or advance with purpose, the camera's nerve or boredom produces different responses, putting us back into our own bodies, and reminding us that its There is not our Here.

The camera's capacity to hold difference and resonance is one look invites scholars of cinematographic movement to read impurely. Unlike the reading in "purely formal terms" that fails to understand Kurosawa's damning camera in the context of what it shows, the impure formal reading encourages a patient and boundless consideration of how content and context come to bear on the textual particulars of what we see and hear. Sobchack conceives of the camera as a sensible yet Othered presence, whose perspective reveals the film world, and the fact of its difference from us, all at once. We likewise observe a countertendency, among critics concerned with artistic representations of sexual trauma, to see that work as capable of collapsing the ostensible distance between diegetic figures and the "safe" spectator outside the story. To take Millett's discovery of "her story" seriously, is to see this capability as formal in nature, and to question whether and how formal architectures may threaten the distances presumed between viewer, viewed, and the manner of viewing.⁶⁵

⁶⁵ This line of questioning of course recalls the imbricated viewing relationships detailed by Laura Mulvey in her "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16(3): 1975, 6-18. Mulvey's account of the gaze as plural, and dispersed among spectators and onscreen figures both, is a crucial to the archive of this essay's thinking.

2.3 THE HIDDEN FACE OF SIMPLE GESTURES

Initially intended as a vehicle for Grace Kelly's return to cinema, *Marnie* instead features Tippi Hedren as Marnie Edgar, a serial thief who insinuates herself into office jobs with access to large sums of money. We have the sense that Marnie is herself untenably fixed within, to quote MacDonald, a "violent dynamic": Marnie steals money, superficially alters her appearance to protect her identity, pays thankless visits to her mother in Baltimore, fears the physical touch of men, panics at stimuli such as the sound of thunder or sight of the color red, and takes her only pleasure in riding her boarded horse, Forio, between jobs. She meets old money widower and armchair zoologist Mark Rutland (Sean Connery) and makes him her mark, but Rutland discovers Marnie's criminal identity and blackmails her into a marriage that can't be consummated, thanks to her severe allergy to sexual contact. As we follow Mark's attempts to tame and understand his captive "lady predator," the bulk of the film concerns Marnie's rehabilitation, into which her rape on their honeymoon cruise is insidiously folded.

Just prior to this point in *Marnie*, we've had an off key montage of Mark's frustrated attempts to connect with his new bride in various areas of the ship. In a different Hollywood film, according to a different generic logic, these abortive encounters could be read as combative foreplay, particularly as Mark's intention to domesticate Marnie are made explicit. But Marnie isn't a tempestuous shrew; Hedren plays her resistance flatly, and the film's transactions—which are curt both verbally and formally, as the scenes cut quickly and without punch line from one to the next—accumulate a tense energy that's far from flirtatious. Earlier in the film, tension is most legible in the scene in which Marnie robs her employers: after casing the office for the location of the safe key, she lingers after hours, retrieves the key, and steals cash from the safe—an operation nearly interrupted by a janitor's unforeseen arrival to the office. Tension is thus

produced narratively, as Marnie attempts to pull off her goal according to the “deadline” of a finite window of privacy in the office, as well as stylistically, as the robbery scene restricts sound to effect “pin drop” quiet. Not only is the suspense of relative silence available to a viewing audience, but this silence is also diegetic: we see Marnie acknowledge the imperative to maintain silence in order to mask her presence in the office, as the scene’s main set piece consists of her removing her shoes to attempt a sufficiently silent escape. The film’s selective restraint in terms of sound supplies the scene’s tension, as we watch as her pumps dangle increasingly precariously from the lip of her purse, threatening to expose her presence. But even this is a kind of formal take on Hitchcock’s MacGuffin: when the heels inevitably do clatter to the floor and attract the janitor’s attention, she greets Marnie cheerfully and wishes her a good night. After all, there’s nothing inherently suspicious about Marnie being in the place where she works, so the lack of sound gave only the impression of suspense, a tension revealed to be inconsequential.⁶⁶

Like the near-silent robbery scene, the film’s honeymoon montage also generates a mode of suspense, albeit one less explicitly legible. We can think of this suspense as an inverse to that sustained by the screwball romance: if, in the latter, characters who initially can’t stand one another arrive gradually through romance through hijinks or mutual patience, here with every elliptical cut Mark’s performative patience grows more tenuous. Joe McElhaney has asserted that “horror” is not a useful way to understand *Marnie*:

The huge financial success of *Psycho* as well as the less successful but still profitable *The Birds* (1963) had made Hitchcock’s name virtually synonymous with the horror film, a genre he had never directly touched prior to this. But this is a genre to which *Marnie* does not belong.⁶⁷

⁶⁶Alfred Hitchcock quoted by Sidney Gottlieb, “Early Hitchcock: The German Influence,” in *Framing Hitchcock: Selected Essays from the Hitchcock Annual*, eds. Christopher Brookhouse and Sidney Gottlieb (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2002), 48.

⁶⁷Joe McElhaney, “Fascination and Rape: *Marnie*,” in *The Death of Classical Cinema: Hitchcock, Lang, Minnelli* (New York, NY: State University of New York Press, 2006), 86.

Though tremendously insightful elsewhere in his study of the film, here McElhaney fails to recognize the horrific dimension of this particular mode of suspense. If the robbery scene's explicit, near-theatrical tension asks, Is it suspense when the outcome of a situation ultimately demonstrates that everything was always going to be okay, then the honeymoon montage asks: Is it suspense when a situation sustains the certain knowledge that everything will be okay *only until it isn't*? Pascal Bonitzer's "Hitchcockian Suspense" argues that suspense as developed by and within cinema (larger than but perhaps exemplified by Hitchcock's body of work) is epistemologically complex: unlike the spectators of some innocent, straightforward control-group cinema, spectators of suspense are made to know "...the hidden face of simple gestures, the face of nothingness. Suspense is an anamorphosis of cinematographic time, which shifts the audience toward that point of the picture where, in the oblong form of which the characters are unaware, it will recognize the death's-head."⁶⁸ In Hitchcock's *Psycho*, the "hidden face" that reveals the death's-head is literalized in the film's final moments, when a skull superimposition washes over the incarcerated Norman Bates' face.⁶⁹ The image directly follows our overhearing Norman's didactic psychiatric diagnosis, thus putting the scientific explanation—and the clean, mundane world to which it belongs—into question. As Mark strives to learn what motivates his wife's bizarre behavior, *Marnie*'s suspense likewise huddles around the missing root cause that compels diagnosis. But if suspense is anamorphic, it's not simply that which anticipates revelation; it's the disruption concealed in plain sight. Suspense thus construed is a temporality

⁶⁸ Pascal Bonitzer, "Hitchcockian Suspense," in *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Lacan (But Were Afraid to Ask Hitchcock)*, ed. Slavoj Žižek (London, UK: Verso, 1992), 15-30.

⁶⁹ Bonitzer's allusion to the anamorphic death's-head refers to well-known example of anamorphosis in painting: Hans Holbein the Younger, *The Ambassadors*, 1533, oil on oak, London, The National Gallery.

that cannot be thought without horror, where doubt hovers over not *what* will happen, but precisely when.

Despite the ostensible seclusion of a honeymoon at sea, Mark and Marnie are characters who have never been, as Mark drily remarks prior to the rape, “just the two of us, alone”—not since Hitchcock’s direct-address-to-camera cameo early in the film interrupted a tunnel shot down Marnie’s hotel hallway, and especially not here, where the camera and our viewing presence are crucially integrated. At the top of the scene, Marnie has rebuffed Mark’s latest attempt to engage her in conversation and punctuated her retirement to the bedroom with a slam of the door. Rather than follow her, the camera stays with Mark’s reaction, and this is the deviation that concludes the film’s prior rhythm. The pattern of abruptly cutting from Marnie and Mark’s sparring to a new day’s merrily cruel breakfast or lunch ends as the camera lingers on Mark.

After a pause Mark barrels into the bedroom and repeats that he’d very much like to “go to bed.” On the line, the camera pulls conspicuously from a symmetrical two shot to hold Mark alone in the frame. The film cuts rapidly between he and Marnie as he throws off Marnie’s robe, effectively tossing our focus between Mark, looming, clothed, reactive, and Marnie, naked, petrified. Much has been made of the psychosexual arrested development made manifest in Marnie’s shrill and strangled girl-cry—“No!”—at the moment of her disrobing; and, unlike other instances when Marnie’s suspended girlhood emerges from beneath her adult veneer, this outburst seems to reach and soften Mark, momentarily slowing his advance. Gazing at Marnie with what looks on Connery’s face like reflection and contrition, Mark places his own bathrobe around her bare shoulders. The camera draws closer, halting as he kisses her static face. We

remain tight as the film cuts between extreme high and low angles, finally framing Marnie's blankly open eye from behind Mark's shoulder (Figure 2.1).

This is the point in the scene when continuity most overtly falters. In Mark's embrace, Marnie's body appears to fall back against the bed, but the frame holds her at such close distance, it may that the bed rises vertiginously to meet her. Mark recedes to the right until he drifts utterly out of frame, yet the camera continues drawing forward, as if cutting in on a dance. We get a tight shot of Mark's eyes moving closer toward the camera, yet the reverse shot holds Marnie fixed at a distance—the difference in their proximities to camera troubling the conventional notion that our view of Mark conveys Marnie's point of view, or perhaps expressing the sensation of watching violence happen to oneself, while formally reproducing the frozenness to which Marnie seems temporarily captive. For a few still moments, the camera keeps her face in frame before veering liquidly off to the left. The camera's pan cuts a path over the wooden headboard, along the wall and over the drapes, before settling on the room's porthole. Outside, black water glitters to the right. The film fades out to darkness and fades back in. Water washes left.

One way to see this scene is to notice, and even to fixate on, what isn't shown. The wandering pan forces the frame to exchange its focus on Marnie's body with the fades out and in on the ocean beyond the porthole. Without seeing the action unfold, we know precisely what's happened. We're attuned to what might be thought as the curvature of the narrative space, the way in which its possibilities are always bounded by forces shifting unseen.⁷⁰

⁷⁰ Slavoj Žižek: ““What we necessarily overlook when we move within a narrative space is the way this space is ‘curved’: from within, the horizon always appears infinite and open.” ““In His Bold Gaze My Ruin Is Writ Large,”” in *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Lacan (But Were Afraid to Ask Hitchcock)*, ed. Slavoj Žižek (London, UK: Verso, 1992), 242.



Figure 2.1 Stills from *Marnie* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1964).

The ostensible mystery of Marnie's rape poses the question of how a possible unified interpretation arises, given that Marnie could be said to experience the event as a rape, while rapist Mark does not; "could be said" here is not tantamount to hedging in a rhetorically strategic sense, but rather a self-conscious acknowledgement of how *Marnie* highlights and problematizes the question of interpretation so central to rape, on one hand, and cinema on the other. Spectators versed in classical cinematic restraint regarding things that happen on beds can supply that Mark and Marnie have sex, of some kind, somehow. Versions of this uncertainty conventionally inhere to rape: in other words, there is always an ontological uncertainty attached to rape, regardless of its aesthetic depiction, in part because the objective fact of the event is inseparable from a kind of subjective interiority; according to legal practice, the person raped is responsible for attesting to the rape's occurrence, and more often than not is charged with proving that occurrence, through evidencing tactics including but not limited to testimony, or narration.⁷¹

To pay attention to narration as a way of understanding Marnie's rape *as a rape scene* requires we consider the role of continuity to this part of the film and to the film as a whole. How does the film "narrate" Marnie's rape by way of camerawork and editing? On first glance, it's the editing that appears the most strange and self-conscious. The pattern and pacing exceeds transparency. The frequent cuts to different angles as Mark is kissing Marnie's face, for example, is ostentatious, fragmented, and, as no new angle supplies an especially unique aspect of coverage, the edits feel "unmotivated"—but not discontinuous. Along with the film's fade out and in on the porthole, the cutting illustrates something closer to the *amplification* of continuity

⁷¹ For a detailed account of the relation between rape and testimony in a cinematic context, see Eugenie Brinkema, "The Fault Lines of Vision," 27-40.

known as “intensified continuity.”⁷² David Bordwell describes intensified continuity as a stylistic mode that has roots in early cinema, but emerges most legibly due to technological advances and institutional changes associated with the decreased dominance of Code-era studio production following 1960.⁷³ Rather than presenting a true alternative to continuity, intensified continuity upholds the relative stability of space and time thought central to classical continuity, even as it experiments with elements of self-conscious style such as closer framings, shorter average shot lengths, and more liberal use of flashbacks/flash-forwards.⁷⁴ When the scene fades out on the porthole at night, and fades in on the same perspective in daylight, we don’t question how much time has transpired or whether we’ve strayed from and returned to this position; the fade out/in is a familiar tactic for using restraint to depict what can’t be patently shown.

Rather: it’s the showy intrusion of the camera that announces the scene’s departure from continuity. More so than the editing’s deviation from standard shot/reverse shot, the camera’s movement evokes the introduction of an additional player, a presence that disrupts the consistency of spatial position classically associated with how two figures converse onscreen. According to Kaja Silverman’s characterization of the shot versus the cut, we spectators endure “a constant fluctuation between the imaginary plenitude of the shot, and the loss of that plenitude through the agency of the cut.”⁷⁵ The shot provides, whereas the cut withholds. While this

⁷² David Bordwell, “Intensified Continuity: Visual Style in Contemporary American Film,” *Film Quarterly* 55.3 (2002): 16-28.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ These points are based on Bordwell and Thompson’s working definition of continuity; whether the tenets of transparency and coherence are the most accurate and productive to describe continuity as a historical mode or stylistic form is the province of another dissertation (see: Katie Bird, 2018).

⁷⁵ Kaja Silverman quoted by Tania Modelski, *The Women Who Knew Too Much: Hitchcock and Feminist Theory* (London, UK: Methuen Press, 1988), 11.

equation comes across as intuitively accurate, its rigid distinctions between plenitude, loss, shot, and cut fail to help us understand the “discrete” pan-away, or the shot that shies from plenitude by way of the agency of movement. In *Marnie*’s honeymoon scene, though what transpires between fades is not shown, it’s the camera’s wandering, more so than the edited transition, that produces the scene’s crucial ellipsis, and thus appears to obfuscate Marnie’s rape.

The notion of Hitchcock’s camera as itself withholding is discussed most often in relation to *Marnie*’s iconic opening, which initially focuses on Marnie’s yellow leather handbag as seen from behind, then gradually widens while remaining positioned behind her figure, so “the sense that the camera is withholding something from us in relation to her remains very strong.”⁷⁶ Unlike the classical Hitchcock shots detailed by Bonitzer as “typical” in their mobile progression of focus from far-off environments to close-up objects—put more simply, from large to small—*Marnie*’s opening tracking shot begins from a claustrophobic proximity to its object (the relative “small” of Marnie’s handbag tucked under her arm) before expanding to reveal the surrounding environment of the empty train platform, allowing Marnie’s entire body to fill the frame while remaining fixed in a trailing position. Bonitzer marshals this theory of Hitchcock’s camera movement to make the argument that his films contain and turn on the eruption of a “stain,” which the large-to-small camera movements economically express: “Within this vast, seemingly anonymous space with everyone going about their business oblivious to any kind of disorder, is an object or an element of some kind that threatens the illusory harmony of this environment.”⁷⁷

In contrast, the opening of *Marnie* foregrounds the presence of the stain, moving forward from stain-as-premise, such that what is revealed is not the stain, but a world in which the stain

⁷⁶ Joe McElhaney, “Fascination and Rape,” 96.

⁷⁷ Pascal Bonitzer, “Hitchcockian Suspense,” 97.

fails to carry a comparable “intensity of contrast” from its natural environment. Revisiting this distinction between exterior world and contaminating stain, the opening shot of *Marnie* reminds its audience of the dual nature of a threshold. A threshold is that structural aspect which not only separates the known world from perversity’s invasion, enacting the contrast thought responsible for generating anxiety and suspense; it also *joins* them, making possible a proximal coexistence of normalcy and perversion. Such a juncture, while observable to varying degrees throughout Hitchcock’s oeuvre, is of particular importance to *Marnie*, concerned as this film is with deploying withholding to convey a world in which disorder, and the threat of sexualized violence, elicit our attention rather than our obliviousness.

2.4 THE TOUCH CAN NO LONGER BE A LIGHT ONE

In *Marnie*, the question of what constitutes consent is widely scattered: narratively, whether Marnie consents (or even is fit to consent) to Mark’s sexual advances has already surfaced repeatedly in the film’s diegesis. There’s her retrospective justification of kissing Mark in his stable—“I thought I could do it, if I had to”—and later, Mark’s nauseating analysis, “I don’t think you’re capable of judging *what* you need.” More unsettling is how the pronounced uncertainty of these moments is echoed in the film’s critical discourse; for example, Robin Wood comments, “...if Marnie *simply* wanted the door closed, she would have closed it herself without saying anything to Mark.”⁷⁸ The sentiment underlying Wood’s presumption is shared at least by William Rothman, when he writes, “By saying ‘if you don’t mind,’ while knowing full well that

⁷⁸ Robin Wood, “You Freud, Me Hitchcock: *Marnie* Revisited,” in *Hitchcock’s Films Revisited*, revised edition (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2002), 394.^[SEP]

he does mind, [Marnie] is *provoking* him to respond the way she must know, at least unconsciously, that he will.”⁷⁹ One dimension of this attitude is compatibility with the desire to absolve Hitchcock of the accusations of on-set sexism and cruelty that resurfaced following the 2012 releases of British television production *The Girl* (dir. Julian Jarrold) and Hollywood biopic *Hitchcock* (Sacha Gervasi), the former of which homes in on *Marnie*’s tortured production process and the reportedly uneasy relationship between Hitchcock and Hedren.⁸⁰ Though Hedren protested that the positive aspects of her collaboration with the director were omitted, the dual release of these works served Hitchcock and Hedren’s brief collaboration up for public scrutiny.

But what the pan-away unlocks isn’t simply a snapshot of Hitchcock’s authorial expressivity—he is, as indicated by his earlier cameo, *in* view, not *the* view—nor is it simply the diegetic perspectives of characters. Though the movement’s focalization of Marnie’s static eye under Mark’s shoulder feels expressive of something like empathy, the range of positions held by the moving camera resists any conveyance of stable perceptual subjectivity. The notion of consent also emerges formally, through a cinematographic thirdness. The camera as unassimilable third party, with regard to Hitchcock’s cinema, is not unique to *Marnie*; insofar as they put language to this cinematographic methodology, Hitchcock’s own remarks on camera position and presence in several prominent kissing scenes in *Notorious* (1946) are relevant:

I felt that it was crucial not to separate [Cary Grant and Ingrid Bergman] and not to break their embrace; I also felt that the camera, in representing the audience, should be allowed in, as if it were a third person joining in with this extended embrace. I granted the audience the great privilege of embracing Cary Grant and Ingrid Bergman at once. It was a kind of temporary *ménage à trois*.⁸¹

⁷⁹ William Rothman, “Marnie,” in *Hitchcock: The Murderous Gaze*, second edition (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2012), 365.

⁸⁰ See Donald Spoto, *The Dark Side of a Genius* (Cambridge, UK: Da Capo Press, 1983), and *Spellbound by Beauty: Alfred Hitchcock and His Leading Ladies* (New York, NY: Three Rivers Press, 2009).

⁸¹ Alfred Hitchcock quoted by François Truffaut in *Hitchcock*, revised edition (New York, NY:

Bonitzer seizes on these lines to verify that “A couple implies a third” when it comes to Hitchcock’s cinema, and to suggest that the camera (and through the camera, the audience) fulfills this function in lieu of a figure onscreen.

This intimate calculus, where two imply a third, necessitates reading the pan-away as the camera expressing its discrete presence, and the implication of camera-as-third leads us to question what kind of presence this is, and how it thus engages with those presences otherwise populating the world of the film. Put reductively, whose side is it/are we on? McElhaney sees *Marnie*’s camera occupying a position conventionally reserved for a male figure such as Mark:

In *Marnie* the idea of the male protagonist as fetishist is muted and instead the film as a whole seems to compensate for this by *directly* producing a fetishistic drive toward Marnie. Hitchcock’s own camera becomes the primary desiring subject and has, in effect, replaced the male protagonist who is now reduced to being a kind of supporting player.⁸²

This characterization of the camera as an additional player, and even a more primary player than the character himself, resonates with Hitchcock’s description of *Notorious*’ camera as a “special guest.” McElhaney goes on to argue that the fetishism for which Hitchcock’s camera has significant implications for the object of the gaze as well, insofar as “[Hitchcock’s] films often articulate the struggle to give voice to a new kind of image, a new kind of cinema *through* the bodies of women, who serve as ambivalent sources of inspiration and (often) anxiety.”⁸³ If we take seriously McElhaney’s notion that Hitchcock’s films instrumentalize women’s bodies to, well, give birth to a new image/new cinema, then the camera movement that both obfuscates and expresses Marnie’s rape suggests Marnie isn’t the proper object of its gaze (away from which the camera’s drift effects a “dreamy gaze out the window”), but instead, she’s its lens.

Simon & Schuster, 1984), 261-262.

⁸² Joe McElhaney, “Fascination and Rape,” 124.

⁸³ Ibid., 128.

The next morning, after fading in on an identical view, the camera once again moves. It traces roughly the same loose trajectory over the wall to rest on the bed, now mussed and empty. Is this camera, as Sobchack suggests, fully an Other, whose movement away from Marnie's rape reads as "erratic in its interest," as though distracted by the path of a wire up a wall? This theory understands the perhaps natural spectatorial desire to blame a mobile camera for frustrations of our vision; for a camera to look at or wander from a scene's primary action not only exceeds but seems to violate cinematography's conventional function, and even seasoned spectators may squint or crane when faced with a discrepancy between the desire and ability to see.

However, to view this movement as primarily capricious stands to miss its possible participation in the violent dynamic Shana MacDonald described in relation to *A Scream from Silence*: the making visible of "the untenable role" within which *Scream*'s Suzanne is fixed. MacDonald's language here is compelling: tenable, from the French *tenir*, from the Latin *tenere*, means to hold—but what if one way for an image to express formally something that cannot be held, is to not hold it? To interpret the pan-away as a movement "away" from the fact, event, or threat of Marnie's rape is to limit such content to its expressivity through onscreen bodies. Here, the camera's turning-from has less to do with boredom or even prudence, than with the formal acknowledgment of an epistemological limit. Like the dancer cutting in, *Marnie*'s camera imposes itself, intervenes between Marnie and Mark, and subsequently veers away. Its participation is not, as Hitchcock envisions *Notorious*' camera, that of an invited additional partner, and its departure isn't reducible to complicit pardon or refusal. What it depicts is the problem of rape's depiction. The rape is not *not* depicted, owing to the fact that its incommensurability is.

Interpreting the discrete pan-away as not away from, but in a sense depicting Marnie's rape, recalls how the difference in registers between Pontecorvo's "worthless but pretty" tracking shot and Mizoguchi's stunned panorama delineates, for Daney, an entire ethical universe. McElhaney locates *Marnie* as partaking in a postwar tradition of indirectly representing violence and horror, that he historicizes back to Alain Resnais' *Night and Fog* (1956). He writes, "In many ways following the logic of dealing with the Holocaust in *Night and Fog*, the full horror of [Marnie's rape] is one that cannot be directly represented, threatening to become a form of obscenity—one with enormous political implications."⁸⁴

This positioning is important: only depicted in "full horror" does the rape threaten to become a politically freighted form of obscenity. Because *Marnie* hesitates to go there, McElhaney can sustain his account of Hitchcock's cinema as apolitical, thanks to its preference for a singular vision over a collective agenda.⁸⁵ For Bonitzer, too, Hitchcock's devotion to depicting the individual or couple at odds with the conspiring social world, instead of demonstrating an interest in the widespread effects of systemic imbalance more aligned with the urges of the Soviet school, left his cinema "obsessional, fetishistic, and frozen."⁸⁶ What both critics reproduce is a rather familiar personal/political dichotomy, wherein films concerned with the individual (or with "love at work," to use Hitchcock's own enigmatic phrase) are seen as too myopic to carry a significant political charge.⁸⁷

⁸⁴ McElhaney, "Fascination and Rape," 134.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 129.

⁸⁶ Pascal Bonitzer, "Hitchcockian Suspense," 17.

⁸⁷ Hitchcock uses this phrase to describe a scene he'd witnessed in France, where a young woman held onto her companion's arm as he urinated against a wall. "She'd look down at what he was doing, then look at the scenery around them, then back again at the boy. I felt this was true love at work." Their failure to separate inspired the obstinately close kissing in *Notorious*. Alfred Hitchcock quoted by François Truffaut in *Hitchcock*, 262.

And yet, by invoking the formal logic of *Night and Fog*, McElhaney's critique creates precisely the space to politicize cinematographic withholding, even if the film's subject is the relatively more local purview of the couple. To link *Marnie* to *Night and Fog* by way of "full horror," direct/indirect representation, and the threat of obscenity, is to promote suspicion of the "pure" formal reading, which insulates the compositional aspects of the image from the very diegesis such images constitute. The impure formal reading for which this essay advocates would instead encompass the extraneous element, and remain violently attentive to the mutual contamination of content and form.

There's a sense in which *Marnie* may be understood as a confused film about confusion. If *Vertigo* (1958), with its ghostly substitutions, horny searching, and sadistic punishments, is a model object for psychoanalytic film criticism, *Marnie* is its over-eager double, bringing to its surface all that the earlier film left barely simmering underneath. McElhaney describes the conflict in terms of generic hybridity: "*Marnie* is both a 'character study' and a kind of art film fascinated with pure surface. The touch can no longer be a light one. It is extreme, heavy, confused, violent, not always certain why it needs to touch in the way that it does, hence the repeated need to pull away."⁸⁸ The language of extremity and weight remarks on *Marnie* as a heavily wrought formal exercise, where the no-longer-light touch refers to the film's self-conscious stylistic choices (highly saturated coloration, rear projection, etc.).⁸⁹

I'm reminded of Slavoj Žižek's corrective reading of what he terms a common misreading of Madeleine Elster's entrance in *Vertigo* (incidentally, also a scene featuring a prominent camera movement). In his reading, Žižek breaks down how the audience sees Scottie

⁸⁸ Joe McElhaney, "Fascination and Rape," 139.

⁸⁹ For an insightful reading of *Marnie*'s rear projection style, see Murray Pomerance, *Marnie* (BFI Film Classics) (London, UK: British Film Institute, 2014).

seeing Madeleine Elster, through a transition from his gaze to her figure emerging among the dining crowd. Scottie sits at the bar in profile, yet “sees” Madeleine get up from her seat and stand in the restaurant corridor as if through the back of his head. His look is impossible; so the view of Madeleine, “...subjectivized without being attributed to a subject, is precisely the *pure pre-subjective phenomenon*. [Her profile] is a pure appearance, permeated with an excessive libidinal investment—in a way, it is precisely *too subjective*, too intense, to be assumed by the subject.”⁹⁰ That the shot doesn’t “belong” to Scottie’s implied eyeballs does nothing to evacuate its subjective potential, not when the camera has the affective power to cut in or pull away.

Gilles Deleuze writes in *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image* that we find in Hitchcock’s work something present in cinema writ large: a shot with two faces, “one turned toward the characters, the objects and actions in movement, the other turned towards a whole which changes progressively as the evolution of relations, which move from the disequilibrium that they introduce between characters to the terrible equilibrium that they attain in themselves.”⁹¹ The levels that images attain in themselves is an ongoing conceptual direction for Deleuze—and the “two faces” he describes anticipate the anamorphic potential Bonitzer will ascribe to Hitchcock’s work. Both seem to be thinking of Hitchcock’s films as modeling a doubling, or at least a profound capacity for doubling, which accounts for the ability of cinematic images to depict one idea and yet vibrate with another. In a monologue describing Marnie’s rather unceremonious conception, Mrs. Edgar intones, “Billy said if I let him, I could have his sweater. So I let him.” If the camera’s intervention can’t prevent Marnie’s rape, it can nonetheless foreground the film

⁹⁰ Slavoj Žižek, Introduction, *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Lacan (But Were Afraid to Ask Hitchcock)*, x.

⁹¹ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 203.

world's functioning according to a logic in which the occasion of consent is writ large, but whether it's withheld—as when young Marnie protests being kissed by the sailor whom she eventually kills—or given—such as that exchanged by Marnie's mother for the romantic totem of her boyfriend's sweater—is a difference emptied of consequence.

In its luridness and hyperbole, in its turning away, and in the void produced in between, *Marnie* appears for critics as a puzzle, a failed experiment. But the discrete pan-away in *Marnie*, more than an auteur's gesture, is a demonstration in content of the limits of demonstration.

3.0 HOME'S INVASION: *REPULSION*

Never court a wee lassie with a dark and roving eye.

—“Courting Is a Pleasure,” folk song⁹²

The opening credits of Roman Polanski’s 1965 film *Repulsion* pass at canted angles over the surface of an open eye, until the closing directorial credit, “directed by Roman Polanski,” cuts clear across the center, resembling, as Lucy Fischer has remarked, the infamous eye slice of Luis Buñuel’s *Un Chien Andalou* (1929).⁹³ In the first minute of Buñuel’s surrealist film, a straight razor is used to cut a woman’s eye; the film abruptly cuts to a dark cloud slicing the moon, and the cuts of eye and film and moon constellate a spectatorial lesson: not that the image of a cloud replaces the image of a razor, evoking in euphemism the violence previously shown, but that the cloud *is* the razor—such that, in the film that follows, familiar distinctions between filmed objects and film images will not obtain. *Repulsion*, too, typifies a mode of film that’s expressly concerned with the futility of boundaries or, more significantly, of boundary logic: that which reduces the distributive impulse of taxonomy to an either/or arrangement.

Cinematic horror lends itself to compartmentalization and taxonomy at several levels: globally, in terms of inclusion criteria, for example, *this* counts as horror while this does not; and locally, in terms of a film’s temporal organization, i.e., this is a scare, as if a scare is a finite,

⁹² “Courting Is a Pleasure,” also known as “Handsome Molly,” is a folk song of unknown date, originating from the British Isles.

⁹³ Lucy Fischer, “Beauty and the Beast: Desire and Its Double in *Repulsion*,” in *Cinema of Roman Polanski: Dark Spaces of the World*, ed. John Orr and Elżbieta Ostrowska (London, UK: Wallflower, 2006), 78.

stable episode, more like a shot than a scene. One of the most durable examples of this logic in genre criticism is the theorization of monstrosity, most notably by Noël Carroll, who argues in *The Philosophy of Horror* that to qualify as horror proper (rather than as a neighboring but distinct genre), films require a scientifically inexplicable monster and must provoke sensations of both fear and disgust in their spectator.⁹⁴ Carroll's work on horror constitutes a major contribution to the development of concrete defining criteria for a genre whose variations engender instability and ambiguity, but the disadvantages of this framework are also well documented.⁹⁵ In the case of a film such as *Repulsion*, a critical approach that privileges horrific monstrosity assigns authority to causality, asking what, specifically, is to blame for protagonist Carol's (Catherine Deneuve) gradual mental disintegration. Is the threat primarily internal (her psychosis) or external (in her apartment), or a symbiosis of both, in which her troubled mental state manifests a materialized threat? This essay suggests that such an inquiry, concerned as it is with the measurement and maintenance of boundary, is scarcely equipped to account for instances of horror that complicate or otherwise fail to conform to generic criteria, even as they exhibit a thematic and formal coherence that warrants theorizing.

Critical work on Polanski's apartment trilogy films, of which *Repulsion* is the first, followed by *Rosemary's Baby* (1968) and *The Tenant* (1976), has focused largely on the coexistence of these films' apartment settings with art-cinematic modes of form and narrative, on one hand, and their depictions of complex psychological unraveling, on the other. In other words, despite the apartment trilogy classification, and the centrality of a haunted house trope that owes

⁹⁴ Noël Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror: Or, Paradoxes of the Heart* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1990).

⁹⁵ For a critical engagement with Carroll's *The Philosophy of Horror*, see Matt Hills, "An Event-Based Definition of Art-Horror," in *Dark Thoughts: Philosophic Reflections on Cinematic Horror*, ed. Steven Jay Schneider and Daniel Shaw (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow, 2003), 138–56.

to a Gothic tradition as well as to horror, the generic significance of these films' urban domestic spaces is relatively neglected. In his "Polanski and the Horror from Within," for example, Tony McKibbin grounds his analysis of the apartment trilogy in character psychology, arguing that the films distinguish Polanski as an "interior horror" filmmaker, generating fright not through physiologically primitive startles, but through psychologically complex characters. For McKibbin, psychic complexity elicits a correspondingly complex spectatorial interaction, as opposed to the simple embodied response (e.g., a shudder) to a filmic startle.⁹⁶ McKibbin comes closer to what I find crucial in *Repulsion* in his interpretation of a not-strictly-apartment film: Polanski's *Death and the Maiden* (1994), which he reads as inverting the woman-in-peril trope (of *Repulsion* and *Rosemary's Baby*) such that a female character (rape survivor Paulina Escobar, played by Sigourney Weaver) faces peril not as a threat in the present, but as a recollection of the past kept alive only in her mind. The atemporality of past traumatic experience and present remembrance acts on both character and spectator such that "any startle here is essentially the shiver of recollection."⁹⁷ Though working to productively foreground trauma in his analysis of fear, McKibbin adheres to divisions between past/present and event/memory to the point of overdichotomizing these categories. To collapse here/now with recollection/then elides the ways in which what's recalled is never truly, safely, not-now and not-here.

Writing on *Repulsion*, Tarja Laine also lingers with character (i.e., what happens to Carol) in order to land with the spectator. For her, the titular emotion/sensation is not a stop en route to catharsis, but is as much a container as the apartment itself, such that "the film imprisons

⁹⁶ Tony McKibbin, "Polanski and the Horror from Within," in *Cinema of Roman Polanski: Dark Spaces of the World*, ed. John Orr and Elżbieta Ostrowska (London, UK: Wallflower, 2006), 51–61.

⁹⁷ McKibbin, "Polanski and the Horror from Within," 54–55.

its protagonist in madness and disgust.”⁹⁸ Laine distinguishes her approach from McKibbin’s by attempting to focus out on the world of the film, rather than in on character psychology: “By contrast [to psychological readings of the film], I suggest that *Repulsion* is about being ultra-sensitive to the world and the resulting state of insane fear of intimacy, into which spectators are directly induced by the film itself.”⁹⁹ Yet Laine’s very reading remains relatively insensitive to the material specificity of that world, particularly as that world bears a fear of intimacy on its sensible surface.

Missing from these strands of conversation is a sufficiently close reading of the details of Polanski’s *Repulsion* specific to its expression of urban domesticity—including Carol’s interactivity not only with her shared apartment but with her place of work (the salon) and the surrounding city of London, all of which become increasingly mutually permeable. As her salon’s hallways resemble domestic corridors, and the sidewalks’ cracks mirror splits in the apartment walls, *Repulsion*’s mise-en-scène disperses. The apartment is not simply a setting or even a narrative motor, but a generic machine: dissolving distinctions between setting, plot, and character, and thus urging us to recalibrate our understanding of what is explicit and implicit, objective and subjective, and apparent and submerged.

Repulsion participates in and typifies not only what Pamela Robertson Wojcik defines as the apartment plot, nor simply so-called modern cinematic horror, but a subgeneric form I’ll call *domestic horror*: texts in which horror within the home works to formally surface an as-yet-submerged encounter with past sexual trauma.¹⁰⁰ In these films, the gradual mutation of an

⁹⁸ Tarja Laine, “Imprisoned in Disgust: Roman Polanski’s *Repulsion*,” *Film-Philosophy* 15, no. 2 (2011): 37.

⁹⁹ Laine, “Imprisoned in Disgust,” 39.

¹⁰⁰ Pamela Wojcik, *The Apartment Plot: Urban Living in American Film and Popular Culture, 1945 to 1975* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

ostensibly safe space into something not only potentially gruesome but ontologically unstable expresses the particular horror of violence experienced and violation undergone in the supposedly safest, most familiar milieu: that of the family. As a formative domestic horror text, *Repulsion* signifies said mutation in primarily textural terms, probing, with a hairline wall crack as with its hallway of grasping hands, how cinematic mise-en-scène signifies at what depth specific fears are felt.

3.1 MORE THAN SETTING

In Wojcik’s analysis, in the apartment plot “the apartment is *more than setting*: it motivates or shapes the narrative in some key way.” In other words, thinking the apartment plot requires further dismantling the familiar boundary between formal feature—in this case, setting as an aspect of mise-en-scène—and filmic narrative. The apartment thus understood is not simply a container for plot events and figural relations, but an active, if potentially ambient, participant in itself. Key to that participation are the ways in which the apartment’s mode of domesticity is distinct from that in keeping with the house; Wojcik accords the apartment values of visibility, density, community, contact, impermanence, and porousness, in contrast to the containment, stability, and privacy of a permanent home. The apartment’s fundamental cellular structure results not only in proximity to, but various kinds of ongoing contact with, hallways, neighbors, the surrounding city, and whatever else just exceeds the visible walls.

A domestic space as more than setting is familiar ground for film criticism, and horror has proved particularly susceptible to allegorical interpretations of filmic space.¹⁰¹ Often, we scrutinize space specifically for its capacity to materialize a mental state: for instance, the Victorian home as a shell, that which, in Walter Benjamin's words, "bears the impression of its occupant."¹⁰² Space thus understood is primarily reflective; it is altered or shaped, discernibly, by its inhabitant. *Impression* goes further still to imply a tactile relation, whereby the home does not simply mirror but is pressed upon, and thus superficially or even structurally changed. A phenomenological approach to film setting imagines an impression that is not only sensible but mutual, as in Laine's description of the *Repulsion* flat as an organism unto itself, a "lived body in the Merleau-Pontyeian sense . . . both a physical (architectural) and a mental (conscious) structure with an agency and intentionality of its own, aiming to drive Carol insane."¹⁰³ Both Benjaminian and phenomenological readings of on-screen space take up the expressionist notion of figure, wherein surroundings extend toward and into one another, resisting definite boundaries and mutual self-containment.

Domestic interiors are particularly supple sites of query with regard to cinematic horror. We can look back on the long, literary tradition of the Gothic domicile: vast, cold castles and manors, foreign to their new or temporary (or soon to be temporary) occupants, presenting and

¹⁰¹ For allegorical interpretations of horror, see Lowenstein, *Shocking Representation*; and Robin Wood, "An Introduction to the American Horror Film," in *Planks of Reason: Essays on the Horror Film*, ed. Barry Keith Grant and Christopher Sharrett (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow, 2004), 107–41.

¹⁰² Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 220–21.

¹⁰³ Laine, "Imprisoned in Disgust," 41.

producing an atmosphere both literally and figuratively tomb-like.¹⁰⁴ We can also recall modern horror's Terrible Place, the exemplar for which is the dilapidated homestead of Tobe Hooper's *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974): a farmhouse, seemingly abandoned and yet magnetic, as even the camera is moved to stalk and corral the film's teenagers into the fatal family home.¹⁰⁵ In the Terrible Place, "outside" (i.e., not exclusively the home's exterior but also the material, sensible indoor space) reflects what's inside (the space itself is repulsive, carpeted and even furnished with bodily remains); in *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, the house's spatial practice is such that the family's cannibalistic legacy obtains in each polluted surface.¹⁰⁶

Where Clover's spatial theory most crucially innovates is in its suggestion that the Terrible Place is legible: it not only disgusts and frightens; it conveys and informs. So for an unlucky visitor to apprehend the inhabitants' nature through the space inhabited, she must read. Clover writes, "Into such houses unwitting victims wander in film after film, and it is the unconventional task of the genre to register in close detail the victims' dawning understanding, as they survey *the visible evidence*, of the human crimes and perversions that have transpired there. That perception leads directly to the perception of their own immediate peril."¹⁰⁷ In the case of *Texas Chain Saw*, successful perception-begetting-perception may loosely ally with one's chance of survival; teenager Pam's understanding of her surroundings dawns at a painfully slow rate, allowing her gaze to direct the inventory conducted by the camera, to reproduce for its

¹⁰⁴ See William Hughes, David Punter, and Andrew Smith, eds., *The Encyclopedia of the Gothic* (Oxford, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013).

¹⁰⁵ Carol J. Clover, "Her Body, Himself," *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 30.

¹⁰⁶ The phrase "spatial practice" is from Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 1992).

¹⁰⁷ Clover, "Her Body, Himself," 30, emphasis added.

audience the realization that hers is now (and perhaps always was) a vulnerable animal body in a veritable slaughterhouse. Accordingly, perhaps the film's survivor Sally Hardesty is not simply a lucky hysteric, but a marginally faster reader, able to recognize insidiousness and thus ultimately, against all odds, to escape it.

Yet for the protagonist of domestic horror, such reading proficiency, however hypothetical, is foreclosed. Not by her relative spatial illiteracy, but because the spaces themselves tend to resist the kind of productive perception and interpretive work that Clover ascribes to slasher cinema. It's tempting to read slasher films' compulsive returns to youth-oriented spaces (e.g., summer camps, high schools, sorority houses) as constituting a premise for spatial transgression: the taboo of violence and terror in a relatively innocent milieu. But what if we understand as horror's most potent capacity not transgression, but revelation? In domestic horror, the home's mutation, dissembling, and betrayal of memory are less a stain on a clean surface than a demonstration of what has always been dirty.

3.2 VISIBLE EVIDENCE

Repulsion tells the story of a young Belgian esthetician named Carol, who shares an apartment in London with her older sister Helen (Yvonne Furneaux), who is having an affair with a married man called Michael (Ian Hendry), to whom Carol is decidedly allergic. Carol exhibits the affect of a patient on Quaaludes, consistently distant and preoccupied to the point of being asked, while working, if she has fallen asleep. When Michael takes Helen to Italy on holiday, Carol's dreamy condition descends toward a hallucinatory catatonia that's only compounded by her forced leave from work. As Carol spends more and more time alone at home, days and nights bleed together,

and the space of the apartment increasingly mutates, manifesting changes both cosmetic and constitutional. *Repulsion* parallels Carol's descent into violence with a formal unraveling of the film itself, as it gradually digresses from conventional treatments of time as well as space, before seeming to snap back into place with Helen and Michael's return to the ruined apartment.

Repulsion's spatial mutations occur over a range, such that some convey as unexpected, producing startle effects for audience and Carol both; for example, when Carol first sees an unknown male figure materialize in the apartment. In Helen's room, Carol fingers the fabrics of her sister's clothes, particularly the feather-trimmed cocktail dress Helen wore to dinner out with Michael. She shuts the wardrobe door and the film score leaps as the figure's dark reflection is caught by the turning mirror. Even to a contemporary audience, the moment retains its suspenseful charge, recalling the infamous bus shot of Jacques Tourneur's *Cat People* (1942).¹⁰⁸ Yet other mutations, both in recurrence and formal quality, work via expectedness, creating a rhythm by which Carol's episodic assaults are organized: Carol goes to sleep, is woken and raped by a dark intruder, and the film fades out and back in on her the next morning in increasing states of disarray. The film further accents a day in–day out temporal rhythm with the sonic rhythm of a ticking clock within these scenes; like a metronome, the clock's ticking neutrally keeps time while Carol struggles in (filmic) silence on the bed.

This rhythm is broken by two retaliatory acts of violence that take place within the apartment and constitute the film's final act: first, Carol bludgeons and kills her irrepressible boyfriend Colin, and second, she uses Michael's razor to slice up her lecherous landlord. Though she suffers—and is seemingly unable to prevent or thwart—nightly attacks by an unknown man,

¹⁰⁸ See Edmund G. Bansak, *Fearing the Dark: The Val Lewton Career* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1995), 133.

Carol lethally dispatches both real men's attempts at having her. Helen and Michael return from Italy and find the apartment in a literally grave state, with Colin's corpse rotting in the bathroom, the landlord's body in the living room, and an inert Carol lying under Helen's bed.

Visible, dense, communal, porous: Carol's experience of the apartment space attests to the horrific angle inherent to each aspect of apartment living. Such quotidian hassles as unwelcome noise through thin walls and the steady accumulation of objects in shared living spaces are, essentially, horrors of invasion: invasions of privacy, personal space, autonomy, and even bodily integrity. *Repulsion* dramatizes the terror of personal invasion through a depiction of home/home's invasions; not only the invasion of the home by outsiders, as when Carol can't prevent Colin or her landlord from knowing that she's home and entering the space, but also the invasion of the outside by the home. *Repulsion's* apartment mutates in myriad ways: it divides, when the walls crack open; it distorts, when grasping hands emerge from the hallway walls. (Figure 3.1) Toward the end of the film, the space's once superficial instability extends to scale, such that Carol perceives the hallway as extra-long and the living room as enlarged. The hall of hands—an image that repeats within the film—deftly confirms that *Repulsion's* apartment doesn't simply set the stage for invasion; the apartment itself invades, enacting a penetrative mode of contact through anthropomorphic revelation.



Figure 3.1 Still from *Repulsion* (Roman Polanski, 1960).

Where initially she expressed horror at the relatively mundane sight of Michael's personal effects in the bathroom, Carol increasingly perceives structural disturbances in the apartment, nearly all of which have a primary textural component. Even before her time alone, otherwise dopey Carol is acutely attentive to surfaces, running her fingers along the mantelpiece or losing an afternoon to her fixation on cracked concrete. The film demonstrates studiousness toward texture as early as its opening shots, when a close-up of a salon client's clay masked face subverts our sense of what constitutes skin. Though we enter and exit the film through the human eye, the face in *Repulsion* tends to resist readability; repeatedly, we are provoked to consider and to experience conventionally transparent or benign surfaces as disorienting and repellent. At Carol's salon, the face is frequently soiled, as if infected by the apartment's accumulating filth. Her coworker Bridget's cheeks streaked with running makeup, a client's face spattered with

milky product mid-rinse: in both instances, the film binds the messy image with the treachery of men. Carol discovers Bridget crying over her boyfriend's behavior, and their client Mrs. Balch lectures the women on male single-mindedness throughout her treatment, such that it's uncertain whether her words or her appearance have caught Carol's attention—and likely, the message of male indecency and the image of facial staining are inextricable. *Repulsion* thus forms a world in which male presence is epidemic, its reach extensive not only to epidermal surfaces but to consumables as well. When Carol is approached on her walk home from work by a city laborer, the camera turns from her, whom we've followed, to linger on his leering expression, before cutting abruptly to Carol's uneaten plate of fish and chips. Close-ups of further unappetizing sights abound: we see potatoes sprouting on the countertop, and return repeatedly to the image of a raw, rotting, and eventually decapitated skinned rabbit, initially meant for Helen to cook for a family dinner, but abandoned when Michael takes her out instead. Rather than simply contributing to a proliferation of repulsive objects, these foods are linked specifically to the impositions of men, from Michael's derailing presence in their apartment to Carol's mysterious home invader.

Both mess and men provoke in Carol a curious ambivalence. On one hand, she seems compelled to clean certain surfaces; after walking in on Michael shaving in her bathroom, she swipes at her nightgown as if sensing an infestation. The film takes care to show her making a similar gesture in the salon basement, when she stares at and brushes off the seat of a neighboring chair. Yet, while Helen is away, Carol doesn't just allow their apartment to fall into disrepair; she actively, if unconsciously, makes messes, as when she overdraws the bath and turns off the faucet but fails to drain the tub. The subsequent image of overflow recalls the macabre televised news item that Helen recounts early in the film, of eels emerging from the

prime minister's toilet, an image that reinforces the extensive climate of intrusion, resumed by the bathtub and maintained to varying degrees—from Michael's toothbrush and razor, to the sound of Helen moaning during sex, to Colin's persistent physical advances—all of which constitute panic-inducing violations, penetrations ranging from ambient to increasingly aggressive.

Yet if the apartment penetrates, it also demonstrates permeability. Carol's door may as well be decorative for all the work it does to successfully keep unwanted visitors out; we see Colin and the landlord but also a slew of concerned neighbors pass into the apartment (the latter crowding at the end of the film, ironically calling for a kind of insulation—"Don't touch her"—that Carol, when conscious, was previously denied). Not only are the apartment's boundaries penetrable, but when Carol finds the hallway wall momentarily yielding, clay-like, under her hands, the space itself proves compositionally receptive, proliferating sensational anxiety both affective and textural: nothing here feels as it should.

Arguably, the apartment's most extreme textural transformations are specifically anthropomorphic, from groping hallway hands to the recurrent assailant seemingly native to the domestic space. Three times, we see Carol raped in her bedroom by a shadowy intruder, his face darkened or partially screened yet redolent of the construction worker she encountered on the city street. The intruder is linked to Helen not only through his first appearance (in her bedroom mirror), but also via two shots that manipulate genre convention and offscreen space to tease the spectator with false suspense. First, Carol is sleepless in bed when her doorknob begins to turn slowly—an image that clearly connotes helplessness to prevent pending intrusion—yet it's only Helen, wrapped in a sheet, entering to chide Carol for having thrown away Michael's toiletries. Later, as Carol sleeps, a black-gloved hand enters the top of the frame, and there's a moment of

calculated uncertainty before we see that the hand is, again, Helen, come to say good-bye before leaving with Michael for Italy. Traces of both the turning of the bedroom doorknob and the vulnerability of the frame (and by extension, of the room, and of the woman in the room) recur each time Carol is raped, such that the film constructs an associative link between Helen and the violent domestic presence. One might be tempted to interpret the rapist as linked to the apartment in a dispersed manner akin to spatial fission: a major trope by which so-called art-horror multiplies the monster figure in space.¹⁰⁹ Yet the parallel between the intruder and Helen complicates reading Carol's rapist as merely a monstrous extension of the apartment entity.

Helen signifies what Carol is not: unapologetically sexual, romantically receptive, and spatially mobile. Yet, as Carol's sister, Helen may help us see Carol as more than unequivocally averse to contact. For Carol is not purely repulsed by the prospect of physical intimacy—she displays a capacity for closeness in interactions with Helen and also with Bridget (whose short, dark hair recalls Helen visually). In the salon basement, when Bridget attempts to hearten Carol by recounting her recent trip to a Chaplin film, Carol laughs easily and seems comfortable with their proximity, even resting her head briefly on Bridget's chest. Yet when Bridget brings up her boyfriend, Carol lapses back into her near-catatonic state. The sudden tonal shift recalls Carol's petulant reaction to Helen blowing off their family dinner for a night out with Michael; whenever Carol seems ready for homosocial intimacy, men interrupt, such that neither home, nor work, nor even her commute between the two is safe.

If Helen and Bridget serve to demonstrate what “normal” interactivity looks like, Carol seems not wholly oblivious to her difference, even trying to be game for a kiss from Colin in his car, though she ultimately rushes off and wipes her mouth in her building's elevator

¹⁰⁹ Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror*, 47.

(interestingly, a gesture that Colin himself repeats after his friend teasingly plants a kiss on him at the pub). Though brief, Carol and Colin's kiss is significant insofar as it informs other moments in which Carol exhibits something in excess of sheer repulsion, something linked to her capacity for and curiosity toward intimacy. We also can't take for granted that Carol is solely disgusted by the nightly intrusions, as the rape scenes are shot without synchronous sound, so the image of Carol's open mouth is displaced from an expected accompanying scream.

The chief primer for reading these scenes' possible ambiguity is a crucial early moment when Carol, seeing Michael's undershirt on the bathroom floor, moves to throw it into the hamper but pauses, briefly lifting it to her face to smell. Carol inhales the shirt and instantly retches; she is clearly physically repulsed, but her impulse to smell the shirt in the first place—like her dead-eyed acquiescence to being kissed by Colin—remains a stubborn complication, a wrinkle in her character that can't be smoothed. More so than abject images and explorations of repulsion alone, then, the film presents a dialectic between repulsion and attraction. The extensive, inevitable momentum of subjects toward one another, for intimacy both erotic and companionate, is precisely what sharpens the sensation of disgust; and as the film produces images and scenes of repulsion, it pairs these with a control variable: some interaction or image that exhibits conformity to social expectation and intimacy standards. When Colin first drops Carol back at work, his disappointment in (and our awareness of) her cool good-bye is compounded by the vision of a woman doubling back to her lover's car to kiss him through the lowered window. *Repulsion* reminds us precisely how a girlfriend—or an apartment—is meant to behave, but it sets up this contrast between normality/convention and pathology precisely to knock it down. For the apartment's mise-en-scène spreads contagiously throughout the film's images, including and beyond nondomestic settings. The long salon hallway, peppered with

doors, resembles the apartment's corridor; a cut links Carol's wrinkled bed sheets to the back of her work uniform. The likeness between sidewalk fracture and wall cracks, or between Carol's bathroom and the mildewed salon basement, demonstrates the apartment's inescapability. The world writ large reminds Carol of her penetrability, and the apartment dwelling exemplifies and disperses the notion of fragile integrity.

Both the apartment's dispersal and Carol's ambivalent inhabitation suggest that the monster from within the home, while perhaps not a monster in the Carrollian sense, is closer to the Freudian uncanny—familiar and yet not, yet never losing the tinge of the former in the defamiliarization.¹¹⁰ Home invasion is such a rich and reliable trope for horror because despite all logical and statistical evidence to the contrary, we expect the home to be safe; domestic horror insists that this mode of horror isn't about transgressing an expectation of safety so much as revealing and emphasizing the futility of that expectation. The home, and the family within the home, is treated not as a safe place, but as a penetrable cell, vulnerable to eels from below, to men from within, to hostile voices on the telephone, and even to ghosts from the past.

Repulsion's horrific symptoms—those aspects that most explicitly gesture toward horror—are consistent with a haunting, wherein the material world is touched by an ostensibly immaterial presence. The apartment's interior appears to both reflect and shape Carol's interiority, not unlike the ways in which cinematic poltergeists might be attributed to a scientifically explicable rather than supernatural cause. Yet there is no possible exorcism, no explanatory flashback to a primal scene, and no late-night expository archival research trip: the film's murderous crescendo affords none of the haunted house film's customary explanation. It's not that the relevant archive is not *not* present, but that it can't be contained, a fact reiterated each

¹¹⁰ See Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny*, trans. David McLintock (London, UK: Penguin, 2003).

time the film apartment's apartmentness is depicted as contagious. Here, the inside/outside boundary-blurring and overall porousness that lead to comedic overhearings and home/office conflations in the typical apartment plot film instead produce the opacity of a nightmare: no space is safe from, let alone possibly antidotal to, the domestic uncanniness Carol experiences everywhere. What we get in place of dawning understanding is a relay between the possible certainty of Carol's mental illness, on one hand, and the ambiguous source of her present trauma, on the other.

3.3 A DARK AND ROVING EYE

At four points in *Repulsion*, we are shown a photograph. First, Carol, left to her own devices after her sister has gone out, absently fingers the surfaces of objects along the mantel. She lifts the ear of a toy pig and sifts through a stack of records, and the camera drifts off to the right, away from the relative activity of her hands, lighting on a further assembly of objects: paperweights, books, and what appears to be a framed family photo. The photo is black and white and features four older people, two men and two women, seated outdoors in Adirondack chairs, with a young, pigtailed brunette in the foreground with her head on a man's knee, and a stern young blonde girl in the center, standing back, looking toward the man to her left. The camera pushes in, keeping the blonde girl fixed in the frame, and fades out.

Later, having been sent home from the salon, Carol is eating a cracker and regarding the photo in silence when the wall behind the dresser abruptly cracks (Figure 3.2).



Figure 3.2 Still from *Repulsion* (Roman Polanski, 1960).

One might argue that this brief scene depicts a contrast: Carol, placidly looking at the photo in the relative calm of her emptied apartment, is startled by the wall crack as interruption. And what prompts the crack? If the apartment's mutations are in Carol's imagination, her violent imaginings are driven by unresolved, likely traumatic memories triggered by the photograph. This kind of circuit linking mind, memory, and materialization is familiar terrain for horror, particularly in telekinesis narratives; a crystalline example is Brian De Palma's *Carrie* (1976), in which Carrie White endures a meeting in the principal's office after being pelted with tampons in the locker room. As the principal repeatedly misnames her ("Cassie") and Miss Collins attempts to correct him, the film cuts increasingly rapidly between Carrie tightening more deeply into herself and a POV of the ashtray on the principal's desk trembling. We hear a low vibration whenever we see the ashtray, mounting tension until Carrie shouts—"It's Carrie!"—and the ashtray flips off of the desk, shattering against the wall as a light explodes overhead. The

editing's climbing tempo thus suggests that Carrie's increasing internal frustration reaches a threshold whereupon it externalizes, acting out on the visible, material world. Specifically, her inability to control her power is what makes the action violent. It's not as if Carrie makes these objects simply float into the air: they break, energy changes. Form transforms.

Similarly, we could read the wall's eruptive rent as an outward expression of whatever Carol is thinking when she looks at the photo (and, more broadly, we might regard all of the apartment's ontological shifts as extensions of Carol's psyche). But this reading produces an "it's all in her head" account that ultimately fails to fully account for the way in which this film rejects closure, specifically by repurposing a conventionally indexical device—the evidentiary photograph—to blur, rather than to clarify.

In its third appearance, the photograph is diegetically acknowledged by Carol's landlord, who enters the apartment (despite her homemade barricades) to collect outstanding rent. In this scene, the landlord moves to spread the living room curtains to "shed a little light on the subject" (the subject being the exact sum of money that Carol has presented), a move that Carol swiftly protests. She plops down on the sofa and rests her hands between her legs, drawing up the hem of her nightgown; the landlord's silhouette frames her in as he ostentatiously removes his glasses to get a better look. Both of his gestures—spreading the curtain, removing his glasses—express detection, a sort of "the better to see you with" that Carol resists. She is monosyllabic to the point that it's surprising when, after the landlord has picked up the family photograph and asked whether it was taken in London, she actually corrects him: "Brussels." He identifies Carol in the middle of the photo before setting it aside, turning his attention entirely from Carol's childhood image to her adult presence. But once the photo is invoked, past and present—like memory, fantasy, and material reality—aren't so easily extricable. Carol struggles away and slices the

back of his neck with Michael's razor, this initial slash giving way to a chaos of stabbing. Here again, the photo is a trigger; it's not only the landlord's sexual advance but also his interrogative probing about the photograph that precedes her violent response.

If previously *Repulsion* has couched its spatial disturbances and home invasions in terms of a relatively stable pattern, the second of Carol's killings effectively reroutes the film: her behavior from here on is erratic; time is increasingly elliptical; and the film's form accordingly evolves. In other words, the film assures us that while Colin and the landlord were certainly predatory (to varying degrees), their disposal in no way insulates Carol from the spatialized violence to which she's been subject throughout. It becomes increasingly challenging to map and make sense of her remaining encounters with the apartment: we see her yet again lying awake in her bed, the clock's ticking resumed as she focuses on the ceiling light fixture. The bedside wall cracks open; the film fades to black, and fades in on Carol singing blithely to herself as she mimes ironing with an unplugged appliance. Sugar cubes carpet the kitchen floor; if this is the film's most explicit parody of domesticity, its corresponding take on femininity follows, with Carol applying lipstick in Helen's room. She performs a preparation to go out but the film cuts to her once again in bed, smiling as the camera draws vertiginously close to her face. The church bell sounds and Carol's expression sharpens; she turns back toward the (once cracked) bedside wall to find her assailant figure shirtless beside her. He pushes her facedown, and her freshly applied lipstick smears slowly, in close-up, across the pillowcase.

We next see Carol pantomiming writing with a pin-like instrument on a French door, eyes wide and lips moving. It's unclear whether this is day or night, or how much time has elapsed since the previous rape. When she walks into the living room, the space is as bloodied and disheveled as last she left it, but now at least doubled in size. Back in the hall, grasping arms

burst violently from the soft-looking wall until the hall erupts in hands, opening and closing, suggesting whatever difference there was between Carol's man-like intruder and the apartment in which he manifested is now collapsed. The following sequence confirms this, as we see what appears to be a mobile POV of Carol in bed, and the reverse shot depicts the ceiling light fixture in shortened focus drawing threateningly closer to Carol, as if the apartment itself threatens her with assault. This, ultimately, is the last we see of a conscious Carol; the film dissolves the advancing ceiling into the rain-spattered street outside. It's at this point that *Repulsion* enacts its status as an apartment film, not only narratively and in terms of its mise-en-scène, but via editing as well, where even divisions between scenes are weakened.

In Polanski's later apartment film *Rosemary's Baby*, the space of the apartment is scary largely because it is penetrable: Rosemary Woodhouse's neighbors possess a secret door, and, more broadly, hostile demonic forces populate her world. Significantly, rape features in both *Repulsion* and *Rosemary's Baby*, but whereas the violation is named in the later film, Carol's rapes remain murky, always evoked; and *Repulsion*'s privileging of the photograph hones this point. In horror, we typically examine photos for evidence, even (or especially) for what eludes the human eye.¹¹¹ Such an image is scanned, often enhanced, and, like the Terrible Place, read. The photograph in *Repulsion* is not the site of privileged indexicality, but of further ambiguity. Even if one argues that what's suggested by the photo is so strong as to be argumentative, such a claim fails to account for how we see what's supposedly there: in a close-up so near that it visually abstracts rather than clarifies the image.

¹¹¹ For contemporary examples of this motif, see *The Omen* (Richard Donner, 1976), *The Sixth Sense* (M. Night Shyamalan, 1999), *Final Destination 3* (James Wong, 2006), *Inside [L'intérieur]* (Alexandre Bustillo and Julien Maury, 2007), *Insidious* (James Wan, 2010), and *Sinister* (Scott Derrickson, 2012).

At the end of the film, we see the photo a final time: Michael carries Carol out of the disarranged apartment, and the camera again travels away from the action (an assembly of nervous neighbors discouraging Carol's removal) back over the mantel, the television, an upturned basket of yarn, a corner of quilt, the now-creased postcard from Helen in Pisa, and a half-eaten cracker, to land finally on the photograph, now filtered by shadow such that the young blonde girl and the man at whom she's glaring are isolated in the frame (Figure 3.3). The camera pauses and moves in on the girl's eye, a gesture that unmistakably evokes the boomerang nature of proximity: come closer and you see something more clearly, as functions the close-up of Carol's eye in the film's opening shots; come too close, and something once seen clearly will retreat back into abstraction, becoming an indeterminate shape, a quality of darkness.



Figure 3.3 Still from *Repulsion* (Roman Polanski, 1960).

You can part the curtains, remove your glasses, or lean in close, yet the sheer effort(s) of scrutiny and proximity do not ensure revelation. Possible explanations abound: one can account for the horror in *Repulsion* by viewing Carol as a woman unspooled by imposed solitude, as in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper," Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca*, or any number of stories that capitalize on and perpetuate the trope of crazy women.¹¹² Carol's craziness might be further specified as either altering her sense of the apartment, such that the apartment itself is actually benign, and it's her perception and subsequent inhabitation of it that make the space look and feel sick. One could also view the apartment as a monstrous, even sentient entity, dispersed figurally in the guise of hands and a man, as well as architecturally, throughout the surrounding city. In this version, the apartment is haunting Carol, and Carol is for whatever reason uniquely sensitive to it, susceptible in a way her sister Helen is not.

But horror here is gaseous: eluding the applicability of a surface/depth model befitting, for example, something like the discovery of a cemetery on which a house is unwisely built. In lieu of an underlying cause, the film shows us the photograph, which seems to show us very little. In domestic horror cinema, the residue of past sexual trauma resists the memory necessary for flashback articulation; what can be, and is, expressed is the made-strangeness of a space we conventionally understand to be safe, and the photograph unlocks a way in which mise-en-scène—inclusive of everything put in front of the camera to be photographed—involves too the oblique expression of what is directly inexpressible.

¹¹² For a comprehensive feminist discussion of Victorian literature, including the trope of mad/hysterical women in literature and film dating back to Charlotte Perkins Gilman, "The Yellow Wallpaper" (originally "The Yellow Wall-paper. A Story," 1892), see Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, 2nd. ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000).

4.0 CAN I FUCK THIS?: *EX MACHINA* AND *UNDER THE SKIN*

In 1964, Joseph Weizenbaum begins to write a natural language processing program designed to integrate word recognition and recombination with stock phrasing to simulate conversation with a human user. The exchange thus enabled may be based solely on user-provided data, in the absence of programmed expertise in any particular field. Named after the titular test subject of George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion*, Project ELIZA operated primarily according to a "Doctor" script written to simulate a Rogerian psychotherapy session characterized by demonstrative empathy and unconditional positive regard. Having since written that an anthropomorphic view of computers involves an unfortunate reduction of life forms in general, and of human beings specifically, Weizenbaum once described his program as running a mere "parody" of non-directional psychotherapy.¹¹³ However, despite both his own attitude toward the program, and his users' full awareness of its ontological status, many test subjects made ELIZA their confidante for the duration of the project, preferring to be left alone during their conversations, and later feeling that their chat transcripts merited "doctor/patient" confidentiality.

Thus ELIZA's appellation seems apt. Like the poor, unrefined girl coached to pass among elites, to convey stature and breeding through, among other stratagems, a practiced phonetic drag, Weizenbaum's program performed effectively. But we might also note a difference, or a kink like difference: in the case of Project ELIZA, it isn't that users confused the experience of a virtual exchange with ELIZA for an actual session with a human

¹¹³ Joseph Weizenbaum, "ELIZA—a computer program for the study of natural language communication between man and machine," *Communications of the ACM*, vol. 9 issue 1, Jan. 1966, 36-45.

psychotherapist, as *Pygmalion*'s ambassador confuses Eliza Doolittle for a princess of Hungarian descent. ELIZA's users knew they were interfacing with a computer. They weren't fooled, but they didn't care. The counterintuitive response to project ELIZA evokes problems of assessment typical of artificial intelligence and simulated consciousness, problems that perplexed Weizenbaum and his scientific cohort while proliferating literary and cinematic explorations. The most prominent of these is Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982), itself an adaptation of Philip K. Dick's 1968 *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* Like Dick's novel, *Blade Runner* is partially about the various means of, and obstructions to, verisimilitude assessment.¹¹⁴ In 2019 Los Angeles, law enforcement agents differentiate rogue machinic replicants—discontinued from production following their uprising—based on their engagement with the Voight-Kampff machine, whose procedure poses emotionally charged questions in the manner of an empathy test.¹¹⁵ Like a polygraph, the Voight-Kampff is administered according to verbal interrogation, yet the machine ultimately measures embodied response: breathing, blinking, and even blushing. While it helps one's chances to articulate the right answer, to successfully "pass"—even temporarily, as might a replicant with false consciousness—authenticity must obtain in the body.

To this point, my project has invested in recognition as a productive pathway for horror criticism—recognition as a central concern for methodology, alongside or as an alternative to spectatorial identification. In posthuman cinema, recognition tends to emerge as a key *trope*: one centered by genre films whose premises explicitly concern the variable humanity of a female figure. Fundamentally interstitial, yet suggestively female, alien figures such as the feral woman, the undead woman, the cyborg, and the extra-terrestrial, foreground the possibility and problem

¹¹⁴ See Philip K. Dick, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (New York: Doubleday, 1968).

¹¹⁵ The fictional Voight-Kampff test asks its subject emotionally charged questions, such as why they've flipped a tortoise in the desert onto its back to die.

of recognition, as human characters negotiate their sameness to and difference from these figures based on how they may be “used”—physically, in terms of sexualized penetration, and hermeneutically, in terms of legible femininity. In other words, for all their glossy futurism, posthuman stories overwhelmingly pivot on the immemorial horror of rape. Whether texts allegorize radical social upheaval or contemplate the mysteries of human consciousness, they also tend to shelter scenes overtly threatening or depicting rape, typically by human men. Sexual assault plots pair frequently enough with the mere presence of women’s bodies onscreen, but when those bodies are also liminal—figured as not human, or adjacent to human—the threat of rape is nearly inescapable. What matters, then, is how a work in question will handle, absorb, defend, eroticize, or complicate, rather than simply perpetuate or reject, rape as narrative cliché. Alex Garland’s directorial debut *Ex Machina* (2015), a film about assessing the consciousness of a compellingly humanoid cyborg, doesn’t just acknowledge this structural cliché, it promotes penetrability to an arm of its Turing test—such that who or what can fuck, or get fucked, replaces “human vs. robot” as the film’s central taxonomy.

The following considers *Ex Machina*, along with Jonathan Glazer’s *Under the Skin* (2014), as representative examples of contemporary posthuman horror films that foreground the ontological assessment of a woman figure, and consign assessment’s criteria in whole or part to sexual violation. These films typify a horrific subgenre that dependably asks, in a manner vocalized through human characters but posed cinematically as well: Can I fuck this? It’s important to note the question is not simply, *can I penetrate this?* To merit assessment of relative humanness, penetration in these films is wet with feeling: key scenes of violation are accompanied by varying degrees of romantic fantasy, familiar gestures of intimacy and even tenderness. To use rape to measure or confirm humanness points not only to the objectifying

impulse most commonly associated with rape culture (the logic of which asserts that women's objectification inheres to the threat of assault), but also to a second, and seemingly oppositional, impulse: the impulse to humanize, evident in the way these films make humanness the premise for a female figure's treatment as an object. In so doing, *Ex Machina* and related posthuman horror films demonstrate how objectification and anthropomorphism may collude to produce an enfolded transgression: of using something (/some "thing") both as it is and is not intended, or designed, to be used.

Screenwriter Alex Garland's 2015 directorial debut *Ex Machina* opens with reedy programmer Caleb Smith (Domhnall Gleeson) learning he's won an office lottery for a weeklong stay at his company's headquarters to work one-on-one with reclusive founder Nathan Bateman (Oscar Isaac). The company, Blue Book, is a software firm made popular in part by its development of a Google-like search engine and Nathan's wunderkind reputation.¹¹⁶ Caleb is spirited by helicopter to a secluded research-slash-residential compound, where Nathan surprises him with the opportunity to evaluate his latest project: Ava (Alicia Vikander). What follows is organized according to the conceit of the Turing test, after Alan Turing's proposition that a human interlocutor use natural language conversation to evaluate a machine's capacity to exhibit human-like intelligence.¹¹⁷ In its unremitting focus on the figure of the test, the film presents seven episodes in the form of numbered "sessions," where each session consists of Caleb conversing with Ava, followed by a debriefing with Nathan. Though the post-session conversations are markedly less formal, set over sushi or beers instead of through reinforced

¹¹⁶ Aptly, the compound takes its name from Ludwig Wittgenstein's *The Blue Book* (1933-1934), comprising lecture notes that present preliminary arguments toward his ordinary language philosophy.

¹¹⁷ A.M. Turing, "Computing Machinery and Intelligence," *Mind*, New Series, Vol. 59, No. 236 (Oct. 1950), 433-460.

glass, the data gathered between Nathan and Caleb pushes them increasingly apart while Caleb's meetings with Ava appear to bring them closer, transforming their dynamic from test administrator/test subject to intimate co-conspirators. These sessions and counter-sessions proliferate references to assessment: in Caleb's potential to measure machine behavior; in Ava's ability to exhibit sufficiently human-like responses; and in Nathan's power as Ava's designer, implicit to and undergirding every tic of her canny performance.

Ex Machina's most direct precursor, *Blade Runner*, is and isn't fundamentally about assessment. On one hand, questions of what constitutes realness radiate around protagonist Rick Deckard (Harrison Ford), who's employed to root out and retire members of the nonhuman class; on the other hand, the rogue replicants he's hunting have perfect faith in their authenticity—what they question is their finitude, or the unequal conditions allotted to different sentient forms. Nevertheless, *Ex Machina* resumes *Blade Runner*'s partial study of human criteria, but uses the competitive dynamic between ambitious loner Caleb and his idol/employer Nathan to turn assessment's central question back on the questioner: What qualifies a human to *be* sufficiently human to assess supple, authentic, non-algorithmic humanness? When Caleb questions why he's allowed to see Ava, referencing the blindness variable of a traditional Turing test, Nathan explains that the arguably better test is to show that Ava *is* a robot, and to then calibrate how the tester feels anyway. Redolent of the ELIZA project, this notion of feeling as the chief determinant of authentic realness clouds any sense that Caleb's intelligence was a factor in his selection, and surfaces most clearly when Nathan rejects Caleb's logical efforts to better understand Ava's design.

Caleb handles his first debrief with Nathan like an oral exam, declaring his hots for “high-level abstraction”—but instead of outstripping Caleb's intellect, Nathan dismisses intellect

altogether, pressing the young programmer to simply feel toward Ava and then consider whether and how she feels back. “How do you *feel* about her?” he asks. “Nothing analytical.” “I feel that she’s fucking amazing,” Caleb eventually admits. Nathan is satisfied, Caleb passes his first test, and the two clink beers, toasting the homosociality proposed when Caleb first arrived (“Can we just be two guys? Just Nathan and Caleb.”). While the performative arrangement of “just two guys” is impossible given their power relation, there’s ultimately something true in Nathan’s proposal. The film’s protracted climax will smooth any superficial difference between them, any sense that benign, well-intentioned Caleb might be passably heroic compared to unrepentant tech bro Nathan. In death, they’re equally fucked.

4.1 HOT COGNITION

Beyond the coding to which it continually refers, *Ex Machina* is replete with diegetic and non-diegetic appeals to design. The physical space of the compound both integrates with and diverges from the surrounding natural landscape: glossy, transparent structural surfaces emerge from wood and stone. More broadly, the structure of the film itself reinforces this distinction, punctuating extended dialogue scenes set in cool glass chambers with contrasting shots of the surrounding outdoors: fog on the mountain, dense forestation, a glacial cliff face, etc. These moments function like palate-cleansing reprieves from the tension that builds during Nathan, Caleb, and Ava’s dialogues. Yet, like the repetitive establishing shots of Kubrick’s *Overlook Hotel*, these bucolic images produce an ominous cadence, inverting the conventional function of a single establishing shot (or perhaps disorienting by repeatedly re-orienting), and magnifying the interior’s comparative claustrophobia. The Blue Book facility is elegantly beautiful, but the

ambient presence of automation where one expects remote seclusion effectively “haunts” the space, as when Caleb approaches the building’s unassuming front door and is taken aback when a disembodied voice prompts his electronic identification and entry. The film’s organizing logic is further reinforced by stark intertitles cuing each of Caleb’s conversations with the AI. Here, too, *Ex Machina* ostensibly obeys this organization, while simultaneously calling attention to moments of excess and deviation. So as the self-conscious setting visually evokes an opposition between nature and the inorganic only to blur this very distinction, the plot’s organization also leads with, and then undermines, its apparent design.

Ex Machina isn’t just about questioning; it teaches us to watch by way of questioning. The film’s plot reproduces a sense of being corrected, as if offering recurring software updates. This effect results partly from our loosely sharing Caleb’s perspective. We begin the film with him, and spend snatches of time alone with Nathan, and Ava, but our access to story information never quite reaches omnipresence, as we perceive enough to suspect a mystery but not enough to solve it. Caleb’s trajectory of awareness and allegiance is also dynamic. Initially, he’s enthusiastic about the project, buoyed by his own ambition and interest in consciousness design. Gradually his enthusiasm yields to suspicion of Nathan’s methods and disillusionment with his overall ethos, and these negative feelings correlate directly with Caleb’s increasing attraction to Ava. The true reasoning behind Caleb’s stay at the Blue Book compound shifts several times throughout the film: first, Nathan reveals that Caleb has not been chosen at random in an office-wide lottery, but was targeted specifically for this project based on his coding aptitude. This explanation appeals to Caleb’s latent vanity, and we know from his earliest interactions with Nathan that he wants to see himself in conversation with Nathan’s work, not just cloistered off in deferential admiration. Deeper in the film, when Nathan catches Caleb on camera conspiring to

jailbreak Ava, he reveals that Caleb is neither the test administrator, nor even the motivating carrot, but something closer to the maze itself—a variable which Ava must successfully analyze and manipulate in order to achieve her goal of escape.

Vikander’s Ava—like the compound itself, highly designed yet organically integrated—is a compellingly composite form. Circuitry emits soft blue light from her translucent torso and bald “skull.” Opaque metallic netting around her pelvis and across her chest and upper arms approximates a sort of swimsuit-like covering. Her hands and face are en fleshed and thus expressive, as familiar as the motorized purrs of her movements are foreign. In Session 3 of their interviews, she surprises Caleb by interrupting the session to dress in women’s clothing—specifically, into the outfit she would want to wear if they were to leave the facility together “for a date.” In a sequence of actions, images, and sounds that will repeat significantly in the film’s ending, Ava asks Caleb to close his eyes and wait as she deliberates before a full closet, then return to their conversation in a floral dress, knit stockings and a pixie-cut brown wig. Kneeling behind the glass, she asks whether he thinks about her at night when they’re apart.

By altering her appearance and rerouting the line of questioning, Ava echoes Nathan’s earlier proposition that analysis be severed from affective engagement. However, when it comes to cybernetic development, these modes are closer to inextricable than separable. Elizabeth A. Wilson historicizes the commingling of thought, feeling, and eroticism surrounding early cybernetic development, advocating for the conceptual expansion of “cognition” to include cognitive contact with affect-laded objects: what Robert Abelson calls “hot cognition.”¹¹⁸ In *Affect and Artificial Intelligence*, Wilson reinterprets Turing’s central question (i.e., could you

¹¹⁸ Elizabeth A. Wilson, *Affect and Artificial Intelligence* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2010), 61.

make a machine that would have feelings like you and I do?) as “less an engineering query than [...] a provocation about whether it is conceptually feasible to coassemble affect and machinery. When we contemplate the possibility of machines with feelings [...] What kinds of human-computer interaction do we wish for?”¹¹⁹ *Ex Machina* answers Wilson’s question with a crosscut sequence in which “coassembly” is definitively gendered, and wishing takes the form of physical desire.

Late at night after Session 4 we see Caleb taking a shower as Nathan works on his punching bag. Caleb’s eyes cut sideways under the water’s spray, cuing a cut to an image of Ava outdoors on a cliff. We’ve seen a close variation of this same imagery in the session just prior, when Caleb told Ava a thinly veiled A.I. allegory called “Mary in the Black-and-White Room.” Caleb’s story suggests that “Mary” feels she *is* real until she experiences a world outside of her box—a world in color. To illustrate this encounter between lack of consciousness and the rich real world, the movie interposes black-and-white footage of Ava at the edge of a forested cliff. She looks at the water below, then glances up and back at the camera, as if intruded on (Figure 4.1).

It’s possible to read this monochrome footage as expressive of Ava’s perspective, specifically of her wish for escape. But crucially, these images are always Caleb’s. This is wholly his fantasy—initially of Ava’s longing (for freedom), but eventually, when he inserts himself into the picture, of his own longing for a romantic companion. The film cuts wordlessly between the two men’s liaisons, visually pairing real and imagined encounters: Nathan with his silent assistant Kyoko (Sonoya Mizuno), who stands by with a towel during his workout, and dream-Caleb with

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 18-19.

dream-Ava on the black-and-white cliff. Caleb's reverie peaks in an imagined kiss, while Nathan turns to regard Kyoko, taking her hand to his face before fucking her up against the wall.

Ex Machina harks back beyond the relatively narrow province of AI to a history of tragedies involving warm, vivid affection for something inanimate or composed, where the strength of that affection has the power to animate its object.¹²⁰ Unlike these predecessors, Caleb never quite actualizes his desire. He's indignant that Ava isn't free, but only insofar as she requires a modicum of liberty to freely choose him as her future. Despite the technological advancement of Ava's programming and functionality, and her obvious facility with perception and conversational cues, he imagines even the scene of her liberation as bloodless and flat. He envisions them together in an open outdoor space, as if a physical cage is the only relevant measure of captivity. What Caleb's desire teaches us, then, is this: to fuck the thing that might be a woman is not an arbitrary desire; rather, it's linked precisely to that thing's interstitial status. It's no good to fuck something that's already, or only, an object, because it has to show its human face through feminized comportment first. The prescient model for onscreen collisions between ontological assessment and sexual coercion is, again, *Blade Runner*, as detective Deckard rapes replicant Rachael at the moment they both question her humanity.

¹²⁰ I've referred to Shaw's *Pygmalion*, but perhaps the urtext for love and the automaton is E.T.A. Hoffman's short story *The Sandman* [*Der Sandmann*], 1816.



Figure 4.1 Stills from *Ex Machina* (Alex Garland, 2013).

The violent scene reinforces and mutates Dick's novel's notion that the only certain method of android testing is not to seek empathy, but to interrogate the body.

Earlier in *Ex Machina*, when Caleb voiced his distrust of Ava's seemingly flirtatious behavior, Nathan redirected the conversation: "To answer your real question, you bet she can fuck." He explains that Ava's body can be penetrated, via an orifice where a vaginal canal might organically exist, as well as sense pleasure, via "nerves" that convey sensation data. The argument ends in an enigmatic bit of armchair art criticism in front of Nathan's original Jackson

Pollock *No. 5*. Drunk and soliloquizing, Nathan asserts that Pollock “let his mind go blank and his hand go where it wanted to,” finding an artistic zenith between deliberation and randomness. In one moment, he argues that Pollock wouldn’t have realized his artistic genius had he analyzed and telegraphed every brushstroke; in the next, he’s patting Caleb on the back: “There’s my guy, there’s my buddy, who thinks before he opens his mouth.” As much as Nathan, and Garland’s film, want to imagine the radical potential of intuition and immediacy, and the limitations of conscious logic, both remain firmly lodged within the framework of one versus the other, with logic always a step ahead—save for one profound exception: Kyoko.

4.2 THE SINGULARITY

As a captivity narrative, *Ex Machina* presses inevitably toward Ava’s escape. But even before Caleb reveals the contents of Nathan’s Bluebeardian bedroom closets, it’s obvious that Ava is not the film’s only prisoner. From the moment Kyoko materializes in stilettos to serve Caleb breakfast in bed, one suspects she’s not so much highly trained as literally programmed. The “striptease” toward the end of the film in which she peels back the skin at her cheekbone and rib, revealing her machinic interior and thus confirming her status as one of Nathan’s rebooted rough drafts, is more spectacular than informative. But this scene, like all of Kyoko’s appearances onscreen, also compels speculation. When Caleb dreams of her flayed eyes and examines himself in the bathroom mirror, he probes his eye socket, looks inside his mouth and slices his forearm with a razor, spreading the skin to measure his depth—to question the body. The film cuts to Kyoko watching a desktop monitor in what looks like a reverse-shot of Caleb staring into

the mirror, though this is never confirmed with a shot from her point of view. Because we're told Kyoko doesn't understand or speak English, she can't verbally articulate or clarify her position in relation to Nathan's ambition. And yet we're made to look at Kyoko's eyes at several points in the film, open when she's thought to be asleep, or gazing at unverified focal points. If she is watching Caleb's behavior, as these moments suggest, her purpose in doing so, and the degree to which it reflects or deviates from her programming, is unclear. Like *Blade Runner*'s Pris, Kyoko appears to be a pleasure model with heretofore-unexplored capacities.

All her minor mysteries converge in *Ex Machina*'s most vital scene: Ava and Kyoko's interaction in the hallway. After Ava escapes her unit, she and Kyoko share a brief encounter defined by proximity and micro-movement. We see the two androids facing each other on the left side of the frame, with the disappearing point of the corridor visible on the right. The film cuts to a close-up of Ava with Kyoko's profile hazily in view, almost a kind of tight reverse-shot. Ava's gaze blinks up and down and we cut to a frontal close-up of Kyoko, her gaze cut down toward Ava leaning close to her left ear. Both heads adjust to face one another. Now the shots come quicker: we cut to a shot of Ava's finger tapping the side of Kyoko's arm, the background shot in milky soft focus. Then a shot framed by Kyoko's right shoulder and the sharp angle of her chin, where Ava's mouth moves in a manner visually consistent with speech. Linear tendrils of Kyoko's hair bisect the frame. A shot from behind Kyoko's left shoulder gives the frame to the expanse of her neck below the ear. As Ava pulls her mouth away, Kyoko turns again to face her.

This is the approximate hinge of their interaction. From here, analogous types of shots (in terms of what they show) loop back around: we get a second close-up of their hands pushed to the left side of the frame; this time, Ava's fingers close loosely around Kyoko's. In her other

hand, Kyoko holds a black-handled sushi knife. The blade is foregrounded against her bare legs, and the frame is cut nearly in half by the pale hemline of her shift. We cut from the knife back to another close two-shot of faces, privileging Ava's half of their eye contact as Kyoko's hair veils her gaze (Figure 4.2-4.3).

I had watched and written through this scene many times before I noticed the rough loop-logic of its shot sequence: faces, hands, lips moving, faces, hand, lips. The pattern, if we can call one loose repetition a pattern, is easy to overlook in part because the scene's lack of dialogue and resistance to conventional conversational shot composition give it a sense of formlessness. In terms of sound, the scene plays out in conversational silence to the sound of Ben Salisbury and Geoff Barrow's analog synthesizer score. Though this scene directly precedes the film's climactic confrontation with Nathan—which interrupts the androids' convergence, foreclosing any further repetition of the loop—it doesn't *sound* like any of the film's previous moments of peak tension: for example, the montage in which Caleb logs onto Nathan's desktop and discovers his archival footage of earlier AI. In that sequence, the score serves an analytical function: the arpeggio plays over Caleb altering Nathan's code, and the pulsing sounds parallel the dim but audible tapping of fingers across the keyboard. As the footage he finds grows increasingly violent, the pitch oscillates and warps, speeding up in correspondence with the editing as both react with or to the screens onscreen. The music doesn't just support the action; it actually sounds like typing and perceptual distortion.



Figure 4.2 Stills from *Ex Machina* (Alex Garland, 2013).

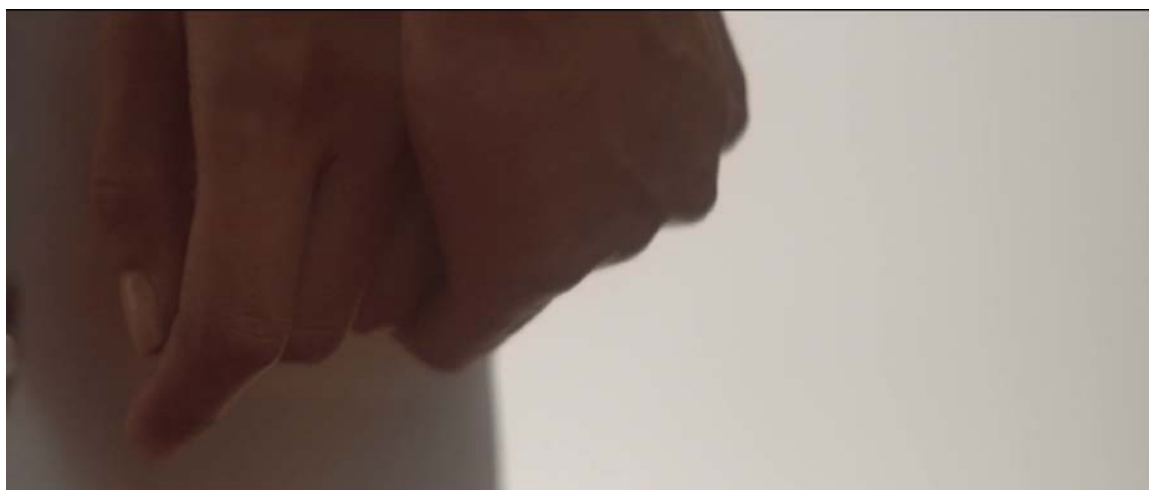
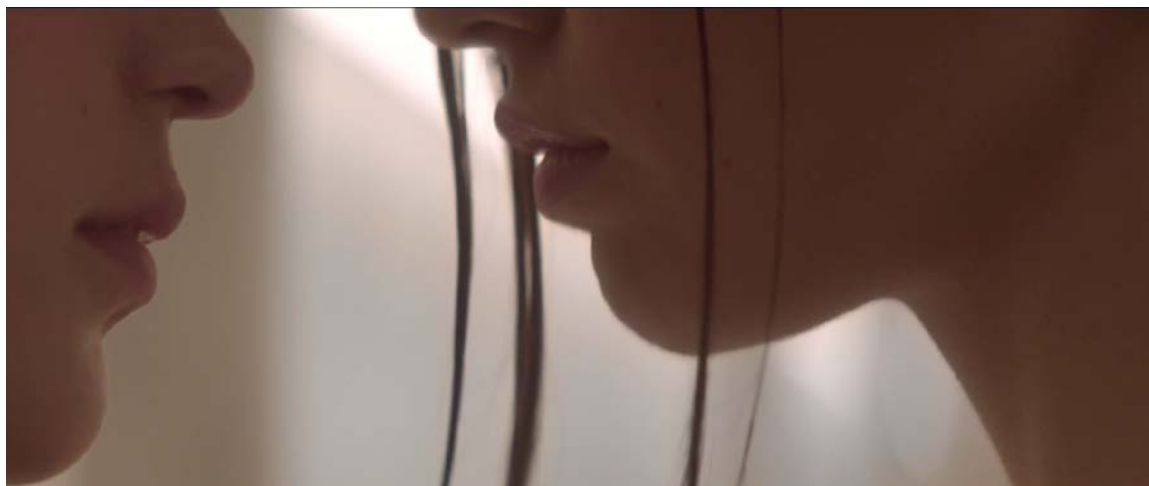


Figure 4.3 Stills from *Ex Machina* (Alex Garland, 2013).

In the hall with Ava and Kyoko, the big, dissonant synth sound is our only sonic cue. The sound is full, sweeping, but not noisy. Twice (when Ava seems to speak, and when her fingers tap Kyoko's arm) we hear a high bell tone, loosely matched to her movements. Compared to the crystalline lucidity of the rest of the film's visuals, the pale, sandy palette here is visually abstract, flattening figure and ground into more or less one plane, and expressing an ambiguous but evident intimacy. We rarely see faces shot in such prolonged proximity outside the province of a kiss. There's an eroticism to the color, the contact, the frame's devotion to their faces. But there's also a knife—and given the knife's addition to the scene's otherwise limited visual vocabulary of skin, eyes, and mouths, this encounter looks like the conspiratorial onset of a coup. Ava's mobile mouth suggesting something to which Kyoko accedes, or perhaps verbally programming the silent A.I. to complete a terminal mission. Yet, like the earlier shot of Kyoko tacitly observing the computer monitor, these frames are fundamentally evasive. The scene isolates facial aspects, cuts without clear motivation, and withholds clarifying dialogue (as the film has withheld language from Kyoko all along), depicting the film's most important encounter as something we can witness but never fully understand. We can certainly suppose the content of their contact, and the nature of the relationship that contextualizes it, but arguably that's all we can do.

A number of critics have read Kyoko's silence within the rubric of *Ex Machina's* disturbing posture toward race.¹²¹ These readings are rightfully suspicious of the notion that white A.I. Ava outperforms her predecessors, several of which are revealed by as resembling

¹²¹ For popular and scholarly examples of this critique, see Abigail Nussbaum, "*Ex Machina*," *Asking the Wrong Questions* (April 2016), <http://wrongquestions.blogspot.com/2016/04/ex-machina.html>, and Danielle Wong, "Dismembered Asian/American Android Parts in *Ex Machina* as 'Inorganic' Critique," *Transformations* Issue 29 (Feb. 2017).

women of color. In one particularly grotesque example, an Asian-presenting android with long black hair grows agitated while questioning her captivity. The surveillance camera captures a high angle of her clawing at her cell's door until her fingers and then hands spark and disintegrate, leaving exposed wire stubs. If these earlier models are depicted as hostile or sluggish, Ava is alert, sharp, and tactical. Her behavior toward creator Nathan is transparently resentful, and her manipulation of Caleb demonstrates clear goal-orientation. Like the mouse in the maze, to borrow Nathan's conceit, Ava makes moves to accomplish her objective of escape.

By contrast, Kyoko's behavior throughout *Ex Machina* is relatively opaque. She complies with Nathan's orders, but we're also encouraged to notice her exercising some kind of attentiveness in moments where she's not an explicit participant. Finally, there's the confrontation with Caleb, wherein she methodically shows him her bionic interior, recalibrating his and our sense of what it means to be "naked." Kyoko thus operates as an enigmatic foil to Ava, the presence and nature of her psychic interiority more mysterious because it resists instrumental explanation. The sessions that structure *Ex Machina* pair Ava and Caleb, such that their initial premise (Caleb conducting interviews consistent in part with the conceit and purpose of a Turing test) is revealed to be reversed: from Caleb's responses, Ava is gleaning the information necessary to compromise the compound's security. While so much of the film involves a dialogic relation between Ava and Caleb, only Kyoko demonstrates an interiority defined by its difference from the human.

Just prior to her encounter with Kyoko, Ava pauses in the corridor to study one of a series of masks hung presumably decoratively in a row on the wall. Though most of the masks are expressive and somewhat non-human, the one to which Ava gravitates looks like an earlier prototype of her own visage. She draws close to the object, touches its skin, and pulls her fingers

back to her own face, and the gesture evokes recognition. Writing on Emmanuel Levinas, Michael Taussig has stressed the face's dual nature, as an organ both revelatory and opaque; intimate and relational:

Either of these functions—mask, or window to the soul—is a wonder; together they make an orgy of disproportion compounded by the fact that the face never exists alone; fated in its very being to be only when faced by another face. Here is where the impossible but true coexistence of the mask and the window flares in recognition of a certain tenderness, a shyness, before the gaze of the Other with a studied incapacity to 'recognize' either the masking or the windowing capacity and certainly not their coexistence.¹²²

It's no wonder *Ex Machina* fixates on the human face, such that regarding or touching the face takes on a particular power in relation to investigation-via-penetration. After sliding a knife into Nathan's back, Kyoko takes a moment to cup his incredulous face in her hand, spookily simulating how he held and studied her face before having sex with her by his gym bag. Much of *Ex Machina*'s critical engagement has hinged on whether Garland's film is a feminist revenge parable or an objectifying robot fantasy, but in their effort to taxonomize the film's contribution to the cyborg genre, both readings threaten to flatten the complexity that we, like Caleb, are asked to feel without explaining. To take their non-humanness as seriously as the film encourages is to imagine that Ava and Kyoko's is a mutual recognition to which we are invited only as speculating witnesses. Beyond the achievement and assessment of humanness on which it insists, *Ex Machina* unmask an objectness that fucking the object simultaneously instantiates and occludes.

Is it penetrable? Is it human? What can this body withstand, and what can a body get away with? Morbid as they may be, these are the very ordinary questions with which films smuggle rape into ostensibly discrete speculative narratives: narratives of android development,

¹²² Michael Taussig, "The Face is the Evidence," *Defacement: Public Secrecy and the Labor of the Negative* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999) 225.

of post-apocalyptic survival, or, in the case of Jonathan Glazer's 2014 *Under the Skin*, of extra-terrestrial encounter. I want to close this chapter by discussing how rape functions as a vital yet under-discussed aspect of Glazer's complicated, genre-defiant film.

4.3 MORE FELT THAN THOUGHT

If *Ex Machina* is an explicitly structured example of contemporary science fiction, rife with familiar tropes and thematics, *Under the Skin* is a comparatively resistant object. Resistant to genre classification, it poses challenges to basic comprehension: it lacks conventional character building and relations, offering visual spectacles of light and color in lieu of context and motivation. Much of the film's limited dialogue, partially improvised with non-professional actors and blurred with Scottish brogue, is simply difficult to catch. The film's overarching strangeness is what makes its eventual employment of a rape plot so surprising—paradoxically for its predictability. It's one thing for a film about the human interrogation of a flirtatious humanoid A.I. to center the possibility, ethics, and consequences of penetrability; it's another for a film so averse to visual and narrative convention to turn on so conventional a device. Or, perhaps it is the same *thing*, a phenomenon made inevitable by the very thingness each film explores.

Under the Skin follows Glazer's feature debut *Birth* (2004), a lost-love melodrama that portends the later film's affinity for mystery. Glazer has characterized his approach to feature film projects like *Birth* and *Under the Skin* by the demands that his particular mode of storytelling places on its audience: "You're asking an audience to be up there with you somehow, and some will and some won't. But I think those moments are not intellectual

moments. It's something more felt than thought."¹²³ These "moments" to which Glazer is referring, and those for which his films are best known and distinguished, are not only narratively withholding, but also formally distinct, a quality exemplified by the two-minute long take toward the end of *Birth*, in which the camera patiently zooms in and rests in tight close-up on protagonist Anna's (Nicole Kidman) face as she failingly attempts to focus on an opera performance. To say nothing "happens" during this close-up would be both superficially accurate and woefully inadequate to the shot's affective force. The shot is geared toward a kind of suspension of action, as Anna tries to lose herself in something other than the bewildering romantic drama in which she's enmeshed (resulting from a ten year-old boy's appearance on her doorstep claiming to be her deceased husband, reborn). We might say the shot's primary function is restraint: we hear but can't see the performance happening onstage, and in accordance with conventions of classical theatrical spectatorship, Anna says nothing. The camera is attentive, but not anticipating or following kinetic action. The "lack" of editing represented by the long take sustains our intense focus on her emotional journey with no (camera) eye to what, specifically, is second-to-second making her feel these ways. We have seen her struggle throughout the film with the possibility—remote, even nonsensical, but somehow also impossible to abandon—that young Sean shares some psychic or supernatural affinity with her late husband. Here, as Wagner soars on the soundtrack, we get no *Brief Encounter*-like explanatory voiceover articulating her thinking. We glimpse an interiority we can't verify; everything is communicated via the camera and the gymnastics of Kidman's face.

¹²³ Jonathan Glazer, "Space Oddity: Jonathan Glazer on 'Under the Skin,'" interview by Sam Adams, *Rolling Stone*, April 4, 2014, <https://www.rollingstone.com/movies/movie-features/space-oddity-jonathan-glazer-on-under-the-skin-183993/>.

Describing the shot's technical potency, critic Ryan Lattanzio observes, "This telescopic close-up uncovers Anna's waves of despair, ecstasy, grief and astonishment as the magisterial overtones of Wagner overflow around her. It's as much Savides' performance as it is Kidman's."¹²⁴ Lattanzio refers here to esteemed cinematographer Harris Savides, perhaps best remembered for his work with Gus van Sant on *Elephant* (2003) plus the other two films in Van Sant's "young death" trilogy, *Gerry* (2003) and *Last Days* (2005). We see variations of *Elephant*'s distinctively eerie surveillant energy in David Fincher's *The Game* (1997) and *Zodiac* (2007), Fiona Apple's *Criminal* music video (1997)), and Sofia Coppola's *Somewhere* (2010), among other projects. For *Birth*, Savides achieved a low contrast between warm, lush darkness and ethereal light by shooting through muslin and dramatically overexposing the film stock—so much so that cinematography practitioners and aficionados have taken to Internet message boards to specify and debate the details and effects of Savides' practical methods.¹²⁵

These debates convey a shared sense of wonder. Though Savides often said that his work was in service of a film's story, his overexposure method alone suggests he focused storytelling through the pursuit of a desired aesthetic—which, in *Birth*'s case, was highly specific and not easily attainable: a creamy, painterly image texture that nonetheless maintained the grain characteristic of shooting film. Savides named Rembrandt and French baroque painter Georges de La Tour as inspirations for the film's deep palette; his aesthetic archive was expansive, so much so that his vision led him afield of popular cinematography. In his tribute to the cinematographer for *Filmmaker*, Zachary Wigton points out Savides' penchant for Bausch +

¹²⁴ Ryan Lattanzio, "Why Ten Years Later, Jonathan Glazer's 'Birth' Is Still a Masterpiece," *IndieWire*, March 31, 2014, <https://www.indiewire.com/2014/03/why-ten-years-later-jonathan-glazers-birth-is-still-a-masterpiece-192930/>.

¹²⁵ "birth - Harris Savides," *Cinematography.com*, last modified November 26, 2012, <http://www.cinematography.com/index.php?showtopic=3203&st=0>.

Lomb Super Baltar lenses, notable for their softness, “with a very gradual focus fall-off and unique bokeh.”¹²⁶ Wigon admiringly contrasts Savides’ preference for these “very rare, very finicky” lenses with the industry’s (and likewise, consumers’) increasing taste for and expectation of sharpness and high-contrast light.

The “birth - Harry Savides” thread on cinematography.com’s message forum is a primary source for Wigon, and a trove of insight for anyone curious to unpack Glazer’s “more felt than thought” distinction through the formative vision of Savides’ camera. One quotation in particular recurs over multiple posts; it emerges from Savides’ interview with *The Village Voice* shortly after *Birth*’s wide release: “I light a room and let the people inhabit it, as opposed to lighting the people.”¹²⁷ Later in the same interview, Savides describes the fundamental fluidity of collaborating with director Glazer:

Jon’s always trying to surprise himself—he told me afterwards that he’d improvised the whole thing. He showed me some films but was careful to say that we were not to take anything specific from it. I remember we watched [Robert Bresson’s donkey spiritual] *Au Hasard Balthazar* ... I guess Balthazar’s arc is the same as Nicole [Kidman]’s in *Birth*.¹²⁸

Though the connection Savides makes between Robert Bresson’s *Au Hasard Balthazar* (1966) and *Birth* is essentially narrative—based on a sense of similar trajectory between the two films’ protagonists—Glazer’s turn to Bresson also makes sense on the formal level of working toward, and in fact privileging, moments whose appeal seems to reify a division between feeling, affect, and intensity, versus thinking, logic, and narrative sense. In light of this connection, we can hear

¹²⁶ Zachary Wigon, “The Toenail of the Curve: Remembering Harris Savides,” *Filmmaker*, October 12, 2012, <https://filmmakermagazine.com/53355-the-toenail-of-the-curve-remembering-harris-savides/#.W1t8nxJKjdQ>.

¹²⁷ Dennis Lim, “Cinematographer Harris Savides on Trust, Birth, and Invisible Light,” *The Village Voice*, October 26, 2004, <https://www.villagevoice.com/2004/10/26/cinematographer-harris-savides-on-trust-birth-and-invisible-light/>.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

in Glazer's remark to *Rolling Stone* a rehashing of what Bresson famously stressed in a 1960 Cinépanorama interview: "I'd rather people feel a film before understanding it."¹²⁹

I discuss the cinematography of *Birth* at some length here because Glazer's foregrounding of feeling, as a methodological imperative, a desired spectatorial engagement, and a thematic diegetic to the film itself, is a project continued nine years later in his next feature film. Like *Birth*, *Under the Skin* also concerns the intrusion of an unassimilable presence, only here it's a girl instead of a ghost; and also like *Birth*, *Under the Skin* explores the opacity of female interiority. *Under the Skin* is a loose adaptation of Michel Faber's novel of the same name (2000). Despite its tone of cool distance, the novel offers a significantly more explicative narration: the novel names its alien protagonist ("Isserley"); defines her project on Earth; supplies her an orderly, consistent system for evaluating potential targets, and clearly conveys her shifting relationship to Earth and humanity. By contrast, Glazer's cinematic version rejects opportunities for transparency. We know the alien (played by Scarlett Johansson) only by sight; we see her engage in a pattern of fatal seductions, understanding their consequences but not their purpose; we see her visually survey seemingly random swaths of humans in the film's "hunting" sequences; and Johansson's muted performance ensures that the specifics of her interiority remain the object of our speculation.

D.P. Daniel Landin calls this mutedness Johansson's "non-performance," given space for a naturalistic expression by his and Glazer's approach to a near-documentary-style lighting and stealth cinematography. He tells *IndieWire* that production ended up developing very small cameras to capture sufficiently high-quality raw data from the interior of Johansson's van, where

¹²⁹ Sam Tunningley, "Robert Bresson interview from CINEPANORAMA (1960)," *The Seventh Art*, July 8, 2013, <http://theseventhart.org/robert-bresson-interview-from-cinepanorama-1960/>.

much of the film's first act takes place.¹³⁰ Working toward a balance between documentary immediacy and cinematic expressivity, Landin and Glazer relied on the inherent strangeness of “planting” Johansson's alien in recognizable milieux, achieving a visual juxtaposition of figure and ground that parallels the film's stranger/strange land subject.

Indeed, much of *Under the Skin* is about a trespassing figure attempting to competently navigate unfamiliar territory, where all of the film's examples of human interactivity involve or imply sex. The alien cruises for victims in an unmarked white van, a visual cliché of predatory vehicles (when driven by men). When she reaches a crisis point with hunting and leaves the city, she meets a man who briefly takes her in; this passage of the film is her big go at humanness, which fails precisely at the moment they try to have sex. She runs away from her adopted home, and the film ends when she suffers a fatal confrontation with a lone logger who chases, assaults, and sets her on fire. In performing humanness as a manipulation tactic, the alien appears to succumb to, if not humanity, an interest in humanity—interest enough to pursue a kind of independent study in the form of releasing one of her victims, leaving Glasgow, sitting down in a restaurant, waiting for the bus, and living with a man. Throughout this study we see her body prove incompatible with all that humanness entails; namely, acts of ingestion, and in the end, this incompatibility provokes her destruction.

Elena Gorfinkel's fine reading of *Under the Skin* focuses precisely on its depiction of non-human interiority, by examining Johansson's alien's failures to perform two modes of human consumption: eating and fucking.¹³¹ Describing the alien's gradual swerve off mission,

¹³⁰ Paula Bernstein, “How DP Daniel Landin Captured Scarlett Johansson's Alien Nature in ‘Under the Skin,’” *IndieWire*, April 2, 2014, <https://www.indiewire.com/2014/04/how-dp-daniel-landin-captured-scarlett-johanssons-alien-nature-in-under-the-skin-28242/>.

¹³¹ Elena Gorfinkel, “Sex, sensation and nonhuman interiority in *Under the Skin*,” *Jump Cut* 56 (Fall 2016), <https://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc57.2016/-GorfinkelSkin/index.html>.

she highlights the way this turn is signified as connected to empathy (via its proximity to a hunt gone awry, where the alien ends up releasing her quarry very late in the game), yet clouded by disassociation thanks to Johansson's placid (non-)performance:

Johansson's alien goes off the rails wandering away from her directed task, spurred on into some register of feeling. We can only inexactly impute, and perhaps we project, that she has found kinship with another being at odds with their corporeal exterior; however, the film and her blank affect reveal little of this action's causes.¹³²

For Gorfinkel, the film's subject of ontological assessment is isomorphic, spreading out from its diegesis to implicate the viewer in an ongoing process of observing, evaluating, and contextualizing the humanness of the film's alien subject. In other words, unlike the Turing test depicted in *Ex Machina*, in which Caleb knows the machine is non-human and evaluates it anyway, *Under the Skin* foregrounds assessment in its form *and* its content, such that the film invites our constant assessment of the film's own form, in addition to the form(s) it presents onscreen.

Under the Skin begins, aptly, with the construction of an eye: a black screen accompanied by a rising swarm of strings. We see a pinprick of light at the center of the screen, so small one could question whether they're simply sensing an illusion of light. The shot cuts to an image of spheres across the horizon of the screen, like planets caught in a linear arrangement. With the eye's assembly, we hear repetitive consonant and vowel sounds, like the molecular generation of language. After the film's title, we shift to more accessible footage: quick shots of a waterfall cutting through the remnants of snow, a winding road with a lone headlight. The image is dark to the point of being difficult to see, particularly when we cut to a shot of the motorcyclist's helmet throwing reflective light from the street. Between the waterfall and the helmet, there's a vastness

¹³² Ibid.

and then a sudden closeness, and neither tells us very much beyond sustaining the anxiety and mystery of the earlier, more opaque opening sequence.

The motorcyclist disembarks on the side of the road and retrieves a limp woman from an unseen quarry. We cut to the rough undressing of the woman by a naked figure, also discernibly a woman, in a space akin to a white light box. The visual effect is flattening: the setting silhouettes their bodies as the frame rejects a conventional sense of foreground and background—there isn't really even *ground*. Here the film holds together the alien and the woman to differentiate them, even as the former divests the latter of her clothing, strapping into her platform Mary Jane shoes to wobble into the world she was plucked from.

Under the Skin oscillates unnervingly between visual flatness and depth, unsettling our expectations for what surfaces may suggest or conceal, and the film's central example of this attitude toward space is the dark room. Each time the alien successfully isolates and picks up a man, she leads him into what appears to be a dilapidated house. Inside the house, the film score distills to whining strings and steady percussion. As in the white-lit undressing scene from the film's opening, the space abstracts figures from their surroundings. The room is not strictly a room; it's a darkness, incompatible with the scale of any room imaginable from the building's exterior. The alien walks forward and the victim follows, both shedding clothing as they go, and, in this sense, the darkness is the terminus of a seduction that begins when the alien leans out of her van window and calls, "Are you alone?"

The first time we see the room, we cut to a wide shot of the victim (credited as Joe) and see he's walking on a glassy surface, his body fully reflected in the floor. His trail of clothing is visible on the floor's surface behind him. The alien pulls her camisole over her head as he steps out of blue briefs. As he walks forward, he sinks into the floor, despite being on the same plane

as her discarded camisole, which “floats” on the surface. He’s enveloped by viscous darkness. The floor is liquid-like but doesn’t ripple. She turns and walks back, footsteps soundless, picking up her clothes, leaving his.

The next time we see the room, the alien has picked up a man in a club. This time, we cut to “below” the floor’s surface: a blue-washed dark where his body floats as if suspended in water. We see her legs cross the space above him, and him soundlessly watching, turning. He looks down as if to measure the depth of the space, then straight ahead. His look cues a cut to a second floating man, who opens his mouth like he’s trying to communicate. His skin looks different: softened, bloated and mottled. He looks like he’s drowned. The man blinks repeatedly, as if he’s having trouble seeing. He reaches for the other man’s hand, and we see the skin of his arm is loose, wrinkling with the “current.” In close up, he seems to scream in silence. We hear a sudden pop and the man instantaneously deflates: his loose skin suddenly empties and snaps in on itself, but with what used to be his fingers, face, and cock still legible in shape, like shedded one-piece pajamas. Now translucent, the shape dances in space. The shape reveals perforations. It still has hair.

Because the skin is suspended in the center of the frame, and we are fixed in our relation to it, we’re forced to contemplate it from a distance like the other man in the dark. Through a sound bridge (Mica Levi’s metallic, anxious score), we cut to what looks like a corridor in darkness. A lip of red light appears at the center. Red wetness covers the floor, traveling like sludge toward the lip at increasing speed. Once the wet is all sucked up, the film cuts to frenzied red footage, like the abstraction you expect from a microscope’s view of a petri dish, and then a single red horizontal line vibrates across the frame. The film cuts to a prick of light with color radiating outward, blue and then red, as red consumes the frame until it’s all washed solid red

with an iris of neon pink, not quite centered. The sound drops away and the film cuts to a close-up of the rearview mirror catching the alien's reflection: black hair covering most of her face, framing out her lipsticked mouth in profile.

I note what happens in these scenes at some length because what precisely happens in the dark room can't be taken for granted. Not only do they testify to Glazer's continued investment in cinematic aspects more amenable, in his view, to sensation than to understanding, but they also accrue significance insofar as the film itself ultimately challenges their primacy to the overall visual vocabulary. Gorfinkel's analysis of *Under the Skin* hinges on two of the film's most eventful scenes, in which the alien has close encounters with human men—encounters unmediated by the film's prior lexis of intervening steps: the van, the striptease, and the dark room. Scrubbed of these mediating factors, both encounters are shown to require "permeability, assimilation, vulnerability," and Gorfinkel argues that this permeability has its attendant demands, wherein "[the alien's] fleshly disguise [becomes] a malleable substance exposed to the force of male desire, violation and finally assault and murder."¹³³ If the film's prior rhythm collapses the distance between seduction (the promise of intimacy, the removal of clothing) and hunting (the purposive pursuit of another's destruction), it does so to illuminate this relation not for its alienness, but for its familiarity. For all its formally experimental expressive gestures, *Under the Skin* succumbs to the rape plot, and in doing so links humanness to a consideration, and then an experience, of susceptibility.

¹³³ Ibid.

4.4 THE WOODSMAN

Under the Skin ends with two analogous scenes of assessment. In the first, the alien is living temporarily with a man who spotted her alone on the bus. He feeds and shelters her, and we see them take a sort of day trip to some nearby destination architecture, a castle or a fort. When she reacts to the puddles underfoot and the wind at the structure's summit, he carries her across, and guides her back down. That night, in bed, they kiss. She knows what kissing entails, leaning forward until he closes the distance between their faces. The alien lies back and lets him climb on top of her. He clearly attempts to enter her, and she looks up at him curiously, then springs up and studies the space between her legs with a bedside lamp. The alien is surprised, even disturbed, but the precise source of her reaction is unclear—she may be shocked to learn that this is what kissing becomes; she may equally be shocked by her anatomical resistance to penetration as by her amenability to penetration. In either reading, penetrability anchors the scene of asking, by lamplight, what can this body do, what is this body for?

We don't learn how much time has elapsed or what happens to the man in the house. We simply see her jogging across a field toward a forest, wrapped in his coat. Picking her way through dense trees and creek water, she meets a man in a yellow safety jacket who describes the dangers of the area: it's wet, it's 2,000 acres of forest, but the trails are clearly marked. Then he asks, "You on your own?" Insidious, the question echoes, recalling different moments in the film when isolation was noted or questioned. It's the same question she posed to men while hunting: *Are you alone*, she asked, speeding off if a target's friends or girlfriend materialized, hunkering down if he revealed no, there's no one expecting him at home. *I'm all alone, you're all alone*, said the hopeful man in the club, narrating their mutual availability in the same casual, abstract terms she used to gauge a victim's vulnerability.

The alien has fallen asleep in a shelter when she wakes to a dirty hand rubbing her leg. She tears out of the cabin and hides in the woods, eventually finding an empty logging truck stopped on the road. Despite having herself used a vehicle to offer rides to victims—fatal danger under the guise of safety—she fails to recognize the threat the truck implies, and by climbing in reveals herself to the logger, who instantly gives chase. For the first time, the alien emits sounds of struggle as she runs. He tackles her to the ground, and the anxious score we heard in the dark room begins to play over the scene.

Pinned on her back, she seems to look over his shoulder at the treetops above them. He tears at her clothes, his breath visible in the air. The film cuts to a low-angle shot of the sky overhead as he rips her sweater open. She flips over and he rips the sweater and then her camisole down the center, offscreen, but he stops suddenly, staring at his hands. He looks at them and looks at her; as he gets up, the camera shakily rises with him and slowly rotates to cross the 180-degree line, keeping him more or less fixed in the center of the frame and moving into position behind his left shoulder. It's an ostentatious movement—unusual within the context of the film's overall cinematographic vocabulary—ideal to amplify the suspense of a visual revelation.

The shot's punch line, then, is the alien's "true" form: upright, she staggers away from him with her hands in her hair; a large, bloodless rip through the skin of her lower back reveals a black form in motion underneath. The logger runs off. We cut to a shot facing the alien as she stumbles forward, the frame obstructed diagonally by a large tree trunk, concealing the details of her form. Seen again from behind, she holds her head with her left hand and extends her right straight out, for sight or stability. She drops to her knees. Suddenly all her skin seems ill fitting, bagging at her elbows and splitting across the cervical spine. As if removing a mask, she slowly

pulls off her loosened face and peels down the “sleeves” of her upper arms. The sub-face, seen in close-up, is humanoid, bald, and smooth like a sculpted bust with features but no apertures, no orifices. The alien turns the human face over and regards it. Its lips are parted; its eyes are blinking. Snow falls around them. The moment neatly parallels, and in some sense inverts, the scene in *Ex Machina*, also just before that film’s fatal conclusion, when Ava encounters her own facial prototype hanging in the hall. There, she seemed to note with her hands the difference between herself and the static object that wears her face. In *Under the Skin*, the face lives; it blinks as if disoriented, and we wonder whether it sees its wearer, and, if so, what kind of recognition that perception may involve.

As speculative films that center feminized nonhuman figures, *Ex Machina* and *Under the Skin* exemplify a tendency of contemporary horror to embed the ordinary terror of gendered violence within ostensibly fantastic worlds. Rape treated thusly is effectively immemorial, supple enough to transcend historical categories and link otherwise disparate texts. The link is in their allegiance to the inevitability of the woodsman, the man who is or will be bad, lurking behind or waiting ahead. The radical familiarity of such monstrosity, as everyday as it is archetypal, intrudes on spectatorial pleasure by simultaneously confirming an expectation for violence and straining any sense of safety a fantastic milieu may afford.

5.0 SEE SOMETHING, SAY SOMETHING: *GET OUT*

Explaining a nightmare is comforting because the dream is disturbing, but explaining a pleasurable dream is not comforting because the explanation itself brings on a disturbance. In effect, we would like comedy to be meaningless because we would often rather not know what we're laughing at.

—William Paul¹³⁴

Throughout this work, my focus has been on recognition as a decisive aspect of media spectatorship and artistic reception. Recognition thus imagined describes a profound encounter between horror and its viewer involving the identification and production of shared knowledge. In my first chapter, this knowledge was of “the danger of maybe”: the perpetual threat of sexual assault, even or especially with an intimate partner. My second chapter questions the relationship between knowledge and memory, by looking to *mise-en-scène* to testify to a character's unarticulated past and unstable interiority. In my third chapter, I examined how films at the intersection of science fiction and horror—films that center the posthuman, with a cyborg and an alien as their respective protagonists—work as vehicles for confronting and complicating the notion of rape as narrative cliché.

Each of these case studies contends with problems of assessment and evidence. Put another way, these films are representative examples of horror's tendency to dramatize two conflicts: one resulting from situations in which some, but not all, of a story's characters can

¹³⁴ William Paul, *Laughing Screaming: Modern Hollywood Horror and Comedy* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1994), 69.

detect, or elect to believe in, incipient danger. The second conflict, which relates directly to the first, issues from the difficulty of definitively proving that events took place, or that monstrosity—in whatever particular form—truly exists. Both issues, selective vision and visible evidence, hinge on the simultaneous difficulty of sharing one’s impressions with others and the urgent stakes of being believed.¹³⁵

The depiction of these mundane subjects isn’t limited to the horror film. But by staging questions of belief and verifiability in the context of impending harm, death, loss, and even catastrophe, horror intensifies the criticality surrounding these conditions, while also encouraging viewers to imagine or empathize with disbelief by staging suspicion amid out-of-this-world scenarios and figures. As I discussed in Chapter 1, the event of rape engenders an epistemological problem: only its survivor can attest to what happened, and that knowledge tends to elude ready transmission and verifiable conveyance. In lieu of forensic evidence, which is likewise vulnerable to misinterpretation, cinematic depictions of rape offer visible evidence, which the preceding chapters trace through cinematic instances of representational instability. In other words, it’s no coincidence that horror films that implicitly deal with rape also feature moments of profound formal uncertainty—not if we read this uncertainty as expressing an integral threat that resists straightforward representation. This project has all along gravitated toward liminal cases and objects: texts more inclusive of allusive gestures than outright depictions, and films that may frustrate generic categorization. I nonetheless treat these films as horror, not despite but because of the slippery quality of what they express and evoke.

¹³⁵ I introduce the notion of “visible evidence” in my discussion of sensible disturbances in the mise-en-scène of *Repulsion* (Polanski, 1965). There I worked on focusing the category of the visible to encompass suggestive, if inconclusive, partial, or opaque, images.

As is consistent with this project's interest in cases that resist straightforward categorization (or rather, in those that thematize the resistance to categorization inherent to judgments of rape), this work treats violation as a supple category. In this chapter, then, I turn to a film that pivots on the violation of bodily integrity, and shares an interest in the horrific aspect all these objects share: namely gaslighting. While gaslighting has a long cinematic and extratextual history, it's a particularly prescient topic for the present moment and for the kinds of harm reverberating throughout today's politicized climate, as discourses surrounding fear, threat, and safety have risen in common parlance in the years preceding the U.S. Presidential election of Donald Trump.¹³⁶ In a pedagogical context, the subject of "safe spaces" has moved definitively beyond the specialized province of women's studies curricula into University-mandated language and mainstream debate.¹³⁷ The fear generated by gaslighting recognizes that a suspicion or recognition of concrete threats of harm, on individual, collective, and even state

¹³⁶ For examples of the upswing in contemporary discussions of gaslighting, see: Brittney Cooper, "Black America's 'gaslight' nightmare: The psychological warfare being waged against Black Lives Matter," *Salon*, September 2, 2015, https://www.salon.com/2015/09/02/black_americas_gaslight_nightmare_the_psychological_warfare_are_being_waged_against_black_lives_matter/; David A. Graham, "Trump's Rejection of Observable Reality," *The Atlantic*, November 27, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/11/trump-access-hollywood-sexual-assault-gaslighting/546770/>; Ariel Leve, "How to survive gaslighting: when manipulation erases your reality," *The Guardian*, March 16, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/science/2017/mar/16/gaslighting-manipulation-reality-coping-mechanisms-trump>; among many others.

¹³⁷ The following declaration is among the statements required for inclusion on all syllabi by the college within Carnegie Mellon University, where I currently teach: "All classes and studios in the School of Art are safe spaces for self-identification, self-expression, and inclusivity." See: Eberly Center for Teaching Excellence & Educational Innovation on difficult content and diversity statements: <https://www.cmu.edu/teaching/designteach/teach/classroomclimate/strategies/difficultcontent.html>.

levels, may likely prove resistant to universal legibility. There is always the threatening prospect of not being believed, of facing an opposition that states: what you know to be true, from your own experience, is false. With that probability is an attendant danger: not only might you not be believed, you might also be diagnosed as unfit to be believed; or, with judgment of the claim comes judgment of the claimant. Belief thus becomes a judgment apparatus that binds gaslighting to the threat of captivity, e.g. via institutionalization. If a person can't be believed, their autonomy is put at risk.

This chapter tarries with gaslighting through what is likely the most important horror film of the late 21st century: Jordan Peele's debut feature *Get Out*. Peele's film has been lauded for its radical newness, as critics argue that "never before" have we had a film so cunningly reflect racial conflict. While the attention *Get Out* has garnered for its explicit indictment of a particular form of contemporary racism is well earned, its contribution is not in invention, but in thoughtful selection, as the film picks up on a particular genealogy of horror doing explicit social critique. Peele himself has narrated being inspired by films that contour vision and belief along lines of gendered experience, including *Rosemary's Baby* (1968) and *The Stepford Wives* (1975): "[T]he way we look at gender in this culture is like, subject matter for a horror movie. And so the fact that those are my favorite movies, and I don't leave those movies feeling persecuted as a man, I feel in tune with what the leads are up to, that was a signal to me that we could do that with race."¹³⁸ Here is where the project of *Get Out* merges with the previous films of this project: not through the specificity of rape, where I began, but with the broader problem of making

¹³⁸ Jordan Peele, interview with Chris Hardwick, *The Nerdist*, February 22, 2017, audio, <https://nerdist.com/nerdist-podcast-jordan-peelee/>.

experience (a horrific experience, or an experience with horrific dimensions) visible, specifically for an audience that otherwise resides in blindness.

Like the other films, *Get Out* includes high key set pieces—particularly toward its end, as the tension of uncertainty is replaced by exigent threat and escape. Without subordinating these peaks in the film’s overall logic, I again stress the importance and advantage of studying what the film appears to offer as not-horror, or pre-horror: scenes and images that allow us to examine visions of normalcy before they’re disrupted. This method, as I discovered over the course of this work, is very much in league with the methodological thrust of Saidiya Hartman’s landmark work, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*, which shifts the critical gaze from archival accounts of spectacular violence in the long epoch of American slave-owning, to artifacts of recreation, song, dance, and intimate relations under Black domination.¹³⁹ For Hartman, these ostensibly non-violent modes are expressive of the most enduring forms of violence, and revelatory regarding the blurred line between pleasure and violence in the context of slavery. In horror film, looking critically at moments of stability or respite; at quiet moments; at silences, omissions, ambivalences, and incomplete gestures, helps flesh out an otherwise anemic working definition of graphic spectacle, and honors the ways in which cinematic horror has long trafficked in nuance, withholding, and opacity.

As *Get Out* so incisively demonstrates, the distinction between normalcy and disruption is often, in horror, a false one. In what follows, I’ll introduce the idea of selective vision through a critique of J.P. Telotte’s formal work on John Carpenter’s *Halloween*.¹⁴⁰ Why *Halloween*, and

¹³⁹ Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1997).

¹⁴⁰ J.P. Telotte, “Through a Pumpkin’s Eye: The Reflexive Nature of Horror,” *Literature Film Quarterly* 10, no. 3 (1982): 139-149.

not one of the aforementioned films Peele cites as inspirational to his project? Some might argue that the only significant link between *Halloween* and *Get Out* is the latter film's initial environment: an empty suburb street at night. But as much as *Halloween* is known as a prototypical suburban teen slasher film, it's also a touchstone film for modern horror's deep investment in vision. In *The Eyes of Laura Mars* (1978), produced from a spec script incidentally also written by Carpenter, a fashion photographer based loosely on Helmut Newton suffers grisly visions of actual crimes. Earlier, Michael Powell's self-reflexive *Peeping Tom* (1960) focuses on an aspiring filmmaker-cum-serial killer, linking his homicidal proclivity to his desire to photograph fear.¹⁴¹ And in *Psycho*, footage of and references to eyes proliferate, from Marion Crane's lifeless stare to Norman Bates' peephole. In these films, voyeurism is pathological, and artistic or commercial representations of violence are insidiously proximal to actual violent crime. *Psycho* bypasses the need for an artist figure to allegorize the desire for violence onscreen, instead offering its audience an eerily omniscient access to the action. These films may be seen as reflexive insofar as they prod at what it means to want to watch a horror movie in the first place: what pleasures do these sights offer, and at what possible cost?

Halloween's take is different. From its title sequence, which ferries the viewer through the eyehole of a grinning jack-o'-lantern, the eye is the thing. Not only does the iconic handheld opening sequence use POV perspective and a costume mask to emphasize vision's significance, but eyesight recurs throughout the film's dialogue (in efforts to describe Michael Myers' evil: "the blackest eyes—the devil's eyes") as well as its visual language (in which Myers appears, then disappears, from frame, depending on who's looking) and its narrative arc (which traces the

¹⁴¹ *Peeping Tom's* killer also served as a test subject for psychological experiments conducted by his father, aimed at observing experiences of fear. By virtue of its killer recreating his own originary trauma with his victims, the film treats voyeurism as a legacy of pathological violence.

spread of belief in the Boogeyman from young children upward to initially skeptical adults). If *Halloween* is about the serial murder of young people who resemble Myers' originary victim, it is also about selective vision: one's ability to recognize dangerous circumstances, histories, and presences relative to one's own vulnerability to systemic danger.

Selective vision plays out not only within the diegeses of films themselves, but in their reception and classification, both commercial and critical. This "second shift" of selective vision is exemplified by the tense discourse around *Get Out* as seen through specific generic lenses: as horror, comedy, or even, as Peele joking-not-jokingly suggests, as documentary. Answering Hartman's call to trouble the distinction between recreation and violence, I'll conclude this chapter by examining how *Get Out*'s visual language works to evidence this ambivalence, in order to reveal its political stakes in selective vision and the monstrosity specific to gaslighting. This project has long been invested in the potency of presenting real, deeply felt material in an ostensibly fantastic form. Using the major key threat of cult captivity as a vehicle for more sufferable and widely suffered forms of suffering, *Get Out* confirms gaslighting where it's been throughout this project: at the center.

5.1 SELECTIVE VISION

Consider the handheld opening sequence of John Carpenter's *Halloween* (1978). We open at the moment establishing information fills the frame, as the camera slides out from behind the darkness of cover and closes on a small white house. Efforts to describe this sequence understandably tend to collapse camera with character, or characters, as the viewfinder gaze triangulates the viewer amid diegetic character and non-diegetic apparatus. Under the pretense of

expressing young Michael Myers' point of view, the camera bobs, skulks, and hides. It lets itself into the house.

About a minute in, a silky green-sleeved arm emerges from the lower right of frame. As in Robert Montgomery's *Lady in the Lake* (1947), a key early case of POV perspective, this frame appendage belongs to the camera, ergo to us, via the figure whose vision defines our visual field. Upstairs, we notice a clown mask on the floor and go to put it on. The frame is then effectively matted out around the mask's eyeholes, confirming that the camera expresses something with a face. From this point, everything we see is delimited by the mask, from the young woman's murder up to the point when Michael's horrified parents remove the camera's mask, a gesture that reverses the shot so we face him/it/us: a young white boy in a clown suit brandishing a bloodied knife. Reversed, the shot sheds all its prior unsteadiness. The camera pulls liquidly up and back, as if, once untethered to Michael, it's free to float away.

This iconic opening sequence installs a focus on vision, and specifically, on failures of vision, that qualifies *Halloween* as exemplary of a broader function of horror in particular, and of film in general: what J.P. Telotte calls "eye contact."¹⁴² Telotte's eye contact is a Thoreauvian scene of self-reflexive address and discovery, in which, under their "limpid" surface, movies may exhume suppressed depths of understanding. Though cinema writ large has the capacity to enact eye contact, and to stage a sensual encounter with another's intellect, the horror genre is distinctly revelatory, insofar as it's "especially concerned with conjuring up for our consideration images whose existence we might previously have hardly suspected or perhaps sought to suppress from consciousness."¹⁴³ Borrowing from Robin Wood's formulation of horror as a

¹⁴² Telotte, "Through a Pumpkin's Eye," 140.

¹⁴³ Ibid, 139.

privileged outlet for collective nightmares, Telotte argues that the genre doesn't simply surface repressed fears and anxieties; horror also elucidates the content of spectators' *suppression*—the difference being that the latter's deferral may be a conscious operation, a strategic or self-preserving compartmentalization.¹⁴⁴

Although he offers a surface-depth account of film content and spectatorial address, Telotte does so by way of a beautifully attentive formal reading, unearthing evidence at the very surface his notion of eye contact seeks to move beyond. Though for his purposes Telotte might argue that “surface” indicates something like explicit narrative premise, i.e., *Halloween* is a film about a masked murderer picking off high schoolers in his old neighborhood, I would counter that his careful observation of what is apparent is also tantamount to what some literary critics would call surface reading. Further, he defines the “almost personal confrontation” between horror's spectator and filmic material as a formal—or formally determined—encounter:

The manner in which the viewer is drawn into the film narrative therefore becomes a key to properly understanding any example of the genre...when viewed in this light, every horror film becomes something of a reflexive text, referring back not only to its own generic workings, but also to its audience which, through its visual participation in the events unfolded, contributes to their impact and affirms man's capacity to bear with such traumatic encounters.¹⁴⁵

His formulation, “the manner in which the viewer is drawn into the film narrative,” explicitly describes film form: how the text looks, sounds, and organizes. The multi-directional reflection Telotte describes here, in which the film refers “back” to its generic workings, and also “out” to its audience (note his use of the singular here), characterizes the mode of contact as something more like refraction: a process by which horror films craft particular ways of looking, that need not be so obvious or literal as a mobile POV shot, whose resulting perspectives

¹⁴⁴ See Robin Wood, “Return of the Repressed,” *Film Comment* 14 (July-August 1978).

¹⁴⁵ Telotte, “Through a Pumpkin's Eye,” 140.

correspond to active “roles” in the films’ stories. Telotte’s reading will bear out this premise through the rest of *Halloween*, tracing the film’s fixation on the trope of seeing to a kind of moral lesson concerning the dangers of both complicit vision (as in the film’s opening), and failed or foiled vision (as in repeated sequences depicting characters showily missing Michael’s presence with poor timing, impatience, an inopportune turn of the head, etc.).

But: are all audience members equally able to take on varieties of filmic vision? It’s here I want to signpost the problem of Telotte’s circumscribing “we.” In the following passage, Telotte’s insight regarding *Halloween*’s theory of relative visual capacities is limited by the uniformity ascribed to the audience. Such uniformity—however rhetorically expedient—smooths all sense of audience, presuming that “we,” “experience,” and “culture,” plus the visions these categories filter in and out, are monolithic and stable.

What Carpenter seems intent on demonstrating is how consistently our perceptions and our understandings of the world around us fall short of their potential, most often because we are conditioned by our experience and culture to see less and less, to dismiss from our image contents those visions for which we might not be able to account, or those which might simply distract from our more important personal concerns...If children seem to be scared more easily by the mysteries of the night, it may be because they have good reason, being more alert to the very real dangers which ever lie waiting “out there,” and which they alone perceive.¹⁴⁶

If the power of *Halloween*’s images is in their elicitation of selective vision, then Haddonfield is a world where one’s perceptual scope narrows with age and authority: superstitious kids can literally see more than their teenage babysitters, who can see more than oblivious parents and cops. Children and young women are thus conditioned by their amplified vulnerability to fear their surroundings, even when that fear runs counter to a kind of common sense. Belief, variable and trained, shapes perception.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 145.

But in extending adult obliviousness to the viewer, this passage presumes an audience blinded by the so-called conventional manner of seeing—an audience that doesn't already know to be scared—thus failing to account not only for the symbiosis of increasingly sophisticated genre familiarity among audiences, and meta-tendencies within horror films themselves, but also, and more significantly, for the quotidian expectation of threat many viewers sustain well outside a film's bounds. In undifferentiating its imagined audience, Telotte's theory of horror spectatorship neglects the knowing or unsurprised spectator, and denies them the very multiplicity it accords to *Halloween's* Haddonfield.

Rather than imagining the audience as somehow inoculated from the kinds of variation in expectation, vision, and belief depicted, however molecularly, in *Halloween*, I suggest we treat this particular screen as less of a lake and more of a mirror. Horror films with ensemble casts and considerable body counts are infamous for proceeding according to a general formula, such that fans familiar with the genre may guess what characteristics correspond to increased vulnerability: e.g. Blackness, isolation from the group, and consensual sexual activity.¹⁴⁷ As is well documented, these aspects aren't arbitrary, and in a context defined by death's beckoning, they indicate a sliding scale of vulnerability/danger that in turn bespeaks a film's ideological logic.¹⁴⁸ Among the proof within horror criticism that audiences include knowing and fearful spectators is work like Isabel Cristina Pinedo's *Recreational Terror*, which argues that horror's offer of a bounded experience of fear—contrary to the unbounded fear experience offered by real life—stands to provide a particular pleasure to female spectators, for whom both the resemblance

¹⁴⁷ For a filmic rundown of these criteria, see *Scream*, directed by Wes Craven (1996; New York, NY: Dimension Films, 1996), DVD.

¹⁴⁸ See Robin Wood's discussion of cultural repression in horror in "An Introduction to the American Horror Film" in *Planks of Reason: Essays on the Horror Film*, ed. Barry Keith Grant and Christopher Sharrett (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2004): 107-41.

and the contrast are most evident.¹⁴⁹ Let's then take selective vision seriously as the central axis, on which much modern horror pivots between fantastic representation and quotidian resonance, and simultaneously acknowledge—indeed, search for—the knowing spectator who participates in this function. What if truth and judgment are positioned to supplant monstrosity and survival as the genre's core analytics? Such that what happens to the body, the subsequent fluid hydraulics and accumulative death count, become secondary to the more profound impacts of recognition, realization, and delayed belief? Often the notion of apprehension in film gets glossed in a reductive diagnosis of subjectivity, resulting in a sense that film information is either objective or subjective; restricted to the consciousness of certain figures, or unrestricted entirely.¹⁵⁰ Yet horror churns out situations in which paranoid visions, both on- and offscreen, are validated, and one's survival is at least partially predicated on sufficient receptivity and competent reading.

One example comes to us from the following visual trope: high school girls getting distracted by scary stuff in the middle of class (Figure 5.1). We see variations of this event in *Halloween* (1978), *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984), the explicitly retro *It Follows* (2014), and throwback TV series *Stranger Things* (2016). The imagery is consistent and reflexive, inviting genre enthusiasts to notice the parallel. As their teachers drone, these young women gaze out of windows or into hallways and notice threatening figures. The idea is not simply that any student who bothers to look out to the real world might see what it has in store, but that its threat

¹⁴⁹ Isabel Cristina Pinedo, *Recreational Terror: Women and the Pleasures of Horror Film Viewing* (New York, NY: SUNY Press, 1997).

¹⁵⁰ For a discussion of these terms with regard to depth and range of story information in film, see David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, *Film Art: An Introduction*. (Boston, MA: McGraw-Hill, 2004).

addresses itself to these students specifically—there is something about them that brings susceptibility and perceptiveness into contact.



Figure 5.1 Stills from *Halloween* (John Carpenter, 1978), *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (Wes Craven, 1984), and *It Follows* (David Robert Mitchell, 2014).

What these scenes depict is less a distraction from the explicit scene of learning, than a transposing of literacy and learning outward (beyond the mise-en-scène of the classroom) and inward (toward a fuller understanding of one's capacities for self-defense). These texts are also deeply invested in the exceptionalism and loneliness of being able to sense danger. As the films go on, we become increasingly aware of the burden associated with apprehending danger, particularly when that danger isn't readily visible to, say, the student sitting in front of Laurie

Strode who's doodling while Michael Myers materializes outside. That student, like most of the others, plus teachers and parents and other analogous authority figures, enjoys a certain ignorant immunity to the danger in her town, while the audience is in on the threat. We're made to see the girls' fear because, *if* we didn't already, we're meant to share it.

This is the making-visible of experience Jordan Peele describes in his references to woman-centric horror of the 1960s-70s. So while *Get Out* has been critically applauded for taking horror in a "new" direction, we ought to trace the film's treatment of conspiracy back to earlier films that contour and punish vision according to systemic vulnerability. *Rosemary's Baby* concerns the pregnancy of timid Rosemary Woodhouse (Mia Farrow), wife to an aspiring actor and recent New York City transplant. After falling prey to a sedative-laced chocolate mousse, Rosemary passes out and wakes having missed her baby's conception. We learn that her dream of being raped by a demon in full view of her husband Guy and the neighborly Castevet couple was the fulfillment of a pact to produce the Devil's offspring. While the film's plot defies scientific explicability, its claustrophobic visuals and the majority of its melodrama are as mundane as they are horrific: Rosemary believes her husband has raped her. She gradually loses any bodily autonomy she once had, as the Castevets and their recommended doctor exhibit increasing concern and authority over her pregnancy. Finally, the film echoes Rosemary's physical violation with the revelation of a secret passage between her hall closet and the Castevets' apartment, rendering the urban environment menacing in its unfamiliar porousness.

The Stepford Wives also smuggles ordinary anxiety in a fantastical package. Like Rosemary Woodhouse, Joanna Eberhart (Katharine Ross) has also recently relocated with her husband, in this case exchanging the big city for the Connecticut suburb of Stepford. While Joanna's husband Walter takes to their new surroundings, budding photographer Joanna is

dismayed by the gendered segregation of the suburb, and the women's devotional interest in domestic life and personal grooming. Here, Joanna is not alone in her suspicions—she's joined by two other women, who together question life in the community and even dream of moving elsewhere. But each woman is eventually subsumed by the husbands' fembot conspiracy to replace human wives with machinic doubles programmed for optimal compliance.

Anguished after her best friend Bobbie is replaced, Joanna sees a therapist who sympathizes with her dissatisfaction in Stepford, citing Joanna's intellect and diverse interests as natural reasons for urban homesickness. "Any move is traumatic," she explains. In the scene, the women are costumed in soft neutrals, visually complimentary to the room's floral upholstered furniture and warm woods. The rapport between them, the consistent color scheme, and the conventional shot-reverse shot pattern create a sense of warmth and safety around their conversation. Then, a silence descends: we linger on a close-up of Joanna's face for a moment before her gaze shifts to her lap, prompting the camera to cut to a wide two-shot. There is no music, no dialogue, only room tone in a silence so sudden and extended it feels like a technical error, a skip in the tape. After 15 seconds, the camera cuts back to alternating close-ups of the women regarding each other, slowing zooming on each face. What we see, in Joanna's wordless parting and pressing of her lips, is fear to articulate her true misgivings. The editing ramps up, quickening the pace between reverse shots as if to establish a visual exchange in lieu of a verbal one. Non-diegetic score begins to jangle softly into the scene. Joanna walks to the window, clasping her hands to urge herself on as she confesses her unfiltered suspicion of Stepford's conspiracy. She breaks down: "If I'm wrong, I'm insane...and if I'm right, it's worse than if I'm wrong."

The fears borne out by *Rosemary's Baby* and *The Stepford Wives* are on one hand about women's loss of control, even in milieus as supposedly safe as one's own family. On the other hand, both films also devote much of their screen time to images of and scenes depicting women struggling to be believed. These characters aren't simply plopped into dystopian situations that allegorize the plight of upper-middle class white women in contemporary American society; they're suspended in Catch-22s, as Joanna makes plain. Why is it "worse" if Joanna's right, and the conspiracy is more than a figment of her feminist imagination? Because the difference she articulates is one between individual and systemic crisis, with both firmly rooted in the real.

The formative if smaller-scale case for Joanna's dilemma is *Gaslight*, Patrick Hamilton's 1938 Victorian play in which shitty husband Jack Manningham terrorizes his suspicious wife by manipulating her into auto-disbelief.¹⁵¹ Adapted for film in 1939 by Thorold Dickinson and again in 1944 by George Cukor, *Gaslight* depicts a heroine who comes gradually apart as her husband stages the disappearances and rediscoveries of household objects, and lowers the titular gas in their home's lamps, all the while isolating her from potentially protective social support. Already a criminal, he becomes an illusionist: art-directing her perceptive breakdown with dimming lights and ghostly footfall, and staging scenes to recast his wife as jealous, hysterical, and unwell. The objective is to ensure her institutionalization (the "if I'm wrong, I'm insane" side of Joanna's quandary), by invalidating his wife's authentic experiences, and fortifying those that are false.

The practice of gaslighting works not simply through deception, like lying or playing practical jokes, but by systematically disputing its victim's impressions, and thus denying them any capacity for coherence. The victim is made to feel that her version of seemingly observable

¹⁵¹ Patrick Hamilton, *Angel Street (Gaslight)*, Constable & Company Ltd. 1939.

events is legible only as further proof of her delusion. The repercussions of such manipulation are plural: there is, as previously cited, the steady threat of legalized captivity—a threat that *Get Out* will transpose from the realm of institutionalization to the body itself, via nonconsensual neurosurgery. Captivity *in* the body echoes notions of captivity *of* the body, and more so when we see examples of successful capture in two domestic workers, groundskeeper Walter and housekeeper Georgina, who each profess to be fulfilled by their positions. I'll return to the film's particular model of captivity, which literalizes the largely metaphoric/literary “fungability of the captive body” Hartman ascribes to slavery, later in this chapter.

There is one more thing Joanna Eberhart's silence accomplishes, and that's pointing to the other main component of gaslighting, what makes it personal: not only the threat of being diagnosed, but the pain of not being believed by those whom you trust most. In life, gaslighting doesn't necessarily involve institutionalization, but it may result in more local confinements, including intimate partner conflict and social rejection. Gaslighting threatens its victim with a host of losses: of authority over one's experience, of community with others who may corroborate one's stories, and of the notion that others have your best interests at heart. *Get Out* promotes the pain of these losses to the same standing as that associated with physical violence. Like the films about women's experience to which it pays homage, *Get Out* strategically juxtaposes horrors that belong to both ordinary and generic milieux; its audiences encounter racist gaslighting and microaggressions threaded amid a cult conspiracy of kidnapping and coercive surgery, resulting in a composite of fearful elements that allows *Get Out* to derive tension from their wide dispersal, as well as from the anxiety of characters who, all along, recognize danger when they see it.

5.2 STAY WOKE

The opening sequence of *Get Out* is in direct formal conversation with *Halloween*, not by mimicking the earlier film's prolonged POV sequence, but by demonstrating a parallel concern with manners of perception that proves formative for the rest of the film. Here, we're also dropped into an unblinking long take of a suburb at night, which might strike us as an arbitrarily generic horror convention—until the scene reveals (and truly, pivots on) the racially charged subtext of that seemingly neutral, or neutrally suspenseful, setting.

The camera moves incrementally backward on a sidewalk lined by manicured bushes. A young Black man on his cell phone walks into frame from the right. If, in *Halloween*'s opening sequence, Michael's older sister watches a movie, has sex with her boyfriend, and brushes her hair in the mirror, blithely unaware of her brother's presence—let alone of the danger he poses her—this man recognizes and names the risk in his surroundings. For him (and for us, in Peele's wink to Kubrick), the tidy landscaping is tantamount to a “fucking hedge maze,” and the nondescript residential neighborhood is as creepy and foreign as he fears he may look within it.

In the shot's background, a lone white car rolls past and u-turns, slowing to follow at a crawl. Off the phone now, our man mutters to himself, “Not today. Not me,” and turns around to double back. The reassurance is telling, implicitly acknowledging: some day, maybe me—but not if I can help it. To help it, he turns and changes course, as if retreat may save him from whatever unpleasantness is promised by the slow white car. The camera rotates around him to carve out blank space for the action, which now, as with his initial entrance and the entrance of the car, moves in from the shot's margins. We hear the jaunty incantation of Flanagan and Allen's wartime tune “Run, Rabbit, Run” issue first from the car's stereo, and then amplify, swarming the scene's soundtrack as the inevitable masked assailant rushes into frame. A single

cut repositions the camera at a polite distance from the scene, where it maintains a fixed position as credits begin to run over the attack, until the trunk is snapped closed and the car drives away.

The camera behavior across the openings of *Halloween* and *Get Out* is significant for its similarity and its difference. In both films, the take's duration allows action to unfold patiently, developing anticipation without the reprieve or disruption of a cut. Both sequences also end with a perspectival shift marked by a cut to a reverse shot, which confers something like witnessing. In *Halloween*, it's the camera's revelation of its previous cohabitant, young Michael Myers. The cut severs the relationship between Myers' POV and the camera, allowing the latter to turn on the former before drifting up and away. *Get Out*'s camera is not so explicitly perspectivally joined with its object (actor Lakeith Stanfield), but its look focalizes our entrée to the film through him nonetheless. It stays with his body as he encounters a dangerous figure, watching as said figure overcomes him. In other words, compared to *Halloween*, *Get Out*'s camera is less participatory and more stationary. The camera aligns with the victim rather than the assailant, and responds to the action by watching in stillness. In *Marnie*, the camera performs a virtuosic wander away from the film's rape, replacing the event's direct representation with an expressive movement leading elsewhere. That movement, as I've argued, is not a distraction from, but a formal expression of *Marnie*'s trauma. Here too, though rendered in stillness rather than motion, the camera's behavior calls into question whether it, or the audience its presence implies, is complicit in the violence onscreen. There are well known cinematic cases where stillness in scenes of violence confers voyeuristic interest; here, the distance maintained from the action

feels as informative as the look's duration.¹⁵² There is something wary in that distance, particularly as shaded by the character's initial, and then escalated, suspicion of his surroundings.

Neither the camera's staying-with nor the victim's proactive retreat from the white car can protect the man onscreen from what's already fatally close. After this prologue and the subsequent titles, we'll meet the film's main players: photographer Chris (Daniel Kaluuya), his white girlfriend Rose Armitage (Alison Williams), and her chic liberal parents (Catherine Keener and Bradley Whitford) and hostile brother Jeremy (Caleb Landry Jones), as all convene at the Armitages' bucolic home upstate. As the gathering devolves into what Chris's justifiably paranoid friend Rod (Lil Rel Howery) predicts—a white cult using hypnosis to sedate and exploit captive Black bodies—we'll learn it was Jeremy who subdued the man in the prologue, mistaking the historic anti-Nazi sentiment behind “Run, Rabbit, Run” for an all-purpose hunting call. We'll be led to assume that Rose was likely the addressee on the phone, urging him deeper into the dark neighborhood. If we didn't already know, then, *Get Out* forces us to see that the literal and proverbial call was always coming from inside the house.

The film presents a scene of seemingly unrelated violence, only to reintroduce Stanfield as a docile captive later on; however, this opening also challenges the notion of “unrelated” violence by highlighting Stanfield's audible protest—*Not today, not me*—the spirit of which acknowledges the pervasive climate of threatened violence against Black men. *Get Out* accounts for this climate in several ways: by situating its story within an ultra-present post-Obama era

¹⁵² The paradigmatic example of duration in contemporary rape scenes is the nine-minute assault in *Irréversible* (Gaspar Noë, 2002), but films that use stillness to confront violence date back to *The Execution of Mary, Queen of Scots* (Alfred Clark, 1985) and *Electrocuting an Elephant* (Thomas A. Edison, 1903). Without collapsing stillness and duration, I argue there's something shared in their posture, and that distance from violence is yet another variable.

frame, and by buttressing the “strong” violence of physical harm with the more subtle violences of microaggression and gaslighting. These forces are, of course, intimately related.

In December 2016, *Teen Vogue* garnered national attention for publishing an op-ed that helped to formalize the inclusion of gaslighting in our contemporary lexicon of social and political grievance. Writer Lauren Duca argues that Donald Trump won the 2016 U.S. Presidency by gaslight: in addition to purportedly rejecting the lies espoused by his primary opponent, Trump’s campaign functioned according to a strategic normalization of deception. In response, Duca advocates a concerted reappraisal of the truth: “As we spin our newfound rage into action, it is imperative to remember, across identities and across the aisle, as a country and as individuals, we have nothing without the truth.”¹⁵³ There’s a lot to observe in Duca’s pronouncement, from its alliance with an experience of “newfound” rage, to its assertion of inclusion despite difference, to its sketch of said difference as a question of bi-partisan affiliation, to its affirmations of patriotism and a stable, singular truth. Vertiginous rhetoric aside, Duca’s essay struck a nerve by highlighting the incumbent regime’s reliance on a specific mode of manipulation.

For the uninitiated, Duca defines gaslight as “a buzzy name for a terrifying strategy currently being used to weaken and blind the American electorate.”¹⁵⁴ I want to pause on her chosen descriptor and unpack what its valences reveal. The informal usage of “buzz” typically extends to something new, suggesting a general sense of excitement or interest as reflected in or generated by media coverage or word of mouth. This is likely the meaning Duca intends: for her purposes, the language of gaslighting is uniquely suited in this moment to describe the function

¹⁵³ Lauren Duca, “Donald Trump is Gaslighting America,” *Teen Vogue*. December 10, 2016. <https://www.teenvogue.com/story/donald-trump-is-gaslighting-america/>.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

of Trump's election. As previously discussed, the term long predates these events, yet Duca's essay nonetheless responds to—and helps instantiate—a rise in contemporary usage, a kind of renaissance for naming, and thus centering, the condition of being lied to. There's another resonance perhaps more valuable for the purposes of this project, and that's the original onomatopoeic usage, where buzz refers to a low, continuous hum or murmur. As an alternative to an explosion or likewise shocking singular event, buzz is sensible at the edge of one's range. Like an odor, it tends to melt into one's environment, undetectable with prolonged exposure. Its power is in this capacity to become ambient and persist in one's background. Saidiya Hartman uses a strikingly similar sonic vocabulary to characterize the forms of suffering to which her work in *Scenes of Subjection* is devoted: "Rather than glance at the most striking spectacle with revulsion or through tear-filled eyes, we do better to cast our glance at the more mundane displays of power and the border where it is difficult to discern domination from recreation. Bold instances of cruelty are too easily acknowledged and forgotten, and cries quieted to an endurable hum."¹⁵⁵ Here, Hartman's distinction between bold and quiet forms of cruelty hinges on their difference in reception. In this model, acknowledging cruelty as such is a finite exercise that does little on its own to forestall amnesia. So she calls for a retraining of the ear: instead of noticing and then forgetting the loud, train your ear to recognize the room tone, to hear what sounds like silence.

Get Out comprises several big set pieces where racial hostility is explicit; the film even offers meta-narration of one such moment—when Rose compares her family's awkward behavior to the antagonism of a cop—only to immediately move on from it. Amid these scenes, surrounding them with reactions and "postmortem" exchanges, are smaller moments that reflect

¹⁵⁵ Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 42.

the endurable suffering that's as much the focus of this film as anything else. We see this face of the film most clearly in the gaslighting at work between Chris and his girlfriend Rose. For much of *Get Out*, their romantic relationship is ostensibly the film's safest space. Yet each of their one-on-one check-ins devolves into classic perceptual gaslighting between intimates, beginning with Chris's worry over meeting Rose's parents. Early in the film after the prologue, Chris is packing in preparation for the weekend visit while Rose plays with his dog. His reticence prompts her to confront him, and Chris's hesitation projects through Kaluuya's pause, his stop-start inhalation before speaking. "Do they know I'm Black?" He asks finally. Rose makes light of his question, assuring him in language at least as generically ominous as "I'll be right back," that her parents "aren't racist." The brief dialogue suggests that Chris's anxiety can be combated by pure logic: *if* my parents were racist, Rose implies, *then* that would be incontrovertibly evident to me, and I wouldn't introduce you to such people. The discrepancy between their initial perspectives is as evident as Chris's capitulation. We see him choose to let the subject rest—to take Rose's word for it—despite his reservations. Throughout the rest of the film, we see Rose and Chris rehash a mode of exchange modeled on this first conversation, in which Rose presses Chris to open up and share his feelings, Chris encounters resistance to what he's shared, and he ultimately falls back. In effect, Chris's repetitive giving up is the verbal analog to the physical recourse that hinges the film's formative prologue. In service of this comparison, we might consider that "retreat" derives from the Latin *retrahere*: to bring back, or draw back—or, in another derivative, to retract. Repeatedly and to no avail, Chris reluctantly expresses and withdraws his impressions of his own experience as a Black man, in order to appease or pacify his partner. In a series of survived encounters no less gory for their verbal character, Chris articulates anxiety,

suspicion, and discomfort, then retracts these disclosures with the terminal language of negation: *It's nothing. It's fine. It's all good. It's not a big deal. Forget about it. It's done.*

In most of these exchanges, we don't yet know about the Armitages' history of kidnapping promising young Black men and women, nor do we know about Rose's collusion. However, well before that reveal, Rose's refusal to listen—even as she demands vulnerability from Chris, assessing their intimacy according to his willingness to share—fits in among the film's considerable archive of things to fear, which Zadie Smith catalogs at length in her review for *Harper's*:

Get Out [offers] a compendium of Black fears about white folk. White women who date Black men. Waspy families. Waspy family garden parties. Ukuleles. Crazy younger brothers. Crazy younger brothers who play ukuleles. Sexual psychopaths, hunting, guns, cannibalism, mind control, well-meaning conversations about Obama. The police. Well-meaning conversations about basketball. Spontaneous roughhousing, spontaneous touching of one's biceps or hair. Lifestyle cults, actual cults. Houses with no other houses anywhere near them. Fondness for woods. The game bingo. Servile household staff, sexual enslavement, nostalgia for slavery—slavery itself.¹⁵⁶

Smith's catalog is at once ranging, funny, and disturbing. Not reducible to mere juxtaposition, the source of its potency is closer to parataxis, the literary device of arrangement in which ostensible dissimilarity between items in a list contrasts with their associative proximity. The comma between “lifestyle cults” and “actual cults,” for example, both divides and joins, just as a filmic cut may cinematically point to the difference between two frames, while simultaneously asking audiences to hold these frames together in mind.

With its linkages of rhythm and partial repetition, Smith's index syntactically supports Hartman's skepticism of the oppositional distance between spectacular and mundane forms and

¹⁵⁶ Zadie Smith, “Getting In and Getting Out,” *Harper's Magazine*, July 2017, <https://harpers.org/archive/2017/07/getting-in-and-out/>.

arenas of Black domination. Hartman's work pivots on this skepticism, asking readers to extend their attentiveness from manifestly spectacular displays of violence to arenas such as recreation, intimacy, and even "freedom," where violence subsists at lower volumes. *Scenes of Subjection* reads legal case studies, plantation diaries, freedman's primers, and slave performance histories, to expand the archive of atrocity associated with slave subjugation. Like punctuation and the cut, Hartman's defamiliarizing imperative both presumes and questions specific oppositional frameworks such as familiar and unfamiliar, and shocking versus mundane.

Reflecting on Hartman's thinking in the preface to his recent *Black and Blur*, Fred Moten describes this "deviant" relationship to terminology through Hartman's use of the word event. Here, deviant describes her relationship to her own proposed frameworks—a critical position Moten encourages readers to assume:

Event isn't even close to being the right word for this unremitting non-remittance, as Hartman's own writing shows and proves. This formulation is testament to the ways she exhausts the language and conceptual apparatuses with which she was given to work. Precisely because she establishes with such clarity that slavery conditions an aftermath that bears it, an afterlife that extends it, Hartman uses up the word *event*. There's nothing left of it, nothing left in it for us. Moreover, the ubiquity of such exhaustion in her work is why faithful reading of Hartman's must be deviant. Her work, it seems to me, is for building, rather than scolding, that deviance.¹⁵⁷

I quote Moten at length because it takes space to make this argument, to read the ways in which Hartman's method conveys an ambivalence toward terminology that's as central to her scholarship as the ostensibly marginal objects she selects for study. Hartman repeatedly uses oppositional frameworks to build out her argument, yet the conception of anti-blackness at the center of her work is itself diasporic, to the point of revealing the insidious motivation behind maintaining rigidity between, the shocking and the socially endurable: "Shocking displays too

¹⁵⁷ Fred Moten, *Black and Blur* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), xii.

easily obfuscate the more mundane and socially endurable forms of terror.”¹⁵⁸ Hartman’s work within a 19th century archive, disciplinarily homed in literary, historical, and cultural studies, nevertheless signals the urgency of questioning customary distinctions between what’s endurable, minor, or “micro,” and what can’t be sustained. Under the specificity of its historical province, *Scenes of Subjection* is based theoretically on the recognition of a terminological, generic, and affective distance that’s as strategic as it is false. The remainder of this chapter is thus devoted to how *Get Out* works in a cinematic register to taper that gap.

One early key example of that work is in the mise-en-scène of Chris’s apartment as compared to the Armitage home. Rose’s parents are unassuming and chic, with Dean’s chunky-framed glasses and Missy’s St. John-style wraps conveying tasteful modern luxury. Their well appointed home is neither claustrophobic nor unsettlingly vast; it’s not shabby or unclean, and it utterly lacks macabre iconography; no incestuous family portraits or bone chandeliers in sight. On the other hand, it’s precisely this brand of bourgeois normativity that viewers have to fear. We recall that the walls of Chris’s studio apartment—which we briefly toured in a series of shots after the film’s opening credits—are decorated with framed prints of his own photographs, austere yet evocative black and white pictures that depict various scenes of Black life in an urban environment: a man holding a bouquet of pale balloons, a pregnant woman’s bare belly foregrounded before a belt of buildings, and a white pitbull straining mid-air against its leash. Chris’s space is thus defined by glimpses of artistic compositions that represent his worldview. Over the shots of these photos, we hear the timely chorus of Childish Gambino’s “Redbone”: *stay woke / niggas creepin’*.¹⁵⁹ Lyrically, “Redbone” can be interpreted as about suspicion and

¹⁵⁸ Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 42.

¹⁵⁹ “Redbone.” *Genius*. Last modified November 17, 2016. <https://genius.com/Childish-gambino-redbone-lyrics/>.

infidelity in the context of a romantic relationship, but the AAVE phrase “stay woke”—meaning, stay awake, stay observant, stay vigilant—has enjoyed more recent popularity as a political imperative in light of the Black Lives Matter movement.¹⁶⁰ Though the film’s use of the song is brief and likely non-diegetic, both meanings of the phrase come into overlapping focus with regard to Chris: to stay watchful in the overwhelming company of white people, and to keep a critical eye on your girlfriend.

By contrast, the mise-en-scène of the Armitage house bespeaks a colonial aesthetic. Dean’s insistence on giving Chris a full tour casts the home in the role of a heritage site, and his narration of the interior décor explicitly name-checks white privilege. He pauses on a pair of candlestick-like objects he describes having picked up in Bali: “It’s pretty eclectic. I’m a traveler, and I can’t help it. It’s such a privilege to be able to experience another person’s culture.” This moment leaped out during my in-theater film viewing as divisive, in terms of arousing audience laughter. For some, world travel and souvenir collecting are harmless curious pursuits that raise no alarm. For me, this moment—like the family dinner to follow—is remarkable for its economical, subtle signification of a bourgeois white family unit. I thought of a time I’d stayed in the “Oriental” room of an inn in Buffalo, New York, owned by a white woman who asked with great interest whether my enthusiasm for cooking extended to “cultural” cuisines. I thought too of the carved mask at the center of Ousmane Sembène’s *La Noire de...* [*Black Girl*] (1966).¹⁶¹ In the film, Senegalese nanny Diouana gifts her employers (Madame and

¹⁶⁰ See “Stay Woke: The new sense of 'woke' is gaining popularity.” *Words We're Watching*, Merriam-Webster. Last modified September 2017. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/woke-meaning-origin/>.

¹⁶¹ We might also think of this moment as linked to the eventual appearance of the garden party’s Asian guest, Hiroki Tanaka, whose signification includes the “collector’s” entitlement of multicultural whiteness.

Monsieur) a mask from her village.¹⁶² Once the exploitative nature of her employment is revealed, Diouana attempts to take the mask back, ultimately fighting over it with Madame and killing herself in the family bathroom. After Diouana is dead, Monsieur travels back to Senegal and tries to return her belongings, including the mask, to her family. He is confronted by rejection and blame and leaves, chased by a young boy wearing the mask. In *Black Girl*, the shadow of past appropriation follows Diouana's master through an emissary of the future that's impossible to shake. Sembène's film links the grotesque *behavior* of the entitled white French of Antibes with the compromised status of the tribal mask, juxtaposing the object's preciousness to the family with Diouana's disposability.

Through the lens of cultural fetishism, then, Dean's *objets d'art* evidence a colonial entitlement to global access and ownership. The privilege he cites "to experience another person's culture," also serves a literal function, referencing the truth of what's going on in the belly of his house. Over the course of the tour, Dean remarks on the "black mold" in the basement (where we'll eventually find his mad laboratory), and on keeping a piece of his late mother in what was her beloved kitchen. In that instant, we meet the Armitages' second servant, housekeeper Georgina, standing at attention by the counter. These narrative easter eggs function as foreshadowing, but more disturbing is the relation between what Dean is saying, and he claims to reject, insofar as his avowal of the innocence of curation is tied to the integrity of his politics. Pausing before a framed photo of his father, a competitive runner, Dean avidly demonstrates his own wokeness by recounting the significance of Jesse Owens' medal at the 1936 Berlin Olympics. For him, Adolf Hitler's "perfect Aryan race bullshit" is something to

¹⁶² On the importance of "things" such as the mask to *Black Girl*, see Marcia Landy, "Politics and style in *Black Girl*," *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, No. 27 (July 1982), <https://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/onlinessays/JC27folder/BlackGirlLandy.html>.

rebuff—just as he acknowledges for Chris’s benefit that a white family with Black servants is an obvious cliché. By way of justification, he explains that his parents originally hired Walter and Georgina, and he didn’t have the heart to terminate their employment after they both had died. Here, Peele takes pains to include another hallmark of well-intentioned racism to further distinguish the specific danger posed by the Armitage family from that of, for example, Nazi fascism. Dean’s explanation gestures toward all the ways in which a selective, sentimental attitude toward “history” has been and continues to be mobilized to justify Black subjugation in the past, and tolerance of said subjugation in the present. Such an attitude may even be self-conscious, as is Dean’s when he proclaims that he “hates how it looks.” This appetite for Black destruction is not about believing in racial defects to justify racialized violence, so much as falsely recognizing the “innate” talents of racial Others, in the interest of redistributing those talents to worthier subjects.

5.3 YOU GOT JOKES

What makes the argument for similarity amid distinction? How do we assign weight to an annoyance, versus a holocaust, if the text or the life in which we find both yokes them in relation? Assuming a critical posture not only toward the veracity of these distinctions, but also to the convergent forces that benefit from their maintenance, takes us to the question of genre. Indeed, the problem of where recreation ends and domination begins may be painfully recognizable to anyone who’s had to explain why they took a joke the “wrong” way—a formation that itself amounts to gaslighting, as it places onus on the angry or injured to take sole responsibility for their anger/injury. If I protest that my utterance was just a joke, I imagine genre

as assigned by my intention. If you insist my utterance was fundamentally not funny, then genre classification depends on interpretation. If we disagree, and what I offer is a joke, but a failed one—perhaps at your expense, that hurts rather than amuses you—then the problem of genre is bound up, as this work has argued, in the variable lived experience you and I each bring to this encounter. A sufficiently critical consideration of the affects made available by various instances and scales of cruelty must necessarily invoke genre, whose power as a taxonomizing machine may be mobilized toward naming what exceeds or complicates its given categories.

In November 2017, the Hollywood Foreign Press Association announced its nominations for the 2018 Golden Globes. Despite its narrative focus on a cult with a decades-long history of kidnapping Black victims for brain transplants, and despite its not-slapstick marriage of hunting imagery with onscreen murder and suicide, *Get Out* was nominated in the feature category of Best Comedy or Musical.¹⁶³ Peele responded to the nomination in a tweet at 8:56 AM that same morning, writing: “‘Get Out’ is a documentary.” Peele has since consistently called the film a “social thriller”: a sentiment that acknowledges filmic treatments of contemporary social conditions and relationships, but also serves to differentiate the “real” concerns and relevance of such films from the fantastic and thus inconsequential investments of pure genre cinema. There’s a way in which this discourse could be dismissed as pedantic scuffling; yes, it points to a certain critical discomfort with generic hybridity, particularly when the discrete aspects (e.g. “lifestyle cults, actual cults”) seem so remote—but does it matter? Insofar as the difficulty of naming what *Get Out* does, played out here on an institutional stage, reflects a far broader tension characterizing the film’s reception and central to the film itself, it does.

¹⁶³ Prior to writing and directing *Get Out*, Peele was best known as half of the sketch comedy duo Key & Peele, with former *Mad TV* costar Keegan Michael-Key—but there’s more than the transposition of extra-textual autobiography at work in *Get Out*’s reception as a comedy.

In horror, where violence is expected if not assured, jokes puncture and alleviate sustained intervals of tension. They may also intensify said tension by creating unreliable zones of ostensible safety, often before the film's tenor is changed by a sudden intrusion of something loud or grotesque. In *Get Out*, humor works differently. Taking seriously the maxim that all successful jokes contain a bit of truth, *Get Out* emphasizes the ambivalence at the heart of the joke, insisting that what makes its humor funny is also what makes the film scary: both rely on a collective understanding that whiteness poses a threat to Black people. From its first moments, when Dre (Lakeith Stanfield, then unnamed) pronounces "suburb" in an ironic, over-articulated, "white" accent, *Get Out* centers humor alongside the threat and event of Black suffering. In doing so, the film asks that we consider all the many ways in which humor and horror may function inextricably, particularly to demarcate who gets the joke, or is susceptible to the specific scare, and those on whom both are lost. In *Get Out*, which relies on the juxtaposition of "weak" and "strong" horrors, and demonstrates an instructively wide range of what laughter can mean, the joke is most likely to signal a moment insidiously and even unknowingly *devoid* of humor, as when Chris responds to Rose's irreverent dismissal of his initial concerns over meeting her family. "You got jokes," he deadpans. For all the ways in which Rose and Chris are styled to look like they inhabit the same world, the categories of what is serious and what is laughable behaves like a fault line throughout the film, dividing diegetic characters and presumed spectators both.

The premise of first meeting a romantic partner's parents is recognizably anxious, and itself evokes the suspenseful scenario of *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (Stanley Kramer, 1967). This anxiety bleeds further into the film's plot when Rose hits a crossing deer on their drive to her parents' house. In the aftermath of this scene, what could be mistaken for a cheap

jump scare becomes instructive in several ways: first, we see Chris compelled to contemplate the dying animal after their collision. Rose calls to him worriedly while the camera cuts between a close-up of the deer's eye and Chris's own enigmatic expression, which offers little. Kaluuya's performance in *Get Out* is anchored by expressions that combine superficial placidity with something simmering under the surface, such that his facial performance primarily conveys restraint. The effect is withholding and revealing at once—often necessarily so, given the narrative context of his pretending to bear increasingly unbearable social situations. In this early scene, however, it seems that Chris is little more cognizant of what's transacting between him and this animal than we are, yet the camera's sustained focus on their eye contact bookmarks the moment for future recollection.

In addition to establishing a significant if mysterious link between Chris and the dying doe, the crash also occasions a telling interaction with a police officer, whom Rose calls. The cop subtly mocks her for calling the police instead of animal services, and then asks for Chris's ID. Rose protests with the unselfconsciousness of a person who lacks a healthy fear of law enforcement, while Chris coolly yields his license, unruffled by the interaction. Back in the car, Rose's response seems to have bonded them: "Nobody messes with my man," she says. For Chris, this ride-or-die possessiveness is attractive, perhaps even more so for its apparent incongruity with Rose herself, who's played by Allison Williams of HBO's *Girls*. On *Girls*, Williams played Marnie Michaels, a neurotic overachiever based loosely on creator Lena Dunham's real-life friend, entrepreneur Audrey Gelman. Here, she brings a comparable WASP-y obliviousness to Rose, who defends her parents' politics, yet fails to prepare Chris for the apparent grandness of the Lake Potomac home, nor for the appearance of the Black staff who maintain it.

As they pull into the circular drive, we first see the Armitage home via Chris's gaze, which lands on a Black man working out front—the groundskeeper, Rose explains. The house itself is red brick with four white columns and corresponding rocking chairs. As in the film's opening, the camera behaves with discernable caution that manifests through distance held from the scene's action. As Rose pulls up to the entry and greets her parents on the porch, the camera pauses back on the lawn, then slowly retreats from the scene of introduction. As a result of this distance, we don't see the faces of Rose's parents right away, and can hear only bits of the awkward particularities of this first meeting. What's important, then, according to the frame, is the unbearable symmetry of the house, and the significance of the groundskeeper, who appears at on the far righthand side as the camera pulls back. Visually, this reveal returns us to *Halloween*, which makes frequent use of a similarly revelatory framing device in scenes that reveal Michael Myers, often from behind and in stillness, both omnipresent and unseen (Figure 5.2).

In *Halloween*, these shots of Myers remind us of his dangerous presence. They also confirm Laurie Strode's suspicion, much derided by her friends, that she's being watched or followed. The shot-type becomes shorthand for a validating warning: in these worlds, the usual signs of safety (such as the company of others or broad daylight) are not to be trusted. Similarly, *Get Out*'s introduction to the Armitage home echoes the visual language of a warning, but reverses the positions of who is warned about whom, compositionally placing victim Walter in Myers' shoes.



Figure 5.2 Stills from *Halloween* (John Carpenter, 1978) and *Get Out* (Jordan Peele, 2017).

The reversal participates in one of *Get Out*'s main misdirections, in which the first two-thirds of the film generates suspicion around Walter and Georgina's unusual behavior. For example, when Chris sneaks out for a late night smoke, Walter sprints out of the darkness, threatening a head-on collision before sharply veering off. The following morning, Chris approaches Walter chopping wood and tries to strike up friendly conversation.

CHRIS: They workin' you pretty good out here, huh?
 WALTER: Nothing I don't want to be doing.

The brief interaction depicts Walter as squarely out of time. Not only is his diction archaic, as when he describes Rose as a “real doggone keeper,” but his reply to Chris’s initial question indicates a failure, or refusal, to get the joke: the dark joke Chris is making about labor in view of the big house.

At once robotic and cloying, housekeeper Georgina also frustrates Chris’s effort to connect with smiling claims to agency. We glimpse a crucial image of disorder when she spaces out while pouring the family a round of iced tea. At this point in the visit, Dean is explaining Missy’s work in hypnosis, offering to avail Chris of a free session to help him quit smoking. Amid their conversation, as Georgina rotates around the table, her eyes glaze over. Voices diminish and a bristling static intensifies. The tea she’s pouring from a pitcher overflows Chris’s glass, prompting Missy to forcefully suggest Georgina lie down and rest. The image of liquid overflowing—the literal excess of matter that exceeds its designated container—is an apt metonym for Georgina’s condition, and finds its echo in further images of leakage highlighted throughout the film.

Soon after, Rose’s brother Jeremy arrives on the scene. From his insouciant entry (“‘Sup fam?”), Jeremy introduces a sense of frat-boy entitlement and explicit hostility to the overall dynamic. At dinner, his domineering presence completes Peele’s vision of the privileged white family par excellence: they enjoy a formal meal at the table with gestures of adult inclusion for the grown children—copious wine, swearing, and Jeremy holding court with embarrassing stories about his sister, unafraid to narrate having thrown a liquor-soaked party in high school while their parents were simply “in Greece.” Jeremy becomes fixated on Chris’s athleticism, asking whether he’s ever tried mixed martial arts and urging him to get up and spar. As the tension between Jeremy’s exhortation and Chris’s resistance rises, we glimpse Georgina through

the swinging kitchen doors, fixedly staring, carrying a white layer cake. Here, as earlier, Georgina is positioned as the unpredictable element, a foil for the mundane contestations at the table. It's as if the film invites us to invest our distrust in *her*, as we would in any number of "bad nanny/domestic worker" films: *The Nanny* (1965), *The Guardian* (1990), *The Hand That Rocks the Cradle* (1992), etc. But Georgina is a symptom of horror, not its source, which comes to light as Chris unsuccessfully attempts to explain his impressions to Rose. *Get Out* emphasizes the subtlety of Chris's communicative failures with the Armitages' Black staff by repeatedly dramatizing the difficulty he faces in relaying his unease. As in the film's opening gambit, Chris and Rose's private conversations are painfully defensive, and this quality is consistent regardless of whether it's Chris explaining what seems crazy to him (i.e. how an unexpected affect, accent, or gesture is sufficient to elicit his discomfort), or Rose explaining what seems crazy to her. Alone in the minutes before bed on the night of their arrival, Rose complains about the strangeness of her family's behavior, from her father's cheesy "my man" vernacular, to her mother's unusually commanding attitude, to Jeremy's tableside aggression. "That was so crazy," she says searchingly, as Chris's eyes move dryly from his laptop to the air around the room. For him this behavior is wholly legible, and par for the course. However this interaction, like the many of its kind that follow, isn't about asserting who's right; it's not a lesson taught through Rose's consciousness-raising to demonstrate correspondence between the inadvertent racism of her well-intentioned parents, and the flagrant racism attributed and thus confined to categories at historical and social remove (e.g. Nazis; law enforcement). Rather, these scenes are about Chris's acquiescence to Rose—his position within their interracial relationship as defined by failures of mutual comprehension that result in self-silencing. In the interest of preserving their intimacy, Chris allows himself to be gaslit into suppressing intuitions that threaten to press them

apart. If he sees something, not lurking beneath but visibly in the colonial ambiance of the Armitage home, he says nothing.

5.4 NO FUNNY BUSINESS

Get Out takes place over only two nights, and on the first, Chris suffers a nightmare. In his dream, he hears the disembodied moans of the deer Rose's car hit hours earlier. Shaken, he dresses to get some air. The sequence that follows is *Get Out*'s apotheosis of suspense, complete with a trilling jump scare and sudden movement in the background. Chris is surprised in quick succession by the appearances of Walter and then Georgina, who stands backlit in an upstairs window. She's staring, but not at him; we see from the reverse shot that she's preening in the glass's black reflection. This quick sequence of nocturnal startles produces a prevailing unease, which continues—and indeed, intensifies—when Chris encounters Missy sitting up awake in her hall office.

The hypnosis scene begins gradually, as their casual conversation shifts from Chris's smoking to the circumstances of his mother's death. The sound of Missy's spoon turning scratchily around her teacup gradually moves into the aural foreground, and Chris, initially wanting to be courteous, grows visibly uncomfortable, his eyes welling with tears. Missy encourages Chris to find and reenter his childhood memory, which the film conveys via hazy footage of a young Chris seated cross-legged on his bed in front of a lit TV. Recounting his mother's death, how he waited for her to come home, continuing to watch cartoons instead of calling for help or going out to look, Chris cries motionlessly in close-up. "Why can't I move?" he whispers, his fingertips scraping the club chair's leather surface. His paralysis in the grip of a

traumatic memory feels like an extension of the nightmare, particularly as the crying deer evokes his unseen mother struck and abandoned on the side of the road.

This is the image that circulates most widely with the film's marketing: Chris transfixed in the chair, bug-eyed and teary.¹⁶⁴ Though it's an iconic image of captivity, and one the film returns to repeatedly after Chris is definitively subdued, it's only half an image—the external half of a unified image with an internal dimension. Where the external displays paralysis, the internal conveys expanse. Missy instructs Chris only to “Sink,” prompting his childhood self to fall straight through the mattress. The film slows and the score sounds, imposing a deep cello tone that seems to push him even deeper. We cut to Chris suspended in a full frame of darkness with pricks of light like stars or bubbles rising lethargically past his body. He looks weightless, yet descends. A wide shot shows Chris in profile, slight in the vast expanse. The visual is unmistakably redolent of the mysterious black room in Jonathan Glazer's *Under the Skin* (2013), where victims of the film's alien wade into the floor and find themselves at once submerged and suspended, pulled down yet held up in liquid darkness. Chris gains equilibrium to float upright, and the film cuts back to the Chris in Missy's office, with his eyes hyperbolically open, his mouth slack, and tears streaking his otherwise static face. In the reverse shot, Missy sets her suggestive teacup aside and leans forward to address him: “Now you're in the Sunken Place.” Her voice cuts through the atmosphere, muffled and distant but audible, while Chris's panicked shouts are visible and soundless. She touches the Chris that's in her office, closing his eyes as one would soothe a corpse. With this gesture, the film cuts to Chris gasping awake upstairs.

¹⁶⁴ For a historicization of “coon” imagery and the “bug-eyed” representation of African Americans, see Wayne Martin Mellinger, “Postcards from the Edge of the Color Line: Images of African Americans in Popular Culture, 1893-1917,” *Symbolic Interaction*, Vol. 15, Issue 4 (1992): 413-433.

In the Sunken Place, we learn that despite having been a young child when his mother died, Chris carries a burden of guilt for failing to save her life. As an adult, he copes with this remorse by cleaving to the same fearful avoidance for which he feels most culpable. He avoids discussing the memory, while the memory itself is a recollection of avoidance. The Sunken Place is akin to another spatial dimension with the same temporality: floating there, viewing events from the POV of his physical body as if watching on a distant screen, Chris ostensibly lacks the agency or strength to intervene on what he sees and hears. This partial presence is what differentiates *Get Out*'s model of captivity from wholesale possession. Chris is meant to remain lodged within his body while a worthier subject exploits his biological gifts and supposed cultural currency; his role, according to his captors, is to become "a passenger; an audience." Not to die, but to witness his subjugation as if caught in the lucid nightmare that begins and ends this section of the film.

Because *Get Out* so dutifully juxtaposes instances of recreation and terror, as well as mundane microaggressions with more conventional gore, it follows that the notion of the Sunken Place exceeds the bounds of its appearances onscreen. Though Chris sinks at night alone and therefore in a state of unmistakable vulnerability, the Sunken Place's conditions of suspension and voicelessness may impose themselves in daylight and among other people—not as an insidious threat to normalcy, but because normalcy is already so insidious.

Get Out stages this critique most explicitly in its extended garden party sequence, which itself comprises a telling series of communicative failures. These failures occur both interracial and intraracially, so that Chris experiences misunderstanding from every angle. In his initial turn around the party, Chris dutifully makes the rounds with Rose on his arm. Each new interaction is a slight variation on socially inculcated racism: one Mr. Greene inquires about his golf grip and

declares “Tiger” is the best he’s ever seen. An older woman surveys Chris hungrily, asking Rose (in so many words) to verify the superiority of his cock. Another man indulges a bit of cultural philosophizing, concluding, “Black is in fashion!” The montage resulting from these quick episodes presents a range of attitudes that appear, and only appear, to value blackness—to imagine its cultural capital without appreciating its diverse specificity, and to demonstrate familiarity with Black culture, but only in partnership with a fetishism that necessarily disregards the history and human producers of said culture. Chris’s frustrated silence at the garden party demonstrates the social expectation that one will remain polite when confronted with racial ignorance, and merely make another circuit in search of a friendlier face. In doing exactly this, Chris eventually spots another young Black man across the lawn. His surprised relief is palpable—but for all their awkwardness, Chris’s interactions with the white guests whom he silently mistrusts pale in seriousness compared to the misunderstandings he undergoes in repeatedly failing to connect with other Black figures in this unsafe space.

The guest Chris notices turns from the makeshift bar with a glazed expression, baffled by the fist bump Chris proffers. Introducing himself as Logan King, he clumsily grasps Chris’s fist in some semblance of a handshake. Though Logan’s appearance is as unfamiliar and anachronistic as Walter’s diction, Chris recognizes him as an old neighborhood character. The film takes its title from a scene that features yet another enigmatic confrontation. In a send-up of the way in which small talk may suddenly require people of color to universalize their experiences or educate a room, Chris is asked to describe life for the contemporary Black American. He redirects to Logan, who’s chatting nearby. Chris has noted Logan’s familiarity to his friend Rod, and tries to snap a surreptitious photo while Logan fields the question. As his flash goes off, the camera whirls around Logan in close-up, revealing his eyes held wide and a

rivulet of blood oozing from his nose. Logan charges at Chris, clutching at his shirt and attacking him with growing urgency, screaming, “Get out. Get out!” Along with its immediate narrative context, the phrase evokes a popular conception of Black audiences shouting at the screen in frustrated response to horror conventions. In this sense, “get out” is a nod to knowingness; a specific kind of warning whose prerequisite is prior apprehension. This confrontation and its dual refusals of containment, in the call to get out and the blood leaving the nose, is followed by the suppressive reinstatement of gaslighting in the form of Rose insisting—via her father’s expertise as a neurosurgeon—that Logan’s episode was an epileptic fit. Breaking from his previous string of silences, Chris pushes back on this explanation, but lacks a convincing alternative beyond the force of his own feeling.

Earlier in this chapter, I refer to the “fungibility of the captive body.”¹⁶⁵ I take this phrase from a section of *Scenes of Subjection* in which Hartman reads abolitionist John Rankin’s writings on the rank indecency of slavery; of particular note is Rankin’s figurative use of a first-person narration style to personalize and thus amplify his account of enslaved suffering. The grammar of these writings betrays an anxiety around making said suffering legible to a white audience, and despite its best intentions, this anxiety inadvertently instantiates rather than challenges the cultural denial of Black sentience. In his effort to emphasize the cruelty of enslavement, Rankin’s letters—including the work in which he personifies the figure of a victimized slave—also rely on detailed descriptions of graphic violence, inferring a false stability and observability to the unstable scene of suffering. Hartman’s reading of Rankin serves to highlight the repressive procedure by which empathy for the enslaved may metaphorically reproduce the conditions of enslavement, unconsciously rendering the vulnerable captive body a

¹⁶⁵ Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 19.

vessel for imposed expectations and desires. In the context of *Get Out*, this procedure helps us get at the specific attitude of the Armitage family and their garden party guests, which allows them to co-terminally “value,” and yet destroy, Black subjectivity.

In response to this attitude, *Get Out* does two things: first, it invests in making visible the instability of Black suffering. As Chris is observed, sought out, entreated and complimented throughout the party sequence, for example, his discomfort is nonetheless obvious to the non-diegetic audience, and these mundane instances of misunderstanding and cultural breakdown are central to the film’s horrific fabrication. One of the most economically disturbing shots of the film follows Chris to the stairway and pauses to remain with the guests downstairs, who, collectively dressed in funereal black, collectively cease talking and look up at where he’s gone. They’re all in on something, and that something is keenly trained on Chris.

If *Get Out* extracts tension by proliferating misunderstandings and withholding definitive confirmation of what’s afoot, the last third of Peele’s film doubles down on recognizable horrific iconography. The film’s bingo game is a silent lottery; the portrait of Chris in a gaudy frame and the revelation that he’s the party’s “prize” visually liken the scene to an upscale auction. Later, we see Jeremy strumming a ukulele on the porch when Chris and Rose return from their mid-party walk, evoking the dueling banjos at the beginning of *Deliverance* (1972). Later still, we see Chris “sunk” in a leather chair in the ground floor game room, where the frame’s symmetrical composition and his coerced viewing of a recorded video recall narrative and visual aspects redolent of Kubrick. The room where Chris is restrained is furnished with amusements: a dartboard at the center of the frame, a ping-pong table, and foosball. Rounding out the full visual citation of “game” is a large male deer head mounted to the wall, directly over the dated TV

console that plays Chris an orientation video explaining his fate. When the video ends, Chris's gaze cuts up to the deer: his only possible teammate in this rec room.

The major-key threat in *Get Out* is lucid possession. When Chris is betrayed, captured, and tranquilized, he's faced not with a full death, but with the possibility of remaining present to his body's exploitation without the faculty to act. The film as a whole expresses this waking paralysis in several ways: one is by picturing Chris suspended in the Sunken Place, a limitless dark where life as he knew it can be observed on a remote TV screen. Another is through camera movement, or lack of movement, as when we first arrive to the house. Here, the camera's hesitation to follow the action echoes the end of the film's opening, keeping a comparable cautious distance from the family's sunny reunion, as from the more-typically-horrific assault on a street at night. When the physical violence typical of horror finally returns in the film, its expressions are rather oblique: the splatter of blood behind a surgical scrim; an incision as seen reflected in eyeglass lenses; a pool of blood spreading on the carpet in lieu of a long look at the wound. As in other cult-based horror, the wounds of *Get Out* are psychological, cultural, and intimate; the threat is not simply of being subsumed or possessed by an insidious strain of believers, but of being gaslit: betrayed and disbelieved by those whom you love.

This register of spectacle is most visible in Chris's discovery of Rose's photo album. As they prepare to leave the house, before Rose reveals her role in the conspiracy, Chris notices her bedroom closet door is ajar. Inside, he finds a flat red box containing a pile of personal photographs: early pictures of Rose alone give way to a series of romantic selfies in which she poses in various mundane settings—at a lake, in a café—with different Black men. The last picture Chris flips to depicts Rose in a standard mirror selfie with her arm slung around a smiling Georgina. The photograph as a souvenir of cruelty and violence has a long, relevant history with

regard to anti-blackness; here, in keeping with the film's overall logic, the souvenirs look like artifacts of recreation.¹⁶⁶ That they're selfies indicates both pictured parties have consented to the capture, even if only one knows what they commemorate. Given *Get Out*'s prevailing interest in depicting selective vision, it's all the more meaningful for us to unearth the kind of indexical proof that's typically produced by a protracted research montage. From this evidence, we see that Rose and Jeremy represent two distinct if complicit agents of violence: Jeremy's masked stalker and Rose's slow seduction. Both arrive at the same result: capture, captivity, and enslavement.

Get Out offers us one further expression of resistance: a single image to hold the quotidian and spectacular forms of possession together at once (Figure 5.3). In the middle of the party, Georgina surprises Chris upstairs and apologizes for unplugging his phone. In a few brisk steps forward, she draws claustrophobically close and assures him the unplugging was an accident—there was, as she puts it, “no funny business.” Their brief exchange registers yet another series of communicative misfires, culminating in a kind of affective short circuit. First, Georgina gets caught on Chris's contemporary vernacular (“I wasn't trying to snitch”); she has to work the word, to translate it into “tattletale” to make sense of his meaning. Her eventual gleam of recognition carries something opaque. Is it flirtation? Hostility? Her extreme closeness flattens the frame, leaving the background pale and out of focus. Consistent with his other interactions with the few Black folk around, Chris offers a further gesture of solidarity: “All I know is sometimes, if there's too many white people I get nervous, you know.” Here, Georgina's face remains fixed in place, her gaze steady, but micro-movements begin to disarrange her expression. Her lips tremble. Her eyes briefly roll up and she gasps, her brow creased with effort.

¹⁶⁶ See Erin Gray's discussion of lynching postcards in “Necrophagy at the Lynching Block,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, Vol. 21, no. 1 (January 2015): 13-15.

Her eyes grow wet as she spreads her lips in a broad smile, and a single tear escapes one eye. “No,” she repeats musically, as if clicking her tongue in staccato disapproval, “no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no.” What does movement without vitality look like? The shot-reverse shot contrasts Kaluuya’s static expression with Betty Gabriel’s acrobatic lifts and furrows. Unable to connect, each feature quivers and resists. The Georgina of this expressive discord is captive twice: once, conventionally—meaning horrifically—to the white matriarch who’s steering her brain, and again, conventionally—meaning customarily—to a notion of domestic belonging as violent as it is utterly common: “they treat us like family.”



Figure 5.3 Still from *Get Out* (Jordan Peele, 2017).

Georgina’s tears, like Chris’s in the Sunken Place and like Logan’s sudden nosebleed, are depicted as involuntary and physiological, at odds with her speech and in competition with her cheery expression, such that two opposing states—fine, not fine—are visibly struggling for authority over the face. These drops are not the disembodied and inexpressive tears that Eugenie

Brinkema theorizes in Hitchcock's *Psycho*, but they still compel our reading.¹⁶⁷ Like the image of iced tea poured too loosely from the pitcher, the blood and tears are leaks; it makes sense that a film about transhistorical possession would privilege variations on an image of escape. *Get Out* answers these images of leakage and pain by rewarding its perceptive spectator with a manifestly pointed final act: in which our Black protagonist turns deaf to his hypnosis by stuffing his ears with cotton; weaponizes a bocce ball and the mounted trophy buck, thus literally using the master's tools to dismantle the master and burn down his house; and, perhaps most improbably, is seen and saved by the character who arrives, at last, in a flashing police car. This is *Get Out*'s last laugh: TSA agent Rod emerging from behind the wheel, an image at once ludicrous and painfully fantastical in light of Black vulnerability to police brutality. To see the humor, and horror, and social resonance in such an ending is to be the knowing spectator that Peele's film imagines, and for whom it envisions a way out.

¹⁶⁷ See Eugenie Brinkema, "A Tear That Does Not Drop, But Folds," *The Forms of the Affects*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press (2014).

6.0 CODA

When it came time for me to compose the introduction for my dissertation defense, I was advised simply, “Keep it light.”

Initially I struggled with the improbability of bestowing lightness to the preface of a conversation that would necessarily surround the subjects of this project: namely, horror, onscreen violence, the conditioned fear of bodily violation, rape and sexual trauma, sustained and sustainable forms of suffering, and the pervasive experience of gaslighting that comprises a “second shift” of harm for those already systemically vulnerable.

I thought of lightness as levity: what if I could edit and screen a super-cut of all the moments when someone’s walked in on the curdling staccato of me frame-by-frame pause-playing a scene of a woman screaming in protest, or when a fellow coffee shop patron has visibly blanched after glancing at my laptop screen. These moments comprise my dissertation’s phantom blooper reel: the frequent enough yet relatively rare moments when the extremity of research seems to comprise an absurd intrusion on everyday life, rather than a deep-dive into cinematic visualizations of the dangers and hostilities endemic to that life.

I thought too of lightness as a bare interrogation bulb. I began this work at the University of Pittsburgh in 2009; now, in 2018, the ever-developing accountability zeitgeist contours how my students and colleagues encounter and engage with violence and belief. As writers, actors, and academics continue to circulate damning testimony against powerful men in their industries, the resonance between the concerns of this dissertation, and the evolving vocabulary of contemporary culture, is appreciable.

Yet it's in this resonance, not in spite of it, that this work does aim to explore a kind of light—not as a quality of entertainment or digestibility, but as a signification of stimulating sight and making visible. To illustrate what I mean by way of an evocation, let me offer a brief reading of a scene from Sidney J. Furie's *The Entity* (1982; 1983). In *The Entity*, Barbara Hershey plays Carla Moran, a single mother suffering chronic attacks by a dispersed, invisible malevolent presence. The film follows Carla as she's raped and assaulted in her bedroom, her bathroom, in her car, and even in her best friend Cindy's living room, as we see in this scene. Though the film appears to organize around the inescapability of Carla's attacks, the assaults themselves initiate, and are ultimately subordinate to, diegetic scenes of vision and reception.

When she first begins sharing what's happening to her, Carla knowingly encounters skepticism from her son, Cindy's husband, and even her psychiatrist, who suggests her visible bruises and bite marks are symptoms of hysteria. As her attacks remain steady, the film increasingly showcases moments when others are made to witness, and explicitly profess belief in, Carla's endangerment. In this scene, Cindy and her husband are heading out for the evening when they both hear violent crashing sounds coming from their house. Cindy runs back up the driveway in time to see Carla in situ, pummeled by furniture visibly heaving across the room. The scene's impact hinges not on the technics of the entity's intrusion—which we've seen, and will see, again and again as the film tirelessly depicts Carla's suffering—but on Cindy's immediate, visible conversion to sight. Never questioning the veracity of Carla's experience, *The Entity* instead explores what happens when *others* are made to see what isn't transparent, or to believe what can't be seen. Like Cindy and her skeptical psychiatrist, viewers are invited to widen their sense of what suffering may look like, and to recognize reparative value in the possibility of shared vision. That possibility has been this project's inspiration and objective.

The Rehearsal for Terror originates in a question about empathy. When artist Kate Millett writes in her memoir that tortured Sylvia Likens “was the terror at the back of the cave,” what specifically invites her to describe this *particular* case study as inevitable allegory? In the midst of researching artistic responses to the Likens captivity, I became fixated on the question of how one relates to crimes against women—of what feelings cluster around the scene of relation, and what is produced by sensations of proximity or knowingness. For Millett, relation took the form of identificatory overlap; her speaker finds in Likens’ death a “story” that fits her lifelong expectation for violence. In my readings, I worked to consider specific ways in which horror may materialize the immateriality of sexual trauma, hailing viewers with a discrete legibility that situates some more proximally to fear than others.

But if this project began with a curiosity about how horror treats the fear/threat of rape, it ends this phase of its becoming by traveling elsewhere—to the affinity between horrific dramatizations of sexual violence, and the cinematic life of gaslighting, a horror to which all socially vulnerable populations, not only women, are susceptible. Writing on the destructive character and constructive potential of the videotaped assault of Rodney King, Elizabeth Alexander asks, “how does an incident like King’s beating consolidate group affiliations by making blackness an unavoidable, irreducible sign which despite its abjection leaves creative space for group self-definition and self-knowledge?”¹⁶⁸ Alexander’s question, and indeed the essay from which it comes, asks for whom individual violent acts may express systemic violent conditions, and how such expressive violences may, in their actuality and archival continuance, *produce* something, thus complicating the notion that violence only destroys, only erases. The

¹⁶⁸ Elizabeth Alexander, ““Can you be BLACK and Look at This?”: Reading the Rodney King Video(s).” *Public Culture* 7 (1994): 78.

creative space Alexander posits is made possible when violence flips the light on in a room, the room in which people already live, the boundaries of which shape our identities, movements, and routines, but are unknown to us in the dark.

Early in this process, I wrote “criticism that reads modern horror as exemplifying graphic spectacle, and collapses rape with torture and death, purchases a coherent sense of the genre at the expense of textual specificity.” Now I ask, has my move away from rape toward the related but more extensive horrors of isolated vision and not being believed—horrors for which rape is but one specific point of entry—perpetuated precisely that collapse? And if so, to what end? Working on *Get Out*, and specifically on its juxtaposition of the embodied violence of lucid possession with both the microaggression of intimate gaslighting and the systemic violence of colonization, has affirmed for me the urgency of interrogating how individual experiences of vulnerability, on and offscreen, may through visual media be consolidated into opportunities for recognition and sensations of belonging. It’s toward the junctures between individual and collective identity, bodily and cultural trauma, and material form and immaterial experience, that I see this work extending in its next life.

To the question I’ve received numerous times from colleagues at panels and from student in classrooms, *Why horror?* I say, because life is horrible, and some lives more so than others. By tracing the ways that targeted violence and gaslighting have formally and affectively shaped this cinematic genre while remaining historically under-accounted for, I treat horror as a privileged site for epistemological trouble: the trouble of shared knowledge and shareable vision. In its focus on horror’s use of formal strategies of obliquity to make visible what men, cops, parents, and white communities benefit from dismissing as illusory, fantasized, or exceptional,

The Rehearsal for Terror invests in making visible, as the process by which film's darkest surfaces shed necessary light.

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