

Bluebeard's Wives: Horror, Quality and the Gothic (or Paranoid) Woman's Film in the 1940s

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Although a body of work now exists on the Gothic (or paranoid) woman's film of the 1940s,¹ most of this work ignores or explicitly denies any association between these films and the horror film more generally. As a result, the following essay presents a study of the critical reception of these films during the period that demonstrates that at the time of their initial release these films were clearly understood as women's horror films. It starts out from a survey of the academic debates over these films and their relationship to horror before moving on to explore the strategies through which these films were generically understood and critically evaluated on their release in the United States. In the process, it argues that many key examples of the Gothic (or paranoid) woman's film were championed as the epitome of cinematic quality films, rather than being denigrated as low-brow entertainment. At the same time, other films were condemned as pretentious exercises that sought to disguise lowbrow materials as quality productions, or as quality productions that lacked visceral thrills and failed to deliver as horror films.

¹ I use the term "Gothic (or paranoid) woman's film" as a composite given that there are so many overlapping terms used to describe these films; the Gothic film, the Gothic woman's film, the paranoid woman's film, the female Gothic, and so forth. Furthermore, while different generic terms are rarely synonymous with one another, these terms operate as a rare case where critics do seem to be using different terms to refer to the same films, and seem to be directly engaging with one another's work. The use of this composite term is therefore to try to capture the key features to which a variety of critics are referring in the debates about these films. See, for example, Mary Ann Doane, *The Desire to Desire: The Woman's Film of the 1940s* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987); Lucy Fischer, "Two-Faced Women: The 'Double' in Woman's Melodrama of the 1940s", *Cinema Journal* 23, no. 1 (Fall 1983), pp.24-43; Molly Haskell, *From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in the Movies* (1974; London: New English Library, 1975); Karen Hollinger, "The Female Oedipal Drama of *Rebecca* from Novel to Film", *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 14, no. 4 (August 1993), pp.17-30; Tania Modleski, *Loving With A Vengeance: Mass-Produced Fantasies for Women* (1982; London: Routledge, 1992); Tania Modleski, *The Woman Who Knew Too Much: Hitchcock and Feminist Theory* (London: Routledge, 1988); Marjorie Rosen, *Popcorn Venus: Women, Movies and the American Dream* (1973; London: Peter Owen, 1975); Diane Waldman, "'At Last I Can Tell It to Someone!': Female Point of View and Subjectivity in the Gothic Romance Film of the 1940s", *Cinema Journal* 23, no. 2 (Winter 1984), pp.29-40; Andrew Walsh, "Films of Suspicion and Distrust: Undercurrents of Female Consciousness in the 1940s", *Film and History* 8, no. 1 (Feb 1978), pp.1-8; and Andrew Walsh, *Women's Film and Female Experience, 1940-1950* (New York: Praeger, 1984).

The Gothic (or Paranoid) Woman's Film: Critical Debates

Although it is a common claim that the 1940s was a “period of comparative infertility” in the history of the horror film,² critics at the time saw the first half of the decade as one that was witnessing a boom in horror production. Furthermore, they claimed that many examples of this boom were “dressed in full Class ‘A’ paraphernalia” and addressed a prominently female audience.³ Many key examples of this trend have come to be known as the Gothic (or paranoid) woman's film; and although these films are quite diverse, most involve a woman who feels threatened or tortured by a seemingly sadistic male authority figure, who is usually her husband, a feature that prompted many critics at the time to identify them explicitly as retellings of the fairy tale of Bluebeard and his wives. In other words, these films often feature deranged villains who inflict psychological violence on their female victims. As Siegfried Kracauer put it at the time, many key psychological horror films of the period featured “the theme of psychological destruction” in which their villains “no longer shoot, strangle or poison the females that they want to do away with, but systematically try to drive them insane.”⁴ In Hitchcock's *Suspicion* (1941), the heroine is under no threat and her fears stem from simple misunderstandings, but this is a highly unusual case and most heroines are in genuine danger.

In other words, examples of the Gothic (or paranoid) woman's film were usually explicitly identified as horror films within the period, although accounts of the horror film since the 1960s have tended to privilege alternative traditions of horror, so that these films are generally excluded from most histories of the genre's development.⁵ If this exclusion is often based on a tendency to privilege “masculine” traditions of horror over “feminine” traditions, a similar set of oppositions can also be identified in feminist criticism. Not only do many feminist critiques of horror, such as Clover, Creed and Williams, clearly present the horror spectator as essentially

² David Punter, *The Literature of Terror: A History of Gothic Fictions from 1765 to the Present Day* (London: Longman, 1980), p.24.

³ Fred Stanley, “Hollywood Shivers”, *The New York Times* (28 May 1944), p.X3.

⁴ Siegfried Kracauer, “Hollywood's Terror Films: Do They Reflect an American State of Mind?”, originally published in *Commentary* 2 (1946), pp.132-36; and republished in *New German Critique*, 89 (2003), p.107.

⁵ Mark Jancovich, “Pale Shadows: Narrative Hierarchies in the Historiography of 1940s Horror”, in Lincoln Geraghty and Mark Jancovich (eds.), *The Shifting Definitions of Genre* (Jefferson: Mcfarland, 2008).

masculine in character,⁶ but feminist work on the Gothic (or paranoid) woman's film has found it difficult to address (or even acknowledge) its relationship to horror.

For example, the work of Joanna Russ has been highly influential on later writing on the Gothic (or paranoid) woman's film, despite Russ' focus on a form of popular women's literature that began in the 1950s, and which she refers to as the "Modern Gothic", rather than on the 1940s woman's film. Nonetheless, in her condemnation of the "Modern Gothic", Russ distinguishes it from both the Gothic novel of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century and its supposed successor, the horror genre:

the stories bear no resemblance to the literary definition of "Gothic." They are not related to the works of Monk Lewis or Mrs. Radcliffe, whose real descendants are known today as Horror Stories.⁷

Ironically, while Russ associated the "Gothic" literature of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century with horror, and distinguished these two forms from the "Modern Gothic", many of the film critics who later drew on her work would associate the "Gothic" literature of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries with the Gothic (or paranoid) woman's film, and distinguished these two forms from the horror genre.

For example, Diane Waldman clearly identifies horror as a masculine genre, and therefore sees it as being distinct from the Gothic (or paranoid) woman's film:

The central feature of the Gothic is ambiguity, the hesitation between two possible interpretations of events by the protagonist and often, in these filmic presentations, by the spectator as well. This it shares with other filmic and literary genres, for example, the horror film and the fantastic. Yet in the Gothic, this hesitation is experienced by a character (and presumably a spectator) who is female.⁸

Although she acknowledges that horror and the Gothic (or paranoid) woman's film "share" certain features, she sees them as necessarily different genres and it is the

⁶ Carole J. Clover, *Men, Women and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (London: BFI, 1982); Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1993); and Linda Williams, "When the Woman Looks", in Mary Ann Doane, Patricia Mellencamp and Linda Williams (eds.), *Re-vision: Essays in Feminist Film Criticism* (Frederick, Md.: University Publications of America, 1984), pp.83-99.

⁷ Joanna Russ, "Somebody's Trying to Kill Me and I Think It's My Husband: The Modern Gothic", *Journal of Popular Culture* 6, no 4, (Spring 1973), p.666.

⁸ Waldman, "'At Last I Can Tell It to Someone!'", p.31.

gender of their protagonists and spectators that is used to establish and define their difference from one another.

Mary Ann Doane also presents the Gothic (or paranoid) woman's film and horror as separate genres, although she does not present them as diametrically opposed to one another but as distinct traditions that may at times intersect: "The woman's film is frequently combined with other genres – film noir and the gothic or horror film, even the musical."⁹ Nonetheless, she still suggests that the woman's film and the horror film exist as separate genres with different pre-occupations; and she even claims that these pre-occupations are normally foreign to one another. As she puts it, in the Gothic (or paranoid) woman's film, "Horror, which should by rights be external to domesticity, infiltrates the home."¹⁰ She even repeats Linda Williams' claim that horror is masculine, and that the woman's film is traditionally associated with romance rather than horror: the "marginality" of the woman's film "is associated with its status as a feminine discourse – the 'love story' purportedly 'speaks to' the female spectator. While the horror film, as Linda Williams points out, prompts the little girl (or grown woman) to cover her eyes, the sign of masculinity in the little boy, when confronted by the 'love story,' is the fact that he looks away."¹¹

Nor are these generic distinctions absent from more recent writing in the area. In her book on these films, Helen Hanson clearly distinguishes between "two genres, *film noir* and the female gothic film",¹² even though she also seeks to identify some points of contact between them. Hanson's study is certainly fascinating, particularly due to her analysis of the ways in which, "within both *film noir* and the female gothic film, female characters are frequently placed in narrative positions that challenge assumptions of gendered agency".¹³ In other words, she acknowledges that many women in these films, like the final girl of the slasher film,¹⁴ are not simply positioned as victims but often possess an investigating gaze, a possession for which they are not punished but rather proves essential to their survival. Nonetheless, despite these strengths, Hanson's work still presents "*film noir* and the female gothic film" as

⁹ Doane, *The Desire to Desire*, p.4.

¹⁰ Doane, *The Desire to Desire*, p.136.

¹¹ Doane, *The Desire to Desire*, p.96. See also Williams, "When the Woman Looks".

¹² Helen Hanson, *Hollywood Heroines: Women in Film Noir and the Female Gothic Film* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2007), p.xiii.

¹³ Hanson, *Hollywood Heroines*, p.xviii.

¹⁴ Clover, *Men, Women and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*.

clearly distinct genres, even if historical conditions meant that they shared some overlapping features.

Moreover, while she acknowledges that “the female gothic cycle is located” within a “wider trend in popularity for gothic and horror fictions” within the 1940s,¹⁵ she only locates this cycle in relation to the literary versions of this “wider trend” and studiously avoids any discussion of the cinematic boom in horror that so impressed commentators at the time, even when she states that the female gothic “has been defined with a variety of generic terms”:

In the industry and the trade press the films are frequently described as “suspenseful drama”, “murder thriller”, “heavy drama with femme appeal”, “melodrama” and “cinematic psycho-thriller”.¹⁶

The problem here is not only that these comments imply that commentators at the time clearly recognised these films as a distinct genre, although they may have given it different names, but also that, as will become clear, the absence of the term “horror” from this list is quite extraordinary.

Part of the reason for this omission may be that, like other critics, Hanson presents the Gothic (or paranoid) woman’s film as being organised for the female spectator, while she assumes that horror is organised for the male spectator. Nonetheless, as we have seen, she departs from conventional accounts of the Gothic (or paranoid) woman’s film in one important sense. Most accounts of these films regard the female protagonists of these films as little more than victims. For example, in her classic study of women in film, Marjorie Rosen declared that this was “a genre whose success absolutely depends on female weakness, mental and physical”.¹⁷ These claims are also given a psychoanalytic inflection in Doane’s account, where they are linked to issues of knowledge, psychology and vision. As Doane claims, these films often revolve around a problem of seeing and work to both frustrate and punish the heroine for her investigating gaze: “The violence associated with the attribution of a desire to see to the woman reaches its culmination in the gothic paranoid films, where

¹⁵ Hanson, *Hollywood Heroines*, p.39.

¹⁶ Hanson, *Hollywood Heroines*, p.40.

¹⁷ Rosen, *Popcorn Venus*, p.224.

the cinematic apparatus itself seems to be mobilized against the female spectator, disabling her gaze.”¹⁸

If many of these narratives involve women who find themselves unable to trust their perceptions of the world around them, and particularly their relationship to men, it is also claimed that these films present the pursuit of knowledge as inappropriate for these women. Women are not only presented as failing to understand the world but of being *incapable* of understanding it. For Doane, even if she is “endowed with the necessary curiosity and desire to know”, the films present the female protagonist “as impotent in terms of the actual ability to uncover the secret or attain the knowledge that she desires.”¹⁹ Similarly, Waldman argues that “the unusual emphasis on the point of view of the heroine has been put to the service of the invalidation of female perception and interpretation, equating female subjectivity with some kind of false consciousness, as the male character ‘corrects’ the heroine’s impressions.”²⁰ In other words, Waldman claims that in most of these films, women are simply wrong in their perceptions and, even when they are not wrong, they can only be saved when a male character “corroborates the heroine’s experience.”²¹

The following article will therefore examine the critical reception of these films and the ways in which they were generically identified within the period. The point here is not to prove that the Gothic (or paranoid) woman’s film is “really” horror, but rather the article concurs both with those who reject a sense of genres as distinct bodies of films that are each defined by, and distinguished from, one another on the basis of specific generic preoccupations;²² and with those that argue that one cannot simply deduce the reception of texts from an analysis of their formal features.²³ As a result, the article explores how individual films and broader generic categories were defined within the specific historical context of the 1940s and, during this period, this horror cycle was supposedly distinguished by films that had moved

¹⁸ Doane, *The Desire to Desire*, p.35.

¹⁹ Doane, *The Desire to Desire*, p.135.

²⁰ Waldman, ““At Last I Can Tell It to Someone!””, p.33.

²¹ Ibid.

²² See, for example, Rick Altman, *Film/Genre* (London: BFI, 1999); James Naremore, *More than Night: Film Noir in its Contexts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); and Steve Neale, *Genre and Hollywood* (London: Routledge, 2000).

²³ See, for example, Tony Bennett, *Formalism and Marxism* (London: Routledge, 1979); Barbara Klinger, *Melodrama and Meaning: History, Culture, and the Films of Douglas Sirk* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994); David Morley, *Television, Audiences and Cultural Studies* (London: Routledge, 1992); and Janet Staiger, *Interpreting Films: Studies in the Historical Reception of American Cinema* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).

away from the fantastic monsters associated with Universal Studios and were described as “fresh psychological efforts”.²⁴ In other words, they not only tended to feature disturbed villains who perpetuated mental torture on their victims but these films were also supposed to unsettle their viewers psychologically through their use of suggestion (rather than explicit visualisation), a technique that made their worlds uncertain and mysterious. Furthermore, the mentally tortured victims of the 1940s horror films were not exclusively female. On the contrary, this impression is only due to the later separation of the Gothic (or paranoid) woman’s film from other 1940s horror films; and Kracauer’s description of the “terror films” of the 1940s also included a range of male-centred films that would usually be described as *film noir* today and he claimed that these psychological films were not preoccupied with female weakness but quite the reverse: “many a current melodrama suggests that normal and abnormal states of mind merge into each other imperceptibly and are hard to keep separate.”²⁵ One of Kracauer’s main complaints about these films was therefore that he saw them as presenting psychological disturbance as being profoundly “normal”.

As a result, few reviews at the time considered the mental distress experienced by many women in the 1940s horror film as a sign of their psychological inadequacy or as requiring male intervention. On the contrary, in the case of *Suspicion*, one of the rare examples where the heroine’s perceptions are in fact invalidated, even Waldman is forced to acknowledge that the ending “was mentioned by *every* contemporary reviewer” [Waldman’s italics],²⁶ and that they complained that it was at odds with the film more generally. Far from being an inevitable, or even a common feature of this type of film, *Suspicion*’s invalidation of its heroine’s terror was seen as being both illogical and an insult to its audiences. As John Fletcher has pointed out, the heroine of the Gothic (or paranoid) woman film was usually, like Paula in *Gaslight* (1944), not the victim of psychological inadequacy but rather of an “internalized prohibition against recognising what she knows”, a prohibition that she must overcome if she is to save herself.²⁷ Like the heroine of the Gothic novels of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, these women can only defend their virtue by renouncing the ignorance of the world that is the basis of feminine innocence, and they can only

²⁴ Stanley, “Hollywood Shivers”, p.X3.

²⁵ Kracauer, “Hollywood’s Terror Films”, p.107.

²⁶ Waldman, ““At Last I Can Tell It to Someone!””, p.33.

²⁷ John Fletcher, “Primal Scenes and the Female Gothic: *Rebecca* and *Gaslight*”, *Screen* 36, no. 4, (Winter 1995), p.364.

protect the domestic by rejecting the separation of spheres that keeps her ignorant of the world of men. As Ellis puts it, these novels allowed “the heroine to purge the infected home and to establish a new one, by having her re-enact the disobedience of Eve and bring out of that a new Eden ‘far happier’”.²⁸

Nor were the Gothic (or paranoid) woman’s films critically disparaged as a group, as Waldman and Doane suggest, no matter how much its reputation may have been reconstructed in retrospect; and the following article examines the ways in which many of the films that are associated with this term were seen at the time as aspiring to the status of quality products. Indeed, as Lee Grieveson and others have demonstrated, the film industry’s efforts to “make cinema respectable” was not only achieved through the generation of “quality” productions but also through “a conscious effort to attract middle-class women”.²⁹ To put it another way, definitions of quality were associated with feminine tastes and feminine tastes were associated with quality. He therefore uses Mary Ryan’s work on the formation of the middle classes in the United States, where she demonstrates that the very identity and authority of the middle classes was “predicated on notions of domesticity and gentility which were closely aligned with idealized notions of femininity as moral guardianship.”³⁰ Consequently, an appeal to women was simultaneously an aspiration towards respectability and quality; and to the cultivation of a middle-class audience more generally, and an audience of middle-class families more particularly.

However, if examples of the Gothic (or paranoid) woman’s film, such as *Rebecca* (1940), were seen as representing the epitome of cinematic “quality”, there were also examples that were ridiculed and condemned. The first section of this essay therefore examines the values through which these distinctions were made, values that did not simply privilege “highbrow” quality but also celebrated “lowbrow” vitality over what was seen as ponderous pretension. To put it another way, films were rarely attacked for being little more than “lowbrow” shockers, but rather films were usually

²⁸ Kate Ferguson Ellis, *The Contested Castle: Gothic Novels and the Subversion of Domestic Ideology* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989), p.xii.

²⁹ Lee Grieveson, “A Kind of Recreative School for the Whole Family: Making Cinema Respectable, 1907-1909”, *Screen* 42, no.1 (Spring 2001), p.65. See also Mary P. Ryan, *Cradle of the Middle Class: The Family in Oneida County, New York, 1790-1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

³⁰ Grieveson, “A Kind of Recreative School for the Whole Family”, p.65.

condemned on the grounds that they did not “know their place” and used the signifiers of quality to blur the line between popular and legitimate taste.³¹

These themes are then expanded in more detail in the next section, which focuses on the gaslight melodramas,³² where the period details had a profoundly ambiguous meaning. On the one hand, these details could provide a suggestion of quality but, on the other, they could also be seen as a mere affection and even as encouraging an association with the supposedly lowbrow and outmoded sensationalism of nineteenth-century popular entertainment. Finally, the third section concentrates on the notion of cultural boundaries, and examines the ways in which films were judged according to a notion of “purity”. While some films were criticised on the grounds that they were supposed to have violated the distinctions between different cultural materials, other films were praised for their “purity”, which was associated with both a clear central purpose and a respect for the distinction between different cultural materials. The films that were celebrated were therefore not only presumed to “know their place”, but were also seen as accepting rather than disturbing existing cultural categories.

“Haunting, Suspenseful, Handsome”: Horror, Quality and the Gothic (or Paranoid) Woman’s Film

Without doubt, the most influential quality horror film of the period was *Rebecca*, which was produced by the key producer of quality women’s pictures in the period, David O. Selznick, and was directed by Alfred Hitchcock. The film went on to become a major hit and the cycle of quality women’s horror films was, in part, initiated by its success.³³ However, while the reviews made a lot of Hitchcock’s presence as a director, they did not see the film as being out of character when placed alongside his earlier films, and many made particular reference to his previous film, *Jamaica Inn* (1939), which was also based on a Daphne du Maurier novel and also featured many elements of the Gothic. Indeed, Selznick clearly saw *Rebecca* as a horror project and regarded Hitchcock as vital to these horrific elements. For

³¹ See Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (London: Routledge, 1984).

³² Guy Barefoot, *Gaslight Melodrama: From Victorian London to 1940s Hollywood* (London: Continuum, 2001).

³³ Although the peak years of production followed the success of *Cat People* (1942), *Rebecca* remained the prototype that many of these productions sought to imitate or reference.

example, during the script writing process, there were tensions between the director and the producer, and Selznick explicitly stated that he wanted to steer the film away from the light, “frisky tone” that inflected some of Hitchcock’s British films and for Hitchcock to “look after [the] horrific atmosphere”.³⁴ Furthermore, when considering writers for the project, Selznick had been interested in John Balderston, who had done “an excellent job for me on *The Prisoner of Zenda*”. But Selznick did not push for Balderston simply because he had a good working relationship with the writer: his main justification was due to Balderston’s background in “horror pictures, all of the best of which – including *Frankenstein* and *Dracula* – he wrote.”³⁵

Consequently, reviewers were hardly surprised by the film’s horrific materials, and clearly saw them as well-established conventions within women’s fiction. This is hardly surprising given that *Rebecca* was, in part, marketed as a quality production through its generic associations with literary classics of the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries. Frank Nugent, in *The New York Times*, referred to it as “an altogether brilliant film, haunting, suspenseful, handsome and handsomely played.”³⁶ In doing so, he balanced two key features of the film. On the one hand, the terms “haunting” and “suspenseful” made claims about the likely emotional impact of the film while also associating it with the ghost story in particular and the horror genre more generally. On the other hand, any anxieties about the film’s generic identity were offset through two key markers of quality: the reference to the film as being “handsome” worked to praise its production values, while the reference to it as “handsomely played” praised the performances of its actors.³⁷

Nugent implies not only that the horrific elements were fully expected but also that the material “demanded a film treatment evocative of a menacing mood”,³⁸ and described the film as one that abounds in familiar Gothic conventions. The house is haunted by “Rebecca’s ghost” and even contains a “bluebeard room”.³⁹ However, despite the highly conventional features of this “macabre tale”, both the “Gothic

³⁴ Selznick quoted in Leonard Leff, *Hitchcock and Selznick: The Rich and Strange Collaboration of Alfred Hitchcock and David O. Selznick in Hollywood* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), p.43.

³⁵ Selznick quoted in Rudy Behlmer (ed.), *Memo from David O. Selznick* (New York: Modern Library, 2000), p.281.

³⁶ Frank S. Nugent, “The Screen: Splendid Film of du Maurier’s ‘Rebecca’ Is Shown at the Music Hall”, *The New York Times* (29 March 1940), p.25.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

manor” of Manderlay, and the “demon-ridden countryside” within which it is located, were claimed to contain “real horrors”.⁴⁰

In addition to extravagant praise for Joan Fontaine, on which the film’s interpretation of the novel “stands or falls”, reviewers also made reference to Olivier’s performance and its similarity to his appearance the previous year as Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights* (1939), another “study in dark melancholy”.⁴¹ If the association with horror was clearly implied in the reviews of *Rebecca*, the reviews of *Wuthering Heights* were more overt. The film was referred to as a “horror-shadowed narrative” that is distinguished by its “strong sombre tone”, and by the way in which it “explores [the] shadows of the original novel”.⁴² Not only was Heathcliff claimed to be “demon-possessed”, “a demon, a ghoul, Afreet”,⁴³ but Emily Brontë was even compared to Mary Shelley. Just as Mary Shelley “only dimly sensed the potent force that she was wielding” with her creation, Frankenstein’s monster, so Emily Brontë was claimed to have never fully understood the power of her own creation, Heathcliff, at whom her sister had “recoiled in holy horror”.⁴⁴

If *Wuthering Heights* was claimed to be a strong adaptation that went “straight to the heart of the book [and] explores its shadows”, the 1943 adaptation of *Jane Eyre* was seen quite differently:

No depths of consuming passion are plumbed very diligently in this film. No haunting pathos pervades it. The producers had little time for that. With Orson Welles playing Rochester, the anguished hero of the book, they mainly gave way to the aspects of morbid horror to be revealed.⁴⁵

Rather than a literary adaptation, *Jane Eyre* was seen as a straightforward horror film. It might been “grimly fascinating” but was also accused of concentrating on the “dark, malignant side of Charlotte Bronte [sic]” and on those aspects of the novel that are “conducive to shivers down the spine”: “the secret horror locked away at

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Frank S. Nugent, “The Screen: Goldwyn Presents Film of ‘Wuthering Heights’ at Rivoli”, *The New York Times* (14 April 1939), p.28.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Bosley Crowther, “‘Jane Eyre,’ a Sombre Version of the Bronte Novel with Joan Fontaine and Orson Welles, Opens at the Music Hall”, *The New York Times* (4 February 1944), p.12.

Thornfield Hall, the screams in the night” and the “mysterious moods of Rochester”.⁴⁶ In other words, while reviewers clearly saw *Jane Eyre* as a film that aspired to cultural prestige through its association with Brontë’s literary classic, *The New York Times* was unconvinced; and the film only escaped accusation of pretentiousness due to its “continuous vitality as a romantic horror tale”.⁴⁷ In this way, the film was praised for succeeding as a horror film, even if it failed as a literary adaptation.

Alternatively, while *Jane Eyre* was supposed to have failed in terms of quality but to have been saved by its generic vitality, *Dragonwyck* (1946) was condemned for its pretensions and was dismissed as “grandiose and obvious”.⁴⁸ While the presence of familiar Gothic conventions presented no problem in the case of *Rebecca*, *Wuthering Heights* and *Jane Eyre*, their use in *Dragonwyck* was seen as tired and dull, and the film makers were said to “have done the whole thing so ponderously that they have drained it of electric essence and even the element of surprise.”⁴⁹ The film was not simply conventional but a “*repetition* of the Bluebeard story” [my emphasis] that followed the patterns too dutifully: it had all “the elemental features of the familiar old tale [...] including a tower-room which the wife is forbidden to enter. The arrogant husband is a killer, the little lady is a much-deluded child and the whole atmosphere of palace terror is dutifully embraced.”⁵⁰ Moreover, it was added that, “Phantoms of immaterial aspect also lurk in the vaulted rooms, and the ghost of a murdered great-grandmother sometimes plays the harpsichord.”⁵¹ As the reviewer’s tone makes clear, *Dragonwyck* might have had all the familiar Gothic elements but it lacked “the taut excitement inherent in the tale”, and “for all these conventional horror elements there is so much talk in the script and so little motion in the action that the tale rather tediously unfolds.”⁵²

However, if the thrills were supposed to be missing from *Dragonwyck*, reviews claimed to find them in abundance in *The Spiral Staircase* (1946), which was praised as a thoroughly unpretentious film that, despite its polished production, was

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Nugent, “The Screen: Goldwyn Presents Film of ‘Wuthering Heights’ at Rivoli”, p.28.

⁴⁸ Bosley Crowther, “‘Dragonwyck,’ Which Opens at the Roxy Theatre, Seen as One More Repetition of the Famous Old Story of Bluebeard”, *The New York Times* (15 April 1946), p.35.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

“a shocker plain and simple”.⁵³ Even its “pretensions [...] to psychological drama” were seen “as merely a concession to a currently popular fancy”, pretensions that never got in the way of its clearly defined and primary purpose, that of terrifying its audience. Robert Siodmak, the film’s director, was claimed to have a “feeling for terror”,⁵⁴ and to have made it clear from “the technique” that he “has employed to develop and sustain suspense – brooding photography and ominously suggestive settings – that he is at no time striving for narrative subtlety.”⁵⁵ While this comment might sound like a criticism, such is not the implication here. On the contrary, the film was praised for its purity of purpose, in which “narrative subtlety” was irrelevant and the use of familiar Gothic conventions did not distract from what was seen as its key asset: its honest and straightforward dedication to its central purpose. The film was therefore praised as “an obvious though suspenseful murder thriller”⁵⁶ that operated on “the time-tested theory that moviegoers are seldom more satisfied than when a film causes them to experience cold-chills”,⁵⁷ and while it “has drawn on practically every established device known to produce goose pimples”, critics claimed that the “only thing that matters” about the film is that those devices are used “to startling advantage”.⁵⁸ In this way, the film was celebrated precisely for its visceral thrills, which are claimed to make any intellectual concerns irrelevant: “even though you are conscious that the tension is being built by obvious trickery, the effect is nonetheless telling.”⁵⁹ The film makers were therefore said to have put “an early-morning house under their spell”, an enchantment that “was evident by the frequent spasms of nervous giggling and audible, breathless sighs.”⁶⁰ Nor was this response perceived as exceptional, and indeed one reviewer predicted that “the film is likely to scare the living daylights out of most of its audiences.”⁶¹

⁵³ T.M.P., “At the Palace”, *The New York Times* (7 February 1946), p.35.

⁵⁴ Herb., “Film Review”, *Variety* (Wednesday, 9 January 1946), p.79.

⁵⁵ T.M.P., “At the Palace”, *The New York Times* (7 February 1946), p.35.

⁵⁶ Herb., “Film Review”, p.79.

⁵⁷ T.M.P., “At the Palace”, *The New York Times* (7 February 1946), p.35.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

“Victorian Villainy”: The Conflicting Meanings of the Gothic Past in the Gaslight Melodramas

As we have seen, the horrors of these films were usually associated with the dark and disturbed personalities of their characters, particularly their intimidating male leads, so that one of the distinguishing features of the 1940s quality horror films was that they were seen as “fresh psychological efforts”.⁶² For example, while *Dragonwyck* was described as “a psychological yarn”,⁶³ *The Spiral Staircase* featured a “fiend” who murders his victims “on the warped premise that the world has no room for the imperfect”.⁶⁴ This feature can also be seen in *The New York Times*’ assessment of *Experiment Perilous* (1944), which it described as being “one of the better psychological melodramas that has come this way since Hollywood began dabbling in the macabre some months back.”⁶⁵ The story concerns an “unfathomable” and “cunningly insane monster”, played by Paul Lukacs, whose wife finds herself threatened by the strange goings-on in his “mysterious household”. However, while the film is “one of the better psychological efforts”,⁶⁶ the psychological concerns were criticised for slowing down an otherwise gripping horror story. As a result, *The New York Times* did not necessarily see psychology themes as positive, but was often highly critical of psychological films, at least until 1945.⁶⁷ In the early 1940s, it did not associate psychology with the realistic depiction of character but, on the contrary, with horror and fantasy and with what it saw as often preposterous explanations for implausible behaviour. As a result, despite its supposed virtues, *Experiment Perilous* was criticised for the way in which the psychological explanations slowed down the action so that “words speak louder than action” and “the microphone proves to be more important than the camera.”⁶⁸ However, the film was praised for its good performances, particularly from Lukacs, and most other elements of the film were

⁶² Stanley, “Hollywood Shivers”, p.X3.

⁶³ Kahn., “Film Review”, *Variety* (Wednesday, 20 February 1946), p.8.

⁶⁴ Herb., “Film Review”, p.79.

⁶⁵ T.M.P., “At the Palace”, *The New York Times* (30 December 1944), p.15.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Mark Jancovich, “The Crack-Up: Psychological Realism, Generic Transformation and the Demise of the Paranoid Woman’s Film”, *The Irish Journal of Gothic and Horror Studies*, Issue 3 (November 2007),

<http://irishgothichorrorjournalhttp://irishgothichorrorjournal.homestead.com/Crack-upJancovich.html>.

⁶⁸ T.M.P., “At the Palace”, *The New York Times* (30 December 1944), p.15.

said to be “well calculated to hold your attention, despite its excessive talkativeness.”⁶⁹

The historical setting was also seen as a significant feature of the film. While the novel on which it was based was set in contemporary America, *The New York Times* noted that the film was set in 1903. Like a series of other films, then, it did not signify quality through its association with classic literature but through its setting within a vaguely imagined world of “Victorian villainy”,⁷⁰ a feature that it shared with one of the most distinguished of examples of the Gothic (or paranoid) woman’s film, *Gaslight*, for which its star, Ingrid Bergman, won an Academy Award. The script was also partly written by John Balderston, who, as we have seen, had previously adapted two other successful stage plays into the two classic horror hits of 1931, *Dracula* and *Frankenstein*. Furthermore, like *Experiment Perilous* and many other Gothic horror films of the period, the film featured a “homicidal husband”⁷¹ who is trying to “drive his wife slowly mad [...] in his best dead-pan hypnotic style”,⁷² a role that had been played on Broadway by Vincent Price, the star of *Dragonwyck*, and was played in the film by Charles Boyer.

The New York Times described *Gaslight* as a “dark shivery study” whose “audience was giggling with anxiety at a performance yesterday.”⁷³ *Time* also saw the film as “a fierce, hair-raising, handsome piece of psychological horror”,⁷⁴ while *Variety* saw the film as “an exciting screen treatment”⁷⁵ that avoided the “corny theatrics” that were supposed to be a prominent feature of the type of nineteenth-century melodrama on which it was based. Consequently, it claimed that the use of period features “only serves to hypo the film’s dramatic suspense”, while “lacking the ten-twenty-third element that was a factor in the stage play”,⁷⁶ the reference to the “ten-twenty-third element” being an explicit reference to the world of nineteenth century melodrama.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Bosley Crowther, “‘Gaslight,’ Adapted from Play ‘Angel Street,’ at Capitol”, *The New York Times* (5 May 1944), p.17.

⁷¹ Kahn., “Film Review”, *Variety* (Wednesday, 10 May 1944), p.10.

⁷² Crowther, “‘Gaslight,’ Adapted from Play ‘Angel Street,’ at Capitol”, p.17.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Anon, “The New Pictures”, *Time* (22 May 1944), www.time.com.

⁷⁵ Kahn., “Film Review”, *Variety* (Wednesday, 10 May 1944), p.10.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

Most reviews also praised Bergman, who is due “a lot of the credit” for the “unusual degree of emotional subtlety” with which the film handles its central relationship.⁷⁷ However, not everyone agreed with *Variety* and many saw the film as old-fashioned, so that its period features came to signify an association with outdated forms of lowbrow melodrama rather than genuine quality. Manny Farber, for example, had no particular objection to the “creepy plot” and, although he found Boyer “unconvincingly insane”, his most fundamental objection was to the inclusion of “a stock detective mystery involving stereotyped mystery problems”, problems that were so “stereotyped” that he warned readers that they “will remind you of the kind of mystery stories Earl Derr Biggers use to write.”⁷⁸ He also complained that this detective plot distracted from the intensity of the central struggle between husband and wife, an intensity that was also undermined by a series of “devices that are supposed to be hair-raising but are only reminders of what may have scared you in your childhood.”⁷⁹

The New York Times made a series of similar points and, while the film was generally praised for its “ticklish assortment of melodramatic camera tricks”, and for the performance of its stars, who “play their roles to the hilt”, it was also claimed that “the film doesn’t match the play”.⁸⁰ While *Variety* saw the play as being similar to the nineteenth century theatrical melodrama, and praised the film for avoiding “corny theatrics”,⁸¹ *The New York Times* took a different line. It argued that, although the film might prove frightening to audiences, it had lost the power of the play, which, “by its rigid confinement within the limitations of one room, pervades the spectator with the horror and frustration of its claustrophobic mood”, while the film opens out the action so that “the fearful immediacy of the play is sadly lost”.⁸²

However, despite this quibble, *Gaslight* was generally well regarded, particularly when compared to films such as *Hangover Square* (1945), which was seen by *The New York Times* as a far more risible exercise, in which its period details were dismissed as mere window dressing that sought to disguise its lowbrow features

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Manny Farber, “Creep House”, *The Nation* (22 May 1944), p.711. Earl Derr Biggers was the author of the Charlie Chan stories.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Crowther, “‘Gaslight,’ Adapted from Play ‘Angel Street,’ at Capitol”, p.17.

⁸¹ Kahn., “Film Review”, *Variety* (Wednesday, 10 May 1944), p.10.

⁸² Crowther, “‘Gaslight,’ Adapted from Play ‘Angel Street,’ at Capitol”, p.17.

and pass it off as a work of quality instead. *Variety* praised the film, which it described as an “eerie melodrama of the London gaslight era” that told the story of “a distinguished young composer-pianist with a Jekyll-Hyde personality”, whose “ghastly end is not for sensitive audiences.”⁸³ It also claimed that the production “is grade A, and so is the direction by John Brahm, with particular bows to the musical score by Bernard Hermann and the sharp editing.”⁸⁴ In contrast, *The New York Times* observed that this “period horror piece” featured a “plushy replica of a rich, turn of the century English home”,⁸⁵ a description that focused on the lavishness of the production values but also suggested that they were merely tackily extravagant rather than being representative of real quality. Similarly, the film’s horror elements were dismissed with the claim that “there is not a first-class shiver in the whole picture”,⁸⁶ and the only real interest was said to be the presence of Laird Cregar, *Hangover Square* being the last film that the actor had made before his death. Nonetheless, Cregar was not seen as having much to work with in the film: he “plays a schizophrenic genius who gets a warning pain in the neck whenever he is about to go into one of those blank, murderous spells which take him away from his piano and out into the murky night in search of victims.”⁸⁷ In other words, this description strongly conveys the critic’s weariness at the supposed predictability of the film, and their sense of its status as little more than lowbrow horror entertainment, a sense that is made even more explicit by the claim that his “transformation from man to beast is accompanied with wild grimaces, the whole while he crutches his neck in a manner reminiscent of Frankenstein’s monster. It is all apparently supposed to send chills coursing up and down your spine, but the chances are you’ll find the whole business inexplicably tedious, if not actually ludicrous.”⁸⁸

In much the same way, *Variety* praised the earlier collaboration between Cregar and Brahm, a remake of Alfred Hitchcock’s *The Lodger* (1927). For *Variety*, the film was “a super chiller-diller” that offers “a psychological study” of Jack the Ripper and operates as “a deftly paced horrific who-dun-it”.⁸⁹ It also paid attention to

⁸³ Kahn., “Film Review”, *Variety* (Wednesday, 17 January 1945), p.14.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ T.M.P., “At the Roxy”, *The New York Times* (9 February 1945), p.15.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Wear., “Film Review”, *Variety* (Wednesday, 5 January 1944), p.16.

the film's high production values and the "impressive performance" by Laird Cregar as Jack the Ripper:

Robert Bassler has provided plenty of production values in carrying out with authenticity the London of the gaslight era. Lucien Ballard has turned in a superb job of photography, his use of light and shade being fine throughout. John Brahm's direction, making a maximum reliance on suspense, is possibly the strongest feature of the picture. Barry Lyndon's scripting from the novel is standout.⁹⁰

In much the same way, *Motion Picture Herald* claimed that the film was produced "on a lavish scale with excellent atmosphere and fine cast and should strike frequent terror in the hearts of horror fans."⁹¹

But again *The New York Times* begged to differ. Although it acknowledged that the film was "handsomely produced" and "designed to chill the spine",⁹² it also claimed that the film ends up looking like "a sly travesty on the melodramatic technique of ponderously piling suspicion upon suspicion (and wrapping the whole in a cloak of brooding photographic effects)".⁹³ In other words, it suggested that the film, for all its surface gloss, was a fundamentally crude affair that lacked proper restraint and forced its central character "continually [to] go around trying to scare the living daylights out of everyone."⁹⁴ As a result, just as we saw in relation to *Hangover Square*, the psychotic killer was associated with the "lowbrow" horror monsters when it was claimed that the film's hero finally "pours more bullets into the murderer than even Frankenstein's monster was ever asked to absorb."⁹⁵

"Murder Mulligan": Purity, Contamination and the Problem of Category Violation

As we have seen, then, respected newspapers such as *The New York Times* were not critical of "lowbrow" horror during the 1940s, and often celebrated its value as entertainment. But they objected when they believed that films were passing off lowbrow materials as highbrow products or when aspirations to quality drained a film

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ E.A. Cunningham, "The Case of Jack the Ripper", *Motion Picture Herald* (8 January 1944), p.1705.

⁹² T.M.P., "At the Roxy", *The New York Times* (20 January, 1944), p.15.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

of its entertainment value. In other words, when films were condemned, they were claimed to lack clarity of purpose. Films such as *The Spiral Staircase* might have a handsome finish but they were praised for never trying to be anything more than “a shocker plain and simple”,⁹⁶ while films such as *Dragonwyck* were derided for being neither one thing nor the other, an unhappy hybrid of different elements that had no clear sense of its position or purpose. If *The Spiral Staircase* was “plain and simple”, *Dragonwyck* was an impure object, a confused mess of different elements.

Similarly, while it was claimed that the makers of *Dark Waters* (1944) had “produced the whole show for strictly A-picture tone, even though the content is really more consistent with low-budget fare”,⁹⁷ the film was ultimately praised as a “horror film” that is “neatly produced and directed – and well played by an excellent cast.”⁹⁸ Again the film concerns a young lady who “thinks she’s going crazy”,⁹⁹ when she goes to stay with weird relatives in Louisiana, relatives who are trying to destroy her psychologically. Rather than being described as “inexplicably tedious, if not actually ludicrous”,¹⁰⁰ like *Hangover Square*, the film was referred to as a “killer-diller of a thriller”.¹⁰¹ Certainly, it was stressed that the film “is nothing sensational in the soul-exploration line”, but it was also professed that the film didn’t make any claims to being anything more than an entertainment and ultimately “what it comes down to” is that the film provides an effective “tingling diversion for the latter part of an hour and a half.”¹⁰²

In contrast, *The Two Mrs. Carrolls* (1947) was described as a “murder mulligan, which [...] is as wretched a stew of picture-making as has been dished up in many a moon”, and the fault was precisely the mismatch between its pretensions to quality and its “crude and mechanical melodramatics”.¹⁰³ Indeed, the review noted that the film had been withheld by Warners “for almost two years after it was made” and it suggested that the studio had needed this time before it could “work up their

⁹⁶ T.M.P., “At the Palace”, *The New York Times* (7 February 1946), p.35.

⁹⁷ Bosley Crowther, “‘Dark Waters,’ a Horror Film that is Diverting, with Merle Oberon and Thomas Mitchell, Makes an Appearance at Globe”, *The New York Times* (22 November 1944), p.25.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ T.M.P., “At the Roxy”, *The New York Times* (9 February 1945), p.15.

¹⁰¹ Crowther, “‘Dark Waters,’ a Horror Film that is Diverting, with Merle Oberon and Thomas Mitchell, Makes an Appearance at Globe”, p.25.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Bosley Crowther, “‘The Two Mrs. Carrolls,’ With Humphrey Bogart, Barbara Stanwyck and Alexis Smith, Arrives at the Hollywood”, *The New York Times* (7 April 1947), p.20.

nerve to risk this incredible monstrosity upon even the most tolerant movie fans”.¹⁰⁴ The most “conspicuous embarrassment” in the film, however, was seen as being “the performance which Humphrey Bogart gives as a homicidal artist with particular designs on his wives”.¹⁰⁵ The problem with this performance was precisely the ways in which it was associated with the lowbrow so that Bogart was claimed to go “through the whole repertory of a low-budget bogey-man” and play his character in a way that reminded one of “a dead-panned American thug whose mother was horribly frightened by a robot built by Dr. Frankenstein.”¹⁰⁶ If *Dark Waters* was claimed to have raised the value of its low-budget content through its “A-picture tone”, *The Two Mrs. Carrolls* was claimed to have degraded its stars and its material so that “Whatever ‘The Two Mrs. Carrolls’ had upon the stage, it has lost in an artless rewriting by Thomas Job and the mugging of all concerned.”¹⁰⁷ Once again, however, it was not the association with the “lowbrow” that was the problem, but the film’s refusal to know its place. Scorn was therefore poured on its psychological pretensions, in which Bogart plays “a psychopathic dauber who paints his successive fraus as the ‘Angel of Death’ and then slips them poison when he feels their inspiration has run dry.”¹⁰⁸ In this way, the film’s psychological themes were condemned as pretentious: the psychological themes were largely dismissed as providing unconvincing motivations for implausible action.

The reviewer for *Time* was slightly more sympathetic, and claimed that at some points, particularly “when the second Mrs. Carroll begins to suspect what she is up against, audience spines register an authentic chill.”¹⁰⁹ But even here Bogart’s performance was seen as unconvincing and, although “violence and murder are old stuff to him”, the actor “appears uncomfortable” in his role.¹¹⁰ If the explanation given was that “madness and paintbrushes are not quite in his line”,¹¹¹ Bogart had long been associated with psychological disturbance, at least since his breakthrough

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Anon, “The New Pictures”, *Time* (12 May, 1947), www.time.com.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

role in *The Petrified Forest* (1936),¹¹² and it was therefore the association between madness and art which seemed uncomfortable, rather than madness and murder alone.

In contrast, *Suspicion* was praised for its purity, as a film with a clear and logical focus in which Hitchcock “constructs his attack around a straight psychological progression”.¹¹³ In other words, while the psychology of *The Two Mrs. Carrolls* is a pretentious excuse for implausible action, Hitchcock’s film is presented as one that is tightly constructed around a clear psychological logic. The film is “not Mr. Hitchcock at his best” but “Mr Hitchcock is probably the most artful sophist working for films – and anyone who doesn’t think so should see ‘Suspicion’ at the Music Hall.”¹¹⁴ Again the film concerns a young bride who begins to suspect that her husband may be a dangerous killer who plans to murder her, and it therefore operates as “a psychological thriller” in which Hitchcock’s skill is demonstrated through his ability “to build, out of slight suggestions and vague, uncertain thoughts, a mounting tower of suspicion which looms forbiddingly.”¹¹⁵ It was also claimed that Fontaine “deserves unstinted praise” and “has unquestionably become one of the finest actresses on the screen” whose performance as the “fear-tortured character is fluid and compelling all the way.”¹¹⁶ The film was therefore seen as one of genuine quality, in which the psychological themes are subtle, plausible and integral to the story, even though the ending was “not up to Mr. Hitchcock’s usual style.”¹¹⁷ Furthermore, the film was praised for the ways in which its production values enhanced, rather than distracted from, its value as an entertainment, so that it “is packed with lively suspense and [...] entertains you from beginning to – well, almost the end.”¹¹⁸

If *Suspicion* has “a straight psychological progression”,¹¹⁹ *Secret Beyond the Door* (1947) was seen as “psycho-nonsense”, in which its heroine should “know at the start that the gentleman played by Michael Redgrave is a bad one to wed”,¹²⁰ and

¹¹² Mark Jancovich, “‘The Murderer’s Mind’: Edward G. Robinson, Humphrey Bogart and the 1940s Horror Film” in Kristopher Woofert, Charlie EllBé and Mario DeGiglio-Bellemare (eds.), *Fragments of the Monster: Recovering Forties Horror* (forthcoming).

¹¹³ Bosley Crowther, “‘Suspicion,’ a Hitchcock Thriller at Music Hall”, *The New York Times* (21 November 1941), p.23.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Bosley Crowther, “On the Screen: ‘Secret Beyond the Door,’ With Joan Bennett and Michael Redgrave, Has Premiere”, *The New York Times* (16 January 1948), p.25.

in which everyone's behaviour is seen as unconvincing. The heroine's new husband walks "out on her right in the middle of their honeymoon just because she, for coy reasons, momentarily locks her bedroom door", and when she follows him to his "musty old manse", she finds that it is "inhabited by several odd characters" and that "he has a morbid fixation upon death, a collection of rooms where murders took place and an untagged death-room reserved for – guess who!"¹²¹ Furthermore, if the husband's psychological problems are supposed to make little sense – "the lady discovers [...] that her husband just doesn't like dames, mainly because his mother didn't come upstairs and read to him one night when he was 10 years old"¹²² – the finale is seen as even more unlikely. The heroine not only decides "to help her old man", despite being threatened with "death and numbed by terror", but "be dogged if her amateur psycho-therapy doesn't do the job."¹²³

Nonetheless, the central complaint was not simply that the film is silly but that it is once again a pretentious mixing of elements. As a result, *Variety* observed that the film "is arty, with almost surrealistic treatment in camera angles, story-telling mood and suspense",¹²⁴ while *The New York Times* scoffed at the preposterous dialogue: "There's something in your face that I saw once – in South Dakota. Wheat country. Cyclone weather, it was."¹²⁵ The film was therefore dismissed by *The New York Times* as a "pretty silly yarn", in which the only saving grace is the skill with which its director is able to create terror in his audience: "Mr. Lang is still a director who knows how to turn the obvious, such as locked doors and silent chambers and roving spotlights, into strangely tingling stuff."¹²⁶ If the film had some "mildly creepy spots", and even manages to conjure up "some occasional faint resemblance to 'Rebecca,' which it obviously aimed to imitate",¹²⁷ it still fell short of the earlier film by a considerable margin, and its positive features were all associated with lowbrow entertainment: "Pure ten, twent', thirt".¹²⁸

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Anon, "Film Reviews", *Variety* (31 December 1947), p.10.

¹²⁵ Crowther, "On the Screen: 'Secret Beyond the Door,' With Joan Bennett and Michael Redgrave, Has Premiere", p.25.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Bosley Crowther, "A Matter of Style – Now You See It and Now You Don't", *The New York Times* (18 January 1948), p.X1.

However, despite these complaints, *Secret Beyond the Door* still came off rather better than *Undercurrent* (1946), in which another young wife (Katherine Hepburn) finds herself menaced by her disturbed husband (Robert Taylor). The film was claimed to feature “one of those silly climaxes such as you’d hardly expect to see on [sic] a film starring Katherine Hepburn and Robert Taylor”,¹²⁹ the implication being that there was a mismatch between the quality of the material and the stars involved. Indeed, the film was supposed to be so preposterous that the critic for *The New York Times* refused to reveal the ending, not because the studio “has beseeched us to keep the secret of this ‘amazing ending’ to ourself [sic]” but rather because “we suspect you’d never believe us if we told you – and if you did, you’d only laugh”.¹³⁰ Manny Farber also found the “terror-ridden ending” somewhat laughable, although for him the moment “which tends to alleviate the horror somewhat” is one in which “Katherine Hepburn, so ravaged by fear, opens her mouth but remains speechless. This you may want to see.”¹³¹ In other words, despite the antipathy that some critics clearly felt for Hepburn, the material was seen as beneath the dignity of its stars, and the film was described as an “emotionally presumptuous story” in which “a fine young lady [...] finds herself married to a brute – a discovery which she makes in painful stages while unconsciously falling in love with her husband’s mysterious brother whom she has never seen”.¹³² What is more, her love for the husband’s brother was seen as poorly motivated and develops as “she learns her brother-in-law likes music, dogs and books.”¹³³

Consequently, it was claimed that the film was “a trifle senseless” and that, although Hepburn “gives a crisp and taut performance” and Robert Taylor plays the psychologically disturbed husband with “a brooding meanness”, the film was ultimately lacking in horror thrills.¹³⁴ Vincente Minnelli, who directs the film, “has used atmosphere to build up some rather fateful moments in which you wait for the unknown to occur”, and certain cinemagoers may find “certain passages engrossing in

¹²⁹ Bosley Crowther, “‘Undercurrent,’ Metro Drama in which Katherine Hepburn and Robert Taylor are Teamed, Moves into Capitol”, *The New York Times* (29 November 1946), p.36.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Manny Farber, “Movies”, *The Nation* (23 December, 1946), p.879.

¹³² Crowther, “‘Undercurrent,’ Metro Drama in which Katherine Hepburn and Robert Taylor are Teamed, Moves into Capitol”, p.36.

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

a strictly melodramatic way”,¹³⁵ but such comments were very guarded praise, even when compared to *Secret Beyond the Door*, and gave little suggestion of any real emotional impact, even as a lowbrow entertainment. As a result, the film was condemned as a quality production that failed to provide either the logic of convincing psychological motivation or the thrill of horrific entertainment.

Conclusion

Nonetheless, there was a clear expectation that *Undercurrent* should provide horrific entertainment and that those films that critics would later identify as the Gothic (or paranoid) woman’s film were understood as horror films during the 1940s, when they were not even seen as a distinct group but as part of a much larger cycle of horror production. Nor were these films disparaged through their association with femininity but rather their femininity was often seen as a sign of quality. For example, *Rebecca* was not only seen as the prototype for many of these films, but also as the epitome of cinematic quality. If certain examples of the Gothic (or paranoid) woman’s film were condemned, it was not due to their association with female audiences, but rather due to their “impurity”. The examples that 1940s critics condemned were usually vilified as pretentious, in a manner that repeats familiar anxieties about the blurring of distinctions between class-based taste formations.¹³⁶

Furthermore, while many of these films were referred to as “psychological efforts”, there is a strong sense that these references usually refer to the psychological motivations of the male threat, and the specific nature of their violence, rather than to any psychological inadequacy on the part of the female protagonists. If these women were mentally disturbed, and found it difficult to distinguish fantasy from reality during much of the narrative, their mental instability was usually seen as perfectly understandable given the terrifying situations in which they find themselves. In other words, these films were rarely seen as requiring female passivity but rather as a condemnation of the repression of knowledge, much like their novelistic predecessors in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Bourdieu, *Distinction*.