

## **The Ballerina Body-Horror: Spectatorship, Female Subjectivity and the Abject in Dario Argento's *Suspiria* (1977)**

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Since Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger's *The Red Shoes* (1948), the female ballerina protagonist, conflated with audio-visual tropes of horror and fantasy, as well as narrative themes of mental and physical trauma, has been a significant, international cinematic trend.<sup>1</sup> This article focuses on *Suspiria* (1977), a supernatural ballet-school murder-mystery, the first film in Dario Argento's 'Three Mothers' witchcraft trilogy, which in turn forms part of his wider engagement with the contentious genre of Italian 'giallo' cinema.<sup>2</sup> *Suspiria* has attracted an extensive body of scholarly criticism, with a predominant focus on the 'female-as-threat', and on the evocation of maternal horror in the characterisation of its killers, as patriarchal manifestations of the 'castration anxiety'.<sup>3</sup> Giallo films in general have provoked this type of commentary since coming into prominence in the 1970s, with the relaxing of Europe's cinematic taboos, and have been branded 'exploitation cinema', 'where artistic merit is sacrificed for sensationalistic display[s] of misogyny and [extreme, bloody] violence'.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, throughout his oeuvre, Argento, often described as the 'Italian Hitchcock', repeatedly positioned the spectator as the disembodied, sadistic serial killer behind the camera, a trope made iconic with *Psycho* (1960) and Powell's similarly scopophilic *Peeping Tom* (1960).<sup>5</sup> For Isabel Cristina Pinedo, such sequences privilege sexualised and fetishised violence towards the passive female victim-image through 'the act of showing [...] the [female] body in bits and pieces', encouraging the objectification and dehumanisation of women through the 'male gaze' of popular cinema spectatorship.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *The Red Shoes*, dir. by Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger (General Film Distributors, 1948).

<sup>2</sup> *Suspiria*, dir. by Dario Argento (Produzioni Atlas Consorziate, 1977).

<sup>3</sup> See Jacqueline Reich, 'The Mother of All Horror: Witches, Gender, and the Films of Dario Argento', in *Monsters in the Italian Literary Imagination*, ed. by Keala J. Jewell (Michigan: Wayne State University Press, 2001), pp. 89-106; Mary McDonagh, 'Suspiria and Inferno', in *Broken Mirrors/Broken Minds: The Dark Dreams of Dario Argento* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), pp. 123-58; and Xavier Mendik, *Bodies of Desire and Bodies in Distress: The Golden Age of Italian Cult Cinema, 1970-1985* (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015).

<sup>4</sup> Michael Sevastakis, *Giallo Cinema and its Folktale Roots: A Critical Study of 10 Films, 1962-1987* (North Carolina: McFarland, 2016), p. 2.

<sup>5</sup> *Psycho*, dir. by Alfred Hitchcock (Paramount Pictures, 1960); and *Peeping Tom*, dir. by Michael Powell (Anglo-Amalgamated Film Distributors, 1960).

<sup>6</sup> Isabel Cristina Pinedo, *Recreational Terror: Women and the Pleasures of Horror Film Viewing* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1997).

Such scholarly, psychoanalytic preoccupation with *male* viewing, however, disregards the vital relationship between *Suspiria*'s horror and its ballet setting, as well as the centralised perspective of its ballerina protagonist. This paper seeks to identify the cultural, gendered, and psychoanalytic discourses from which the focus on the ballerina figure stems, as well as its particular significance within horror and fantasy-film scholarship more broadly. *The Red Shoes*, *The Tales of Hoffmann* (1951), and later, *Black Swan* (2011) (to name the most prominent examples of this trend) all present a prima ballerina whose struggle as a muse figure, under the patriarchal control and bodily expectations of a male *artiste*, has an ultimately tragic end.<sup>7</sup> I am specifically interested, however, in how *Suspiria* offers a powerfully *matriarchal* ballet environment, offering its protagonist ultimate 'Final Girl' status, in contrast to other texts of its kind.<sup>8</sup> I argue that the film's fantastic-horror tropes offer a radical articulation of *female*-centric identity anxieties. Firstly, I explore the potential of the fragmented, female-subjective narrative of its ballerina protagonist to undermine – as well as self-consciously draw attention to – traditional notions of gendered spectatorship through the re-assertion of female physical *presence*. Drawing upon Jungian thought, I then move on to demonstrate how the supernatural in this film is psychosexually representative of the female protagonist's fantastically manifested unconscious, as opposed to presenting a simple, 'sensationalist' serial-murder narrative. Finally, I examine how the film's engagement with non-conventional methods of spectatorship, namely 'abject' body imagery and Laura U. Marks' notion of 'haptic visuality', extends affect *beyond* the image.<sup>9</sup> This further destabilises the theoretical, gendered boundary between subject and object and, consequently, between viewer and film, by encouraging a multi-sensory viewing experience that defies the pleasures of a strictly 'male' gaze and significantly elevates giallo beyond critical dismissals of misogyny.

### **The Ballerina as Social-Feminine Ideal**

The very concept of the female dancer in film exists at the point of conjunction between pervading semiotic and psychoanalytic theories regarding the formation of individual

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<sup>7</sup> *The Tales of Hoffmann*, dir. by Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger (British Lion Film Corporation, 1951); and *Black Swan*, dir. by Darren Aronofsky (Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation, 2011).

<sup>8</sup> Carol J. Clover coined this term, identifying the enduring female archetype in horror film as one who possesses 'the qualities of character that enable her to survive, of all the characters, what has come to seem unsurvivable' (Carol J. Clover, *Men, Women and Chainsaws: Gender and the Modern Horror Film* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1992), p.39).

<sup>9</sup> Laura U. Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000).

selfhood, as well as the gendered opposition between the mind and body. Individual artistic expression and uninhibited bodily movement, typically associated with dance, are directly at odds with the symbolic order that governs Western principles and language. Here, the body, according to Michel Foucault, ‘is directly involved in a political field [organised by] power relations’, functioning as an image to ‘emit signs’ and signify cultural identity.<sup>10</sup> Feminist psychoanalytic scholarship has noted that this order is based on the heritage of dualism, one which radically opposes the ‘body or material’ (female) realm and the ‘mental or spiritual’ (male) realm that controls it.<sup>11</sup> Using Jacques Lacan’s mirror framework, the body is, in such formulations, the distanced *other* whose idealised, ‘clean and proper’ external object-image, according to Julia Kristeva, is crucial to defining the totality of the subjective self, to ensure control over the inner ‘abject’ body-physical that threatens to disrupt it.<sup>12</sup> This division between the active male-subject and the passive female-object, for Laura Mulvey, is reinforced by the screen-mirror apparatus of popular cinema. The woman’s body onscreen is distanced and dehumanised, as per the voyeuristic pleasures of the disembodied ‘male gaze’, thereby reinforcing gender division and legitimating patriarchal subjective control.<sup>13</sup> The woman-as-image and the woman-as-body – both of which have been historically repressed – are employed to prohibit the very concept of female subjectivity.

These psychoanalytic frameworks thus problematise the female dancer in film, historically denied control of her own image and reduced to the body, while that body must also be used as a controlled instrument to meet the physical and aesthetic requirements of the dancing role and choreography, as well of the audience(s). According to Sondra Horton Fraleigh, ‘dance is an aesthetic expression of the body and [...] the body is aesthetically constituted by dance. This involves a concern for the aesthetic constitution of the self.’<sup>14</sup> This notion is, arguably, never more apparent than in the figure of the ballerina, as the hegemonic, patriarchal ideologies inherent in classical romantic ballet teachings, roles, and narratives reflect those highlighted in Mulvey’s spectatorship model. These ideologies arguably continue to pervade the popular stage, through the gothic, fairy-tale duality between ‘virgin’ and ‘whore’, and via inhumanly ethereal female characters such as swans, nymphs, angels,

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<sup>10</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. by Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1979).

<sup>11</sup> Christy Adair, ‘Cultured Bodies – The Social Construction of the Body’, in *Women and Dance: Sylphs and Sirens* (London: Palgrave, 1992), pp. 24-39.

<sup>12</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay in Abjection* (New York: Columbia University, 1982), p. 102.

<sup>13</sup> Laura Mulvey, ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’, *Screen* 16.4 (1975), 119-30 (p. 6).

<sup>14</sup> Sondra Horton Fraleigh, ‘Dance Itself’, in *Dance and the Lived Body* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1987), pp. 43-56 (p. 43).

and dolls. As Deirdre Kelly notes, such figures reflect ideas relating to the ‘eternal virginity’ of ballerinas, and the sense that they are ‘inaccessible’ and remain ‘unravished’.<sup>15</sup>

Such roles demanded absolute bodily control, poise, and precision; the ‘straight spine, lifted chest, long neck, erect head, hands and arms held without tension’ create the immaculate image of the distanced feminine other.<sup>16</sup> Ballet choreography has its origins in the etiquette of European society. According to Kelly, ““with the fair sex, gentle movements and pretty gestures must be the fairest ornament”, wrote the German dancing master Gottfried Taubert in 1717’.<sup>17</sup> These formulations not only feminised the medium as a whole, but also encoded an ‘ideal’ femininity across Western culture, perpetuating, in Judith Butler’s hypothesis, the ‘social-construction’ of gender in a ‘stylised repetition of acts’, through the very stylised repetition of ballet choreography.<sup>18</sup> Such ideas also associate the attainment of perfection with the myth of bodily limitlessness and superhuman ability; as Sally Banes observes, ‘ballet showcased the dancer’s mastery of technique, [...] to mask the effort of physical virtuosity, in order to appear suitably imponderable and ethereal’.<sup>19</sup> For Jade Boyd, this creates an unrealistic, and potentially harmful cultural perception of, and detachment from, the body, which is presented ‘as a machine [and] an object to be worked into shape, [which can] lead to [...] injury when dancers push themselves too hard’.<sup>20</sup> Such regimented and extreme bodily manipulation, to the point of physical punishment, is reflected through the very costume of the ballerina, presenting a quasi-animalistic image of femininity, containing and distorting any hint of flesh, fluidity, or limitation, from the tight leotard and tutu to bind the torso and exaggerate the waist-to-hip ratio, down to the pointe shoes that constrain the movement of the toes and feet into perfect rigidity.

For Douglas Rosenberg, dance in cinema presents an ‘impossible’ body that is rendered all the more mechanical and corporeally artificial through the filming and editing

<sup>15</sup> Deirdre Kelly, *Ballerina: Sex, Scandal, and Suffering Behind the Symbol of Perfection* (Vancouver: Greystone Books, 2012), p. 1, quoting from Rayner Heppenstall, ‘From “Apology for Dancing”, The Sexual Idiom’, in *What is Dance?*, ed. by Roger Copeland and Marshall Cohen (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), pp. 267-88 (p. 274).

<sup>16</sup> Kelly, p. 9.

<sup>17</sup> Kelly (p. 7) cites Gottfried Taubert, quoted in Edmund Fairfax, ‘The “Fair Sex” and its Style’, in *The Styles of Eighteenth Century Ballet* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2003), p. 221.

<sup>18</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 4.

<sup>19</sup> Sally Banes, ‘The Romantic Ballet: *La Sylphide*, *Giselle*, *Coppelia*’, in *Female Bodies on Stage* (London: Routledge, 1998), pp. 12-21 (p. 13).

<sup>20</sup> Jade Boyd, ‘Dance, Culture and Popular Film’, *Feminist Media Studies*, 4 (2004), 67-83 (p. 69).

process, with its non-sequential simulation of a physical totality beyond human capabilities, in a ‘digital construction of corporeal performance’.<sup>21</sup> Rosenberg states that

[Altered] camera placement, shot composition and visual space [find] the most efficient and aesthetic methods of framing movement. [...] [Production] is not sequential [...] but is rather a simultaneous fabrication of disparate parts [...], that will be reconfigured in the future [...] from preproduction to production to postproduction, additional elements are constructed, added or removed.<sup>22</sup>

This language evokes Mulvey’s process of gendered spectatorship, particularly in relation to the aestheticisation and deconstruction of body parts. To frame and screen the dancing body in this conceptualisation is to add a complex, supplementary layer of subject/object interaction in and in relation to film viewing. The process of filmmaking thus inherently fragments and reduces the dancing body, mirroring the ways in which non-fictional dancers’ bodies are inserted within regulatory and patriarchal structures by the rigours of ballet as an art form.

Hence the ideological sphere within which the ballerina exists encourages the attainment of a dualistic ideal of (body) image that renounces female physical presence. Ideals, as Susan Bordo observes, of ‘whiteness, lightness, and slenderness’ continue to abound elsewhere in popular culture, engendering for women psychological detachment through the ‘distance and disdain for the body and its internal functions’.<sup>23</sup> This can lead to rampant psychological problems – most notably eating disorders and self-harm – through daily consumption of hegemonic images of idealised femininity in magazines, film, and television, particularly for the young, impressionable, and aspirational.<sup>24</sup> This propels ballet and the ballerina, with their traditional ‘high-art’ associations, into a wider dialogue about female body image and psychoanalysis, illustrating the societal pressures to which young women are already commonly subject. Bordo’s argument is especially adaptable to today’s society, where social media, celebrity culture, and the plastic surgery and body modification promoted by such platforms, have combined to increase the immediacy and naturalisation of such female images. My intention therefore is not to focus on the ballerina narrative as a ‘dance film’ – indeed *Suspiria* has very little *dancing* in it. Rather, the ballerina’s subjective,

<sup>21</sup> Douglas Rosenberg, *Screendance: Inscribing the Ephemeral Image* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 44.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Susan Bordo, ‘Anorexia Nervosa: Psychopathology as the Crystallisation of Culture’, in *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (California: University of California Press, 2003), pp. 139–64 (p. 139).

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, p. 142.

psychological distress – with which the spectator is encouraged to identify – is meaningfully associated with her repressive conditions, as well as her relationship with, and the destruction and punishment of, the body. The ballerina in horror thus demands further analysis in the broader context of – and as a veritable metaphor for – female identity, not least as it has been, and continues to be, historically denied and confined by patriarchal, dualistic ideologies.

### **The Jungian Ballerina: Role-As-Persona and Body-As-Shadow**

The aforementioned systems that engender damage to and detachment from the female body are particularly problematic when we consider that female selfhood has been historically tied to the body. As Luce Irigaray argues, ‘women [cannot] articulate their [psychological distress,] they suffer [it] directly in their body’, unable to produce signifiers that create a distance between the body and self.<sup>25</sup> I argue, however, that the use of subjective horror-fantasy features does in fact allow for such an articulation, especially when one reads the protagonist’s fragmented selfhood as potentially representative of the Jungian *unconscious*. The ballerina’s psychological instability in *Suspiria* is conflated with her inability to control and define her individual identity away from what Fraleigh refers to as the ‘aesthetically constituted’ bodily requirements of her ballet role, and of her repressive environment. This, in Jung’s conception, goes against the ‘proper’ development of the psyche and its attainment of individual subjectivity, which is reliant upon the ‘individuation process’ and appropriate renouncement of the ‘persona’, the ‘persona’ being the outward, ideal ‘social face’ or ‘mask’ that one projects and performs in public society.<sup>26</sup> This model poses a particular problem for the ballerina, as her value is defined in her performance as the persona and thus the performance-of-self. Here, the female subject has been conditioned to reject the distanced subjectivity necessary to define her selfhood against, which means she cannot define her private self separately from the public performance. Lydia Linnehan argues that, when professional identities are based on the performance of their bodies, ‘[w]e develop the ego in such a way that it becomes identified with the persona [...] at the expense of cultivating a relationship and feeling with ourselves [...] [as the body] becomes the carrier of myth’.<sup>27</sup> This corresponds to Irigaray’s hypothesis that woman ‘enjoys a closeness with the other that

<sup>25</sup> Luce Irigaray, ‘Women’s Exile: An Interview with Luce Irigaray’, trans. by Couze Penn, *Ideology and Consciousness*, 1 (May 1977), 62-76 (p. 74).

<sup>26</sup> Anthony Stevens, *Jung: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 63.

<sup>27</sup> Lydia Lennihan, ‘The Dark Feminine in Aronofsky’s *The Wrestler*’, in *Jung and Film II: The Return: Further Post-Jungian Takes on the Moving Image*, ed. by Christopher Hauke and Luke Hockley (London: Routledge, 2011), pp. 243-52 (p. 244).

is so near she cannot possess it any more than she can possess herself'; instead, she 'over-identifies' with it, and the female look demands that she 'become' the ideal image.<sup>28</sup>

To achieve this 'individuation', the 'shadow' – encompassing the repressed dark and unlawful desires of the ego – that manifests in our unconscious dreams must be confronted. This is necessary to create a balance between those 'internal and external worlds' of the conscious and unconscious; doing so makes possible a deeper understanding of 'all aspects' of the self.<sup>29</sup> As the aforementioned dualistic, patriarchal ideologies of ballet, and indeed the male gaze, encourage repression and constraint of the body's – potentially abject – inner physical functions, it is helpful here to employ J. P. Conger's conception of the 'body-as-shadow'. Conger asserts that the body – like the shadow – is that which 'hides beneath clothes often blatantly [expressing] what we consciously deny'.<sup>30</sup> This is a useful concept, as the ballerina's clean and immaculate performing persona denies and restricts the possibility of the heavy, messy, and inherently breakable nature of the body beneath the perfected exterior. This has wider ramifications for *Suspiria*'s ballerina as, in her attempt to fulfil the ballerina ideal, she is presented, through the film's fantastic elements, as unable to control, or even entirely *separated* from the body, a body that constitutes her professional, aspirational identity but that is simultaneously suppressed. The protagonist's fragmented subjectivity is intercut with grotesque murder sequences, which are, I argue, psychoanalytically representative of the ballerina's fears, externally projected onto other victimised female bodies, and are indicative of culturally conditioned female 'alienation' from and distorted perception of the body through horror fantasy. We see this issue articulated again in *Black Swan*, as the protagonist Nina Sayers' psychological fragmentation springs from her desperation to perfect archetypally opposed female roles – the virginal 'White Swan', and the seductive shadow-double 'Black Swan' – in *Swan Lake*. Nina's fantastic subjectivity manifests her own malevolent doubles, literally embodying her split psyche and bodily detachment, unable to distinguish her personal and private identity from the professional and public.

Such 'alienation' bears striking resemblance to what Bordo describes as the psychopathology of eating disorders and body dysmorphia, experiencing the body 'as alien,

<sup>28</sup> Irigaray, 'The Sex Which is Not One', trans. by Claudia Reeder, in *New French Feminisms*, ed. by Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1980), pp. 99-106 (pp. 104-05).

<sup>29</sup> John Izod, 'The Quest of a Female Hero: *The Silence of the Lambs*', in *Myth, Mind, and the Screen: Understanding the Heroes of Our Time* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 105-23 (p. 105).

<sup>30</sup> J. P. Conger, *Jung and Reich: The Body as Shadow* (California: North Atlantic Books, 2005), p. 107.

as the not-self, the not-me [...] as mechanical in its operations as a machine'.<sup>31</sup> Bordo asserts that when '[t]he body is the enemy [...] willed control brings about a sense of duality in the organism, [and] of consciousness [...] [and] the attempt to subdue the spontaneities of the body [...] only succeeds in constituting them as more alien and more powerful'.<sup>32</sup> This 'duality' is articulated in *Suspiria*'s employment of cross-identification between victim and killer, demonstrating how repressed inner functions – presented through the excessive blood spillage and mutilation – create fragmentation between the body and mind. The ballerina, as the archetypal repressed and idealised body, is thus the epitomical foil for the shadow self, which, through the film's fantastic horror features, becomes a fully formed malevolent assertion of repressed bodily fears and desires. The presence of the Jungian archetypes of the 'persona' and 'shadow' allows for the female protagonist to experience, as John Izod has argued, the (traditionally male) active hero's narrative, the 'journey into the underworld' that symbolises the confrontation with the shadow:

[He] leaves the daylight world of the ego to descend into the dark underworld, the symbolic realm of the unconscious. There he faces extreme danger or defies a monster [...] [and] must [then] return to the world. [This process symbolises] his separation from his earlier state of unconsciousness [by] confront[ing] and break[ing] the mould of his unconscious dispositions [...] [and finally emerging] renewed from this encounter with his innermost self [...] becoming more of his own person.<sup>33</sup>

With *Suspiria*'s representation of a young, adolescent female protagonist on the cusp of maturation, this 'journey' to establish her identity becomes even more significant. The ideals of femininity that surround her, as well as the repression and trauma of her physical body, become, I argue, a metaphor for the fraught process of a woman's attempt – or inability – to develop a singular identity within a sphere that perpetuates an unattainable and collective physical ideal. The psychological fragmentation of the ballerina occurs as the forces surrounding her render her objective distance from the object-ideal unachievable, as she is unable properly to define her individual identity away from the persona she performs as. In turn, the human limitations of her physical body are repressed by these forces in order for her to fulfil the immaculate image-ideal of the 'clean and proper body'; her shadow emerges as the relegated forms of her individual identity struggling to break free.

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<sup>31</sup> Bordo, p. 145.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, pp. 145-46.

<sup>33</sup> Izod, p. 105.

### **Broken Mirrors, Broken Minds: Shattering the ‘Male Gaze’ and the Stage-Screen of Nightmares**

Through the ballerina protagonist’s shifting subjectivity in *Suspiria*, in a space where fantasy and reality become indistinguishable, the body is at once absent and present to spectatorial proximity through graphic horror spectacle as well as emotional identification. The ballerina’s vision, and her vision of herself, is continuously obscured and distorted by the objectifying and dehumanising systems that surround her (systems both in and of the film), thereby revealing the ideologies and cinematic features that manipulate and ultimately destabilise her selfhood. However, it is in the precarious boundary between dreams and the ‘real’ that the protagonist is in fact able to articulate, and even assert, her anxieties surrounding her increasingly controlled identity. This encourages a similarly fragmented subject position for the spectator, whose spatial relation to the (female) image is constantly in flux, as the present ‘reality’ – defined dualistically by logic, reason, and control – gives way to the female-centric fantastic. The boundary between the ‘internal world’ (in Izod’s terms) of the protagonist’s psyche versus her ‘external’ surroundings – as well as the boundary between the cinematic frame and its audience – are thus rendered unstable.

*Suspiria*’s young American protagonist, Suzy Bannion, as we are told from the opening narration, ‘decided to perfect her ballet studies in the most famous school of dance’ in Germany. A series of gruesome murders take place connected with the school and Suzy suspects not only the involvement of her teachers, but that they are a coven of evil witches. The film actively highlights and undermines patriarchal mechanisms, most notably through a subversive *matriarchal* ballet environment, as well as through its Jungian dimensions – specifically, the psychosexual nature of the supernatural imagery that articulates female identity-anxieties.

The opening sequence aligns the spectator with Suzy’s fragmented perspective through a series of shot-reverse-shots as she journeys to the ballet school by taxi and, through an obscured, rain-lashed window, sees a student flee into the stormy night. In the next sequence, the spectator is positioned with the unknown student attempting to escape from some fantastic force in the school; the camera is behind her in a wide shot as she examines her reflection in a bathroom mirror. It is then suddenly positioned outside the window, and a strange, rasping breathing is heard; once again positioned behind the victim, we see a black-gloved hand burst through the glass and smash the girl’s face against the mirror before she is stabbed repeatedly. This suggests that the victim’s self-image is her greatest enemy, in a

visual metaphor of a woman slamming against her own reflection. An extreme close up shows the phallic knife penetrating her oozing, open heart and she is finally suspended by a chord, at the centre of an elaborate wide shot, in an ornate pink and white foyer. Similarly, a later murder sequence within the school shows a frightened young woman attempting to escape – through a high air vent – from the locked room into which the same black-gloved killer is forcing entry. Long-duration shots slowly and agonisingly build tension, as she desperately stacks boxes to reach the vent, and – just as the door handle lifts – successfully makes it into the next room, only to fall into a great mass of barbed wire, which she can only move through by physically torturing her body. The spectator is then interpolated as the killer as the same hands reach out from behind the camera to slash the victim's throat, and blood pours in close up. These sequences present violence towards women as a prolonged aesthetic spectacle, as the spectator shares in both the distress of the victim and the pleasure of the anticipated, gory kill, with the killer as disembodied subject. However, it is later revealed that the killers are in fact *female*; consequently, the deliberate (gendered) stylistics of (traditionally male) violence – strikingly similar to the killers of aforementioned scopophilic slashers – ultimately refute such a reading, and subvert gendered power relations.<sup>34</sup> Through this shifting spectatorial-spatial alignment between victim and murderer, the boundary established in Mulvey's model between (male) subject and (female) object is destabilised.

In keeping with this reversal, the ballet school is governed by older women, Miss Tanner and Madame Le Blanc, and it is the men who are both physically and professionally subordinate to them. As Reich rightly observes, these characters – the young mute boy, the blind pianist, and the facially deformed butler – are 'dependent' on the women.<sup>35</sup> They are all defined by their inability to assert and control their bodies and attain an image-ideal, while the women are strict and gestapo-like ballet teachers in power suits, both embodying and insisting upon a regimental physical style in dance rehearsal. The pianist is (literally) unable to assert his gaze upon the ballerina bodies that his music dictates. The ballet school thus acts as an inversion of the social order which, for Jacqueline Reich, is a metaphor for the masculine threat of castration; she writes, 'what is truly terrifying is the untamed woman, threatening the stability of the patriarchal hegemony'.<sup>36</sup> Reich's argument however ignores the subversive potential of the protagonist's subjectivity as a manifestation of the ballerina's *female* anxieties. I feel it is no accident that the site of torture and mutilation happens to be a

<sup>34</sup> This twist is seen throughout Argento's oeuvre, for example in *The Bird with the Crystal Plumage*, dir. by Dario Argento (Titanus, 1970).

<sup>35</sup> Reich, p. 92.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid*, p. 90.

ballet school, and Suzy's ultimate discovery and destruction of the witches – intercut with the aforementioned grotesque murder scenes – juxtaposes her distorted subjectivity with continual bodily dismemberment, both murderous and balletic. This encourages the spectator to confront their viewing relationship with and to the female image, as we are alternately positioned at a distance from and then identifying with the persecuted ballerina body.

It is especially significant that we first witness Suzy's fragmented perception, and suggestions of the supernatural, at the precise moment that she is encouraged to submit to a ballerina image-ideal. In the rehearsal room, the costumes and wide frame means that male bodies and female bodies become indistinguishable in tight, white and black leotards, all with long hair and tights that visually erase genitalia; a series of immaculate, slender figures lacking any differential identity surround Suzy, leaping and stretching elegantly. She is visually differentiated with her petite stature, unkempt curls, and cardigan tied around her waist, which breaks up her streamlined form; in this scene, she is also distinguished by her 'strong will', refusing Madame's invitation to board at the academy. In the next scene, she walks down a corridor and, through a shot-reverse-shot, we see a strange old woman and pale young boy, both still and staring at Suzy inexplicably and unblinkingly from a doorway, depicted as an uncanny subversion of mother and child. This is accompanied by a tinkling score and by erratic, ominous whispering, as the camera tracks closer, with an ethereal, floating quality, in time with Suzy's footsteps. The old woman holds a triangular object that reflects a blinding white light, as the voices whisper 'witch!'; this momentarily obscures Suzy's – and thus the spectator's – vision, prompting her to become visibly faint and pallid as she steadies herself on the wall. This disturbing confrontation with a quasi-supernatural threat, and Suzy's inability to control her perception, is presented at the very moment when her body is dictated by outside forces through the balletic choreography.

When she returns to ballet class, Miss Tanner calls out the numbered tempo of the steps, tapping out the beat with military precision, using her phallic cane; here, vertical lines dominate the space of the ballet studio, emphasising the repressive, regimented nature of the dancing. Suzy complains that she feels 'a little weak' and we see her face reflected in the studio mirror, as if to signify her split self. Her footing becomes increasingly unsteady as she flails and wobbles languidly, unable to keep to the tempo; the group moves from one side of the room to the other and the dancers are visually cut off at their torso in an objectifying medium shot. Miss Tanner does not, however, permit Suzy to stop, forcing her to keep dancing until she collapses. At this point, a crane shot positions the spectator in an omniscient

position looking down upon her unconscious form, as though Suzy's soul had left her body in that moment; she looks uncannily inhuman, at once corpse-like and doll-like, her legs splayed and spindly. Suzy's obscured perception is therefore conflated with her bodily detachment and dehumanisation when she is ordered to perform as a dancer.

This fragmentation also evokes Tzvetan Todorov's conception of the 'fantastic', which encourages spectators to 'hesitate' over the legitimacy of the images onscreen. As Rosemary Jackson asserts, in the fantastic mode, 'the apparent security of the known and everyday world [becomes] something more strange [...] [so that] the status of what is being seen and recorded as "real" is constantly in question'.<sup>37</sup> Here, Suzy's surrender to some 'outside force' coincides with the physical effects of stress and emotional turmoil. Aligning these features with the narrative of bodily mutilation allows for the violence of the disembodied, pleasure-looking gaze to be highlighted on multiple levels in the ballet school. Indeed, these murder sequences were presumably carefully choreographed, as well as staged and shot in grand, colourful locations for maximum visual appeal, much like dance. The concept of Todorovian hesitation is important here as it highlights the *psychological* dimensions of Suzy's visions, presenting how features of the fantastic are able to visually illustrate and centralise Suzy's mental state, reasserting the female subject's interiority away from external body-image repression.

This distorted perception, and instances of the supernatural, are shot through Argento's signature lurid lens, using bright, kaleidoscopic filters of primary colour and highly saturated 'ASA film stock', which produces a visually unreal quality, especially with the film's setting in a red, baroque gothic mansion.<sup>38</sup> In Mary McDonagh's words, this establishes a 'mind-boggling artificiality' and 'opium-dream' state, as well as highlighting the fairy-tale duality between innocent Suzy and the evil witches.<sup>39</sup> Argento stressed that he wanted the school's production design to reflect 'the point-of-view of a child', with high door handles for example, to 'reduce [the actresses to] adolescents', creating a physically oppressive atmosphere of 'primal' fear, such as with the aforementioned barbed-wire room.<sup>40</sup> This idea can be further examined through the application of Izod's Jungian unconscious nightmare-narrative framework of the 'hero's journey'. The potentiality for this reading is emphasised when Suzy is drugged by the school's physician following her fainting spell; shots of her fitful sleep are significantly intercut with shots of her friend Sarah as a fleeing

<sup>37</sup> Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 34.

<sup>38</sup> Mendik. p. 117.

<sup>39</sup> McDonagh, p. 123.

<sup>40</sup> Alan Jones, *Dario Argento: The Man, the Myths, and the Magic* (Surrey: FAB Press, 2004), p. 81.

murder victim, suggesting a fantastic, subjective projection of Suzy's own unconscious bodily anxieties.

While Patricia MacCormack argues that Suzy has no discernible 'character arc', I propose that she experiences the Jungian 'journey', culminating in the final confrontation with her unconscious 'shadow', in the form of the coven's 'Black Queen' Helena Markos, down the winding corridors of the ballet school and into the dark recesses of her bedroom, a significantly sexual site.<sup>41</sup> This can be seen as acting as a metaphor for her unconscious psychosexual discovery and the gothic return of the repressed, through the red and pink pathways of her brain's inner circuitry, pumping and pulsating with the paranoid, whispering frenzy of Goblin's score. Indeed, Suzy begins the narrative as a signifier of child-like repression, a naïve young girl entering a foreign land, dressed in virginal white in the opening airport sequence. The school, however – with its flashing lights and exotic-flower wall-art – also represents a veritable hothouse of gossip, raging hormones, and sexual maturation. For example, live maggots fall from the ceiling, in a striking image of festering sins and innocence corrupted; we also see Suzy's flirtatious exchange with Madame's nephew, as another student remarks, 'you've caught one. Look at him blushing!'. The ballet school is therefore an inherently fragmented space, expressing both bodily suppression *and* sexual liberation, encouraging Suzy's internal fragmentation, which in turn prompts her to question her identity as a maturing woman.

Suzy lacks an individual identity of her own, defined merely by being 'very pretty', and by her aunt's previous success at the academy. However, suspecting the teachers' involvement in Sarah's mysterious disappearance (and their true identity as witches), she discovers a secret lair by covertly counting out *their* steps, which she retraces to the Directress, Helena Markos' room, ultimately reclaiming through her own ingenuity the dancing regimen that dictated her body. Along the way, from her point of view, we are shown close ups of raw meat chopped in the kitchen, and doors decorated with shapes resembling the lips of a vagina and an ornamental flower, symbols of carnality and, potentially, the loss of virginity. This suggests the appearance of the 'shadow' in *Suspiria*, and once she reaches the room, this is precisely what Suzy sees, in the form of a silhouette behind a gauzy curtain, whose wheezing, bestial snores seem unnaturally separate from the body in their loud, extra-diegetic nature. It is an image of a perverse 'Sleeping Beauty', an archetype traditionally defined as the ultimate image of passivity, and also a prominent character for the prima

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<sup>41</sup> Patricia MacCormack, interviewed in the documentary short, *Fear at 400 Degrees: The Cine-Excess of Suspiria*, dir. by Xavier Mendik (Nouveaux Pictures, 2009).

ballerina on the popular stage. Suzy pulls back the curtain, wielding a spine from a peacock ornament's plumage to stab the sleeping figure, but there is nothing there. Sarah, the previous murder victim, suddenly appears from the doorway in a presumably possessed, dead form; she laughs manically, walking towards Suzy, covered in blood and holding a knife. Suzy stabs the empty space on the bed, on which flashes the outline of some vaguely human shape; we then see a series of grotesque extreme close-up shots of charred, rotted body parts – a croaking mouth, eyes, clawed hands – and finally the phallic object piercing through the strange matter. These shots are intercut with the shrinking, fading projection of the dead Sarah. Suzy then escapes the ballet school, in defiance of the female roles and bodily expectations set forth by the repressive elder generation, through her teachers and aunt, which Markos embodies.

This scene can therefore be read as symbolising Suzy's renouncement of the Jungian persona in Izod's model. She ultimately destroys the definitive image of a dehumanised, passive female body, and in the form of the Directress of the school no less, whose corpse-like, vanishing, and astrally projected appearance erased all traces of her identity, rendering it interchangeable and intangible in its spectrality. Markos can only fully assert her power by using a separate ventriloquised female figure to do her bidding, in a perverse, matriarchal reimagining of the female automaton and the ballet-teacher/student relationship shown, for example, in *The Red Shoes*, where Boris Lermontov, the ballet company's impresario, controls and manipulates his young ingénue, Vicky Page. This patriarchal dynamic is repeated in *Black Swan*, via ballet teacher Thomas Leroy, who treats his dancers as both professionally and sexually disposable.<sup>42</sup>

In *Suspiria*, when the entire coven and the school are destroyed along with Markos, Suzy exits the building as it burns behind her in the final wide shot. Suzy quite literally emerges from an 'underworld', metaphorically 'renewed' as she is drenched by the rain; she smiles blissfully, walking confidently out into the elements, in distinct contrast to her frightened state arriving at the school in the opening storm sequence. It seems that she has successfully achieved 'individuation', having destroyed her 'shadow' and fulfilled the role of Izod's active-female hero. In *The Red Shoes* and *Black Swan* respectively, both ballerina protagonists instead die the same tragic death as their respective starring ballet roles, having 'over-identified', as Irigaray stated, and ultimately transformed into the patriarchally

<sup>42</sup> See for instance, *The Tales of Hoffmann* (1951), the ballet film based on E. T. A. Hoffmann's 'The Sandman' (1816), in which a devious inventor controls his wind-up automaton, 'Olympia', to trick the infatuated male protagonist into thinking it a human woman.

conditioned personas they strive to perfect and perform.<sup>43</sup> This suggests that Suzy's *matriarchal* environment allows her to accomplish what other ballerina protagonists cannot. Furthermore, Markos' demise does not simply act as a misogynistic obliteration of female power, as in Reich's model, as Suzy in fact destroys an archetype associated with *male* oppression: the witch. While Suzy kills a house full of matriarchs, the notion of burning women believed to be witches actually transforms a historical event of patriarchal prejudice and persecution into an assertion of individual female independence and rejection of body-image control. Consequently, *Suspiria*'s feminist resolution remains decidedly ambivalent. Suzy's actions, however, ultimately allow her to self-define her power and potential beyond these female roles, ultimately befitting the individuation resolution in becoming '[her] own person', in Izod's terms.

The ballerina protagonist's subjectivity is therefore encouraged to fragment when expected to fulfil the contradictory values of dance – that is, to express her individual subjectivity yet to do it within the repressive confines of the choreography, as her persona and for an audience. These instances are marked with supernatural ambiguity and distorted perception, through which the shadow emerges. The shadow is rendered transgressive – not because 'the female-look (and by extension her body) [is dangerous and] must be [...] destroyed', as Reich posits – but because both have been systematically denied and repressed by pervading patriarchal ideologies.<sup>44</sup> The spectator is drawn into the fragmented mind of the ballerina as her dance, and its potential for individual expression, comes up against the systems that have engendered the persona and its distance as signifier. *Suspiria*'s ending therefore suggests that the search for the female ideal, through performing femininity, is an impossible, damaging endeavour, critiquing the effect of Bordo's prolific 'whiteness, lightness and slenderness' ideology upon the bodies of those who consume it in popular culture more broadly. Furthermore, by making the deaths of Suzy's fellow dancers so spectacularly *bloody*, the myth of the clean, pure totality of the subject is revealed as itself nothing more than a staged illusion, as the human body's ultimate limitations are graphically dramatised. It is therefore necessary to examine the film's body-horror features, which further destabilise the subject/object spectatorship boundary.

<sup>43</sup> In one scene, *Black Swan*'s Nina is shown literally, and painfully, transforming into a swan. For example, her neck elongates, and her toes web into the rigid, animalistic configuration of a pointe shoe in body-fragmenting close ups.

<sup>44</sup> Reich (p. 90) cites Linda Williams, 'When the Woman Looks', in *The Dread of Difference: Gender and the Horror Film*, ed. by Barry Keith Grant (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996), pp. 15-34.

### **The Bloody Ballerina: Physical Spectatorship and the Abject**

The ballerina's inability to control her own identity, and the emergence of her shadow, is conflated with eruptions and disruptions of the body's inner functions. These eruptions stage an ongoing transgression of the ideal, dualistic, 'clean and proper' subject; as Kristeva states, bodily excess must be 'lost', that is to say repressed and distanced, in order for the body-as-image to be symbolised.<sup>45</sup> Idealised feminine identity is thereby detached from the urges and limitations of the physical, with their fluid, grotesque, and sexual potential. As Emilyn Claid observes, this ideology is reinforced in ballet choreography, encouraging the 'fight against the falling expanse of the flesh':

[Bodies] destined to be shaped into the ideal [...] to appear anatomically gender-less [and] stripped of any identifiable sexual signs: roundness of hips and breasts, dangling dicks and fleshy behinds. The possibility of transformation was essential for entrance [into the prestigious ballet schools] – aspiring to a higher truth of beauty [...].<sup>46</sup>

This 'truth' promotes a singular, slender ideal, as Bordo has noted, where 'the semiotic language is structured to distance and disdain the body and its internal functions'.<sup>47</sup> Its various appetites must be controlled and punished accordingly as, in the psychopathology of eating disorders, 'thinness represents a triumph of the will over the body [...] associated with "absolute purity, [...] [and] transcendence of the flesh"', in order to retain an ideal childlike, virginal impenetrability.<sup>48</sup> In the Jungian framework, the body's repressed development in adolescence simultaneously affects the psyche, stunting the individuation process by performing the ideal body-image persona; this is especially pertinent to young Suzy's 'journey' into maturation.

In much horror-film scholarship, the abject female body – that which must be repressed – is figured as a feature of *male* panic, as a manifestation of an othered threat to the (masculine) subject.<sup>49</sup> I argue instead that abject imagery and engagement with physical spectatorship in *Suspiria* has the ability to dismantle the boundary between subject and object, by drawing attention to the ballerina body as 'reduced to abject matter', as Laura Wilson argues in her work on female subjectivity and the mutilation film. This in turn dismantles the physical boundary between the protagonist's internal and external self. Wilson uses Marks' hypothesis to propose that a film's sound and texture have the ability to extend

<sup>45</sup> Kristeva, p. 102.

<sup>46</sup> Emilyn Claid, *Yes? No! Maybe...: Seductive Ambiguity in Dance* (London: Routledge 2006), p. 20.

<sup>47</sup> Bordo, p. 139.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.* p. 148.

<sup>49</sup> See, for example, Barbara Creed, 'Kristeva, Femininity, Abjection', in *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 8-15; and Reich.

the spectator's experience *beyond* the image 'through senses other than sight' to 'forcefully and aggressively [generate] a physical response'.<sup>50</sup> She continues,

Certain sounds have textures that generate a sense of physicality in the listener [...] the sound of breathing is haptic because it inspires the sense-memory of air moving through the chest and mouth, and across the skin, thereby pointing to the viewer's own corporeality as a breathing subject.<sup>51</sup>

Here the spectator 'shifts from [a position of] the voyeuristic [...] to one that engages with the film through embodiment, thereby calling into question the [traditionally gendered] distinction [and distance] between viewer and film [image].'<sup>52</sup>

In *Suspiria*, Suzy's fragmented perception coincides with her inability to control her inner bodily functions in her aforementioned first ballet rehearsal; when she flounders and collapses, there is an extreme close up of blood trickling out of her nose. The academy's doctor tells her that 'tiny tears in the ligaments' caused 'haemorrhaging'; thus, Suzy's abjection spills out within the very scenario in which she was instructed to repress it, to keep in time and form with the other ballerinas. She is prescribed red wine, with its sacramental, blood-like connotations, suggesting the school's attempt to regulate her bodily functions *internally*, encouraging a 'transcendence of flesh' through submission to some higher authority, in a gothic subversion of Christian communion. Elsewhere in the film, the most prominent instances of bodily grotesquery are of course in the murder and mutilation sequences, which confront the spectator with uncompromising images of distressed and dismembered female bodies in and around the ballet environment. This reminds the spectator once again of the ballerina body's inherent breakability and fluidity, as well as the subjugated nature of the ballerina's identity, reduced as it has been to the physical. As Wilson observes, 'the mutilated wound image is the self in deterioration; having been attacked by an outside force, penetrated and mutilated it continues to fragment'.<sup>53</sup> In *Black Swan*, besides the audio's general emphasis on physicality through extra-diegetic sounds of bone cracking, skin ripping, and heavy footfalls in rehearsals, drawing attention to the heft and fragile realities of the ballerina body, a central haptic-abject feature of the protagonist's fragmented subjectivity is self-inflicted wounds, in line with Bordo's argument about societal pressures and mental health. The severity of these acts are discovered later, by both Nina and by the aligned

<sup>50</sup> Laura Wilson, *Spectatorship, Embodiment, and Physicality in the Contemporary Mutilation Film* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p. 61.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 65.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 71-72.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 49.

spectator, as though committed, beyond her conscious perception, by her aforementioned ‘Black Swan’ shadow, reflecting both her bodily alienation and the self-punishment associated with abject inner-functions and ballet’s physical refinement. This corresponds with Irigaray’s assertion that the female subject’s psychological fears and fragmentation are experienced *in* the body, which, for Suzy, become externally manifested through the (literally) disintegrating abject bodies of the female murder victims. As elements of Suzy’s psyche are projected onto other girls, the image of the self is fragmented further, demonstrating, in Wilson’s terms, *Suspiria*’s protagonist physically and mentally ‘splitting-up into multiple parts she cannot contain or possess’.<sup>54</sup> These images consequently undermine the spectator’s own certainty regarding their own subjective selfhood in relation to the onscreen image, as this self is no longer held at an impenetrable distance. The abject, pulpy wetness of the bleeding wounds, in extreme close up, haptically generates the sense-memory of touching one’s own, too-close inner fluids.<sup>55</sup>

There are also notable instances of haptic visuality through the film’s audio, particularly with the disembodied representation of the witches during the murders, signalled only by the black-gloved hands and the aforementioned whispering score that periodically hisses ‘witch!’. This draws attention to the *lack* of a body image to accompany these whispers, emphasising the film’s tendency towards Todorovian ‘hesitation’ regarding the supernatural. The female threat is thus rendered simultaneously subjective and objective, ubiquitous and invisible, as the sound here seems to come from *within* the paranoid subjectivity of the victim and, by extension, the spectator aligned with them. Wilson observes ‘[the] invasive nature of sound as it appears to originate from within [...]. [Vision] presents the world at a distance, as outside your body, whereas sound penetrates into your body.’<sup>56</sup> Argento himself identified fear as something felt inside the spectator’s body as a ‘370 degree centigrade body temperature. With *Suspiria* I wanted 400 degrees’; the tagline of the film’s promotional material also reads: ‘the sound of fear ... you’ll experience it when you see *Suspiria*’.<sup>57</sup> Here, giallo’s ability to cross the subject/object, spectator/film boundary, both visually and audibly, encourages subjective alignment and physical embodiment *with* – rather than being a mere spectacle *of* – the female victim and her body. In addition, the guttural snoring of Markos’ silhouette seems to extend beyond the film’s diegesis in its otherworldly loudness, which is discordant with Markos’ position, at a distance, in the frame, highlighting

<sup>54</sup> Wilson, p. 69.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid, p. 49.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid, p. 81.

<sup>57</sup> Dario Argento, interviewed in *Fear at 400 Degrees*.

technique that positions her as both corporeal and spectral. Indeed, when Suzy defiantly stabs Markos' *image*, it fully corporealises into the aforementioned charred, fleshy form and can then be destroyed, just as Suzy reclaims her own bodily identity. This suggests that, in doing so, Suzy has exposed, and successfully freed herself from, the ballerina ideal by forcefully solidifying its mortal materiality, thereby refusing the ethereal, impenetrable 'lack' of presence that conventionally defines that ideal.

### **Conclusion**

*Suspiria*'s engagement with both conventional and non-conventional spectatorship, as well as the fragmented subjectivity of its protagonist, ultimately reveals the problematic paradox of dance for the female dancer. Dance entails private movement through a body that exists within wider hegemonic and – traditionally patriarchal – signifying systems that hinder individual expression. This film has the potential to expose the instability of the (male) subject's control over his own fixed 'clean and proper body' promoted on screen, as well as the body of the passive, female image as the object of his gaze. The narrative also acts as metaphor for the ways in which viewing the female body has been constructed and conditioned more broadly, using mutilation to criticise the social conditioning of women's identity development, defined by and reduced to their physical value. Irigaray's argument that women cannot assert subjectivity, and are unable to produce signifiers that define themselves as *separate* from the image, is thus subverted by the ballerina in body-horror. This has the ability to renegotiate and undermine the traditional subject by revealing the limitations of the patriarchal realities that confine and construct the multi-layered performance-narrative of the feminine body.

Rather than the screen adding a supplementary layer of subject/object hierarchy for the dancing body, *Suspiria* allows it to act, not solely as a Lacanian mirror, but rather as a multi-sensory magnifying glass. It shows – through, audio-visual horror-fantasy distortions and haptic slippage between the ballerina and her nightmares, her body and its innards – the multiplicity of spectatorship beyond an unequivocally 'male' gaze. This encourages viewers to alter and confront *their* perceptions by drawing attention to the inescapable reality of their own fragile bodies, and can render them sympathetic to the distinctly female struggle to develop an individual identity outside of a collective, illusory, and ultimately unachievable cultural ideal.