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“I’m not crazy”: the history and development of the American gaslight film

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Thesis

**“I’M NOT CRAZY”:
THE HISTORY AND DEVELOPMENT
OF THE AMERICAN GASLIGHT FILM**

by

DANA WILLIAM ALSTON

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Approved by

First Reader

Lindsey Decker, Ph.D.
Master Lecturer of Film & Television

Second Reader

Roy Grundmann, Ph.D.
Associate Professor of Film Studies

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines portrayals of gaslighting toward women in American film. Gaslighting, a form of psychological manipulation that frequently targets women, has a long history in cinema, and narratives that foreground the practice have developed a series of narrative and stylistic conventions. These conventions frequently simplify the realities of psychological abuse toward women, representing gaslighting and its perpetrators with ideologically patriarchal undertones. Such undertones have changed over time, often in ways that reflect cultural and political shifts within American society. Gaslight films’ female protagonists have demonstrated more agency, while the perpetrators have grown steadily more monstrous as the subgenre shifted from a melodramatic to horrific mode. Using a genre studies approach to survey these constantly evolving tropes across three eras, I argue that the gaslight film is a subgenre that reflects growing attitudes toward and awareness of gender roles and psychological abuse towards women. Concerns involving representations of female agency and the ability of genres to concisely communicate hegemonic, patriarchal ideologies lie beneath this analysis.

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INTRODUCTION

Gaslighting is a form of psychological manipulation in which a person or group covertly sows seeds of doubt in a targeted individual or group, making them question their memory, perception, or judgment. The phenomenon has long been identified by psychologists and sociologists, but its label comes from cinema: George Cukor's 1944 Hollywood film *Gaslight* follows a woman being driven insane by her husband. The act has a long history of portrayal in American film stretching into the present day. That history brings with it several questions, primarily related to the consistency of tropes between "gaslight films," whether this group can be considered a genre or subgenre on its own, and how gaslighting-focused discourse in American society connects to these portrayals over time. With growing attention in mass media paid to gender-based disparities and everyday sexism, the topic of gaslighting remains prevalent. I use this thesis to examine films that feature the act of gaslighting against women, the history and form of its portrayals, and the development of these films as a *subgenre*. My primary goal is to define gaslight films as a subgenre of melodrama and horror unto their own, and to investigate the ideological effect this label and structure have on gaslight's place in American culture. To that end, I build primarily upon work in genre studies, employing close-reading strategies to three films from three eras in each of the chapters. These films have been selected due to their explicit portrayal of gaslighting, their embodiment or development of the gaslight film's tropes, and their broad generic definitions (mainly gothic melodramas or horror films).

To define gaslight's signs and effects as an introduction to the phenomenon, I first

turn to modern scholars in psychology and sociology (Kate Abramson, Theodore Dorpat, and Patricia Evans). Though relatively unrelated to this thesis' focus on gaslighting on film and as a popular cultural term, these perspectives are intended to lay a stable definitional groundwork upon which to build. In the simplest terms, they each provide a method of understanding how gaslighting happens. In "Turning Up The Lights On Gaslighting," Abramson defines it in relation to the film that popularized the name, singling out the antagonist's behavior as an embodiment of several signifiers. The phenomenon is "a form of emotional manipulation in which the gaslighter tries (consciously or not) to induce in someone the sense that her reactions, perceptions, memories and/or beliefs are...utterly without grounds" (Abramson 2-3). Crucially, it does not end at simple dismissal, and is instead "aimed at getting another not to take herself seriously as an interlocutor" during multiple incidents over "long periods." The target is frequently isolated, and others can either intentionally join the gaslighter or act as enabling bystanders. Abramson identifies a critical bias against women regarding gaslighting: women are frequent targets, and the perpetrators are frequently men. Some of this is because some forms of emotional manipulation "rely on the target's internalization of sexist norms," which they can enforce if successful. These norms helps characterize the practice's sexist undercurrents (mainly, the societal tendency to patronize or disbelieve women). This thesis focuses exclusively on gaslighting in film toward female characters because of said undercurrents. Abramson's writing is further illustrative of the popular conception of gaslighting; that is, it is generally understood to happen more to women than to men. There are films where men are gaslit such as Hitchcock's *North By*

Northwest (1959) or Fincher's *The Game* (1997), but altogether more films in which women are gaslit. This thesis' focus on films with female protagonists reflects that gendered disparity in sociological definitions, popular understanding, and representation.

Dorpat affirms that "studies of individuals and groups subjected to brainwashing show how the victims are first led to doubt or even reject their judgments at the same time they are pressured to follow and believe what their victimizer wants them to believe," and introduces the concept of physical abuse to accompany psychological abuse (Dorpat 35–44). Further paragraphs emphasize the ubiquity of these techniques, to the point that "most individuals have little understanding or awareness of the abuse they are exposed to in their families, their schools, and their workplaces." Dorpat's point about gaslighting's ubiquitous or assumed practice in society helps explain why so many characters turn a blind eye during gaslight films' narratives. Furthermore, gaslighting can be grouped with other forms of abuse and treated as a form of domestic violence. Patricia Evans supports this view. In *The Verbally Abusive Relationship*, Evans indirectly connects verbal abuse with gaslighting, writing that the former "by its very nature undermines and discounts its victim's perceptions...she is blamed by the abuser and becomes the scapegoat" (Evans 23). Evan's last clause, regarding the shifting of undeserved blame to the victim, reflects the depictions of gaslighting found throughout this thesis.

Film and gender studies scholar Diane Shoos solidifies the conflation between verbal abuse and gaslighting by studying depictions of domestic abuse in Hollywood film, following Evans' lead and grouping the two under domestic violence. Shoos

identifies a “stasis” at the heart of the domestic violence epidemic in the United States, using six films (including *Gaslight*) to characterize its depictions as “problematic” (Shoos). For example, *Sleeping With The Enemy* transforms violence against women “into pleasurable spectacle.” *What’s Love Got To Do With It* “avoids acknowledging the need of institutional support for battered women and intolerance for the multiple social inequities that make abuse possible in the first place.” These films “seem to sympathize with their protagonists and challenge myths about domestic violence,” but in reality “offer all-too-comfortable positions from which we can ‘see’ what we already assume about men as abusers [and] women as victims.” I use Shoos’s analysis as a starting point, taking some of her observations into account but zeroing in on a particular group of domestic violence films. The approaches are similar and integrate much of the same foundational scholarship found throughout. The specificity of this project allows for the gaslight film’s definition as a subgenre.

The questions that arise from the subgenre label are many-fold. The most immediate, “How does one define ‘genre’?” encourages a return to some of genre studies’ foundational scholars. Andrew Tudor’s “Genre” is a valuable starting point, not only because of its clear initial definition as a category of films that carry and repeat conventions but for its investigation and questioning of that definition. While the Western necessarily has a set of “crucial established conventions” and horror films may be grouped by their intention to frighten, Tudor bristles at both approaches, arguing for a method that relies on “common cultural consensus” (Tudor 4–10). Genre is perhaps best used “in the analysis of the relation between groups of films, the cultures in which they

are made, and the cultures in which they are exhibited.” Altman reflects these concerns, most classically, by defining a semantic and syntactic approach to film genre. Doing so necessarily identifies a gap in classic genre theory concerning the importance of historical genre development. If genres change over time (away from their “platonic ideals”), the theory concerning them must adapt similarly. To that end, Altman combines a semantic focus on literal signifiers (the building blocks) with syntactic examination of those signifiers’ collective arrangement within a text. Horror films include semantics like blood, guts, knives, etc., and films may arrange them into a particular syntactic theme. Over time, Altman recognized and explained a third, pragmatic approach, which takes industrial use of and audience response to genre into account. How a particular type of film is used or received may transform it into a genre (i.e., pragmatically) (Altman 2019). This approach indicates the importance of reception studies and industry studies, which I touch upon in my analysis. While this project’s scope does not allow for an in-depth discussion of industrial or audience-related contributions to the gaslight subgenre, these areas are ripe for additional study.

Robin Wood and Barry Keith Grant complete this thesis’ definitional genre foundation by positioning the term more directly in relation to ideology. Multiple scholars, including Wood and Grant, have suggested that “genres function as vehicles for ideologies in the form of ‘common sense’ beliefs and understandings about the social world” (Wood 1995, Grant 1995, Neale 2000, qtd. in Shoos). Wood clarifies this point by noting the “hopeless contradictions and unresolvable tensions” at work in Hollywood genre pictures, which allow their meanings and cultural significance to be constantly

negotiated over time, particularly by different auteurs (Wood 61). The following project seeks to define the gaslight film based on Altman's semantic and syntactic approach while tying that definition to emerging ideologies per Wood and Grant.

The gaslight film carries several conventions that have remained consistent throughout its history. The plot revolves around the type of gaslighting defined previously; there is almost always an "innocent" or inexperienced protagonist; the gaslighting occurs within a Gothic-coded domestic setting; there is an overtly nefarious male gaslighter usually defined by his romantic relationship with the protagonist and an alternative male character which helps the woman "out" of the gaslighting. The final man acts as an implied replacement for her evil husband by the film's end. These tropes are not absolute, and as conceptions of patriarchy, womanhood, agency, and feminism evolved, the gaslight film evolved with them.

I define "Gothic" based on work from Xavier Aldana Reyes and Lindsey Decker. Reyes argues that the Gothic genre's "distinctiveness lies in its reliance on specific Gothic atmospheres, settings, music, tropes or figures' meant to inspire or evoke feelings of dread, fright, disgust, and tension" (Aldana Reyes 388, qtd. in Decker 148). In gaslight films, these atmospheres and settings take the form of architectural spaces with pointed arches, columns, and darkened or chiaroscuro lighting. Each of these are notable features of Gothic fiction, and the aesthetic similarities help situate the gaslight film as an offshoot (or subgenre) of the Gothic. Furthermore, the Gothic world is "one wherein good struggles against evil, but it is also a world wherein the uncanny proliferates so that boundaries are constantly being questioned and shifted. Often, it is a world wherein evil

triumphs over good and where good has no hope of success because of fate or the continuing influence of the past. In those cases, when evil cannot be ameliorated or escaped, it can only be accepted” (Decker 148). This notion of inescapable evil proliferates scholarly conceptions of the Gothic romance film, a genre that established a number of conventions that the gaslight film would develop. Doane deconstructs the “woman’s film” of the 1940s and its relationship to the Gothic melodrama. The Gothic and the melodrama are frequently paired, according to Doane, because of their shared generic conventions. In particular, melodramas lean on “the externalization of internal emotions and their embodiment within the mise-en-scene or decor” as well as “the claustrophobia of the settings” (72). The same is frequently true of the Gothic. The characterization of the home as a Gothic space helps bring forth “paranoia and suspense,” which became indicative of Gothic filmmaking. Part of this paranoia is connected to defamiliarization of the home, or “a denaturalization of what is seemingly most familiar and most natural.” What is initially safe becomes evil as the protagonist loses her grip on her perception, and the domestic becomes explicitly claustrophobic (134–136).

Gaslight films began within the Gothic melodrama, replicating practically all of these tropes with little to no modification. But later films shifted toward the horror genre, imbuing their dread-filled atmospheres with the outright intent to inspire visceral fright and disgust. Though closely related in shared aesthetics, horror films frequently feature outright violence and a central monster to reflect psychological and political turmoil (Worland 44). Thus, as gaslight film’s villains became steadily more monstrous in behavior and appearance, they became a subgenre of horror rather than melodrama.

Chapter Two covers this transition.

Finally, and perhaps most crucially to the gaslight film, Waldman examines the Gothic's patriarchal ideology. By making the primary gaslighter an abusive-but-voluntary husband, gaslight films implicitly make their protagonists at fault for being gaslit. The presence of a second, less monstrous man who sweeps her off her feet at the end of these narratives "allows the narrative to suggest that the heroine has simply made a bad choice of mate" and fulfills what Waldman calls the "wrong man ideology." Though the first man is evil, the woman apparently "needs" another man to rebalance the patriarchal ideal of marriage (Waldman 35–36). The wrong man ideology is present in virtually every gaslight film examined in this thesis.

My positioning of gaslight films as a legitimate subgenre rests upon their relationship to the Gothic and their growth from multiple Hollywood film cycles, the definition of which comes from Klein. Cycles are "a series of films associated with each other through shared images, characters, settings, plots, or themes" but defined almost exclusively by their pragmatics (Klein 4–10). Their formation and length depend on their "financial viability as well as the public discourses circulating them, including film reviews, director interviews, studio-issued press kits, movie posters, theatrical trailers, and media coverage." Cycles usually last up to ten years before requiring an update to remain relevant. These are different from film clusters, which Leger Grindon was among the first to differentiate from cycles. If cycles present "a variable — often fresh — treatment of a genre's fundamental conflicts under the influence of a particular time, place, and circumstance," clusters are distinct because they fail to "generate a coherent

model or common motifs" despite some similarities between films made during the same period (Grindon 44–45). If gaslight films were simply about someone being gaslit, with no other identifiable semantic or syntactic conventions, it would be far-fetched to label them anything other than a cluster. But their listable and shared conventions make the first batch of gaslight films a cycle, which paves the way for its definition as a subgenre. A cycle “becomes generic when it extends beyond a particular company, character, or filmmaker, and its formula is replaced with variations across the film industry or the entertainment world.” Wallin offers further solidification for this framework by calling “the intermittent recurrence of recognizable cycles” the basis of genre studies (Wallin 3). By extension, cycles “are discursively and synchronically linked together into a broad category with little temporal specificity.”

For example, my first chapter posits that gaslight films began within a Gothic melodrama cycle in 1940s Hollywood, which established some visual and narrative tropes previously described. In describing the ways they conceive gaslighting tropes, including an upper-class Gothic setting, a young “inexperienced” woman as the protagonist, a husband or male figure with outright nefarious intentions, and endings that find the protagonist in the arms of another man, the chapter identifies their ideological adherence to patriarchy and the stage they set for further generic development. Hitchcock began the cycle with two films, *Rebecca* (1940) and *Suspicion* (1941), while George Cukor defined gaslighting itself with his paranoid Gothic melodrama *Gaslight* (1944). Finally, Joseph Lewis’s *My Name Is Julia Ross* (1946) offers a slight syntactic rearrangement, indicating the possibility for malleability within gaslight films going

forward.

The first cycle ended in 1949, but gaslighting tropes reemerged in the 60s within narratives and codings that were more reflective of the United States' politically and socially turbulent era. The second chapter focuses on three films that demonstrate the gaslight film's move from melodrama to horror-focused narratives during this period. *Midnight Lace* (1960) recalls the previous cycle in aesthetics and rearranges the tropes slightly to reintroduce them to a new audience. *Hush...Hush, Sweet Charlotte* (1964) sees the gaslight film not only expand the subgenre's narrative confines to include multiple gaslighters but also more openly embraces the gore and macabre stylings of horror. *Rosemary's Baby* (1967) more openly toxifies the marital relationship at the center of other gaslight films and reflects growing feminist sentiment through its critique of motherhood and female agency. It also completes the gaslight film's move from a subgenre of melodrama to a subgenre of horror.

From there, the gaslight film's popularity remained consistent within various genres (mainly psychological horror) and has undergone a renaissance during the aughts and 2010s, partially in the wake of movements such as fourth-wave feminism and #MeToo. The third chapter zeroes in on this contemporary cycle, in which the subgenre became self-reflexive. *Flightplan* (2005) moves the gaslight film's setting into a Gothic-coded public space, exemplifying broad skepticism toward women when multiple people inadvertently "join" the gaslighting scheme simply by not believing the protagonist. *Unsane* (2017) takes place inside a corrupt hospital and symbolically equates individual gaslighting with widespread institutional manipulation. *Invisible Man* (2020) rounds out

the project's filmography by combining horror and science fiction (demonstrating the gaslight film's malleability) while also indicating the continuing popularity of gaslighting narrative. Each of the films in these chapters develops the tropes, narrative structure, and underlying ideology of the gaslight film while moving between dominant "umbrella" genres. The second cycle in the 60s moved from Gothic melodrama into horror, while the third contemporary cycle demonstrated the gaslight film's mobility between horror, thriller, and science fiction.

These changes reflect my conception of the gaslight film as a transgeneric subgenre, defined by its ability to travel between genres while retaining its vital semantic elements. Films from one cycle may be predominantly Gothic and melodramatic because of their settings and narrative emphases. But gaslight films eventually integrated explicit violence, shock, monsters, and other features of the horror film. Deleyto helps define this sort of generic hybridity by noting the "constantly shifting nature of the generic system, in which genres are in a process of constant evolution" (Deleyto 225–227). Individual films use conventions from multiple genres to both exist within and contribute to the development of those genres. Each of the films surveyed in these chapters "borrows" from a variety of genres (primarily horror and the Gothic) and simultaneously contributes to the development of a new group of films I have identified (gaslight films). I examine that generic transition and tie it to shifting social concerns throughout this thesis.

There are gaps in this approach. The term "women" in scholarship too often addresses a narrow-minded definition of femininity and gender, namely that of white straight, cis, non-disabled women. This thesis falls prey to the same disproportionate

privileging, reflecting the casting of white, straight, cis, non-disabled women in gaslight films. It would be irresponsible not to acknowledge the shortcomings and the reality that a cisgender and heterosexual man approaches this topic with inherent limitations. I intend to give a broad view of gaslighting, which can affect women of all demographics in different ways, through the lens of American film, which has long foregrounded a narrowly conceived version of those demographics. The flaws in the approach are present, and my sincere hope is that future studies can correct them.

To characterize my close-reading approach, I use Carol Clover's survey of the slasher genre in *Men, Women, and Chainsaws*. Clover identifies six key "generic components" in the slasher film: a killer; a terrible place (in which the film is predominantly set); weapons (other than guns); victims; a Final Girl (the last survivor, who is almost always female); and shock. Clover dedicates a subsection to each component. For example, the Final Girl subsection investigates the female survivor's characterization in slasher films over time, introducing gender studies and film scholars while close-reading the films' climaxes. Clover writes that the "quality of the Final Girl's fight," which enables her "to survive what has become unsurvivable," imbues the standard hero archetype with "femaleness." Doing so radically shifts the slasher's gender politics (Clover 39–41). While my conclusions are unrelated beyond their broad connection to gender and genre, I borrow heavily from Clover's organization. Each chapter breaks down the gaslight film tropes in three separate pictures, close-reading scenes that demonstrate their adherence to generic expectations. For example, there is significant space dedicated to *My Name Is Julia Ross*' depiction of its Gothic upper-class

setting and climax, which sets the stage for generic development later.

It is my hope that gaslight films' classification as a subgenre shines a light on the fraught ideological proliferation they help foster. The films use a variety of tropes and signifiers to perpetuate myths not only about gaslighting but about domestic violence overall. While they perhaps raise awareness of the challenges, abuse, and general lack of belief women are faced with, they also offer easy solutions. As Grant notes, "no genre is inherently reactionary or progressive" (Grant 2010, 5). In Shoos' words, "such storylines may be intended to create a sense of agency for the abused woman, but they also make her solely responsible for her fate and relieve the larger society of responsibility" (Shoos 12). Gaslight films reinforce the dominant ideology's patriarchal blind spots even though they ostensibly "take women's side." In the following chapters, I intend to foreground one level of Hollywood's mass production of patriarchal ideology (a form of ideological gaslighting) through genre. Doing so opens possibilities for alternate representations of female empowerment and agency, intentionally making the reality of abuse visible to all.

CHAPTER ONE

Gaslighting in the Gothic Woman's Film of the 1940s

The gaslight film began, somewhat appropriately, with Alfred Hitchcock's professional emigration to Hollywood. The director (labeled "England's Best Director" and the "greatest master of melodrama in screen history" by LIFE Magazine in 1939) began his American career by laying the groundwork for the gaslight genre in a trio of Gothic romance films in the 1940s (Hellman). These films essentially jump-started the Gothic romance cycle of the 1940s, which saw virtually every studio bringing claustrophobic tales of doomed upper-class romance to the screen; this chapter alone features films from RKO, Columbia, and Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer. Diane Waldman, Mary-Ann Doane, and other scholars have noted several melodrama tropes within these films. The tropes' continuation outside of melodrama (and indeed, outside the cycle which essentially birthed them) indicates a generic and chronological malleability of convention. This chapter examines four films within that initial cycle, using Hitchcock's *Rebecca* (1940) as a starting point before continuing with *Suspicion* (1941, also Hitchcock), George Cukor's *Gaslight* (1944), and Joseph H. Lewis' *My Name Is Julia Ross* (1945). It describes how these films conceive and adhere to gaslighting tropes, including an upper-class Gothic setting, a young "inexperienced" woman as the protagonist, a husband or male figure with outright nefarious intentions, and endings that find the protagonist in the arms of another man.

Despite *Rebecca* being the first Gothic romance that a Hollywood powerhouse produced, the genre's long history stretches back centuries, beginning in 1794 with

Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*. The "female Gothic" peaked in popularity in the 19th century with novels by Anne Radcliffe, Mary Shelley, and Charlotte Brontë (Holland and Sherman 8). How the term "female Gothic" is defined and how useful this definition is remains contested. Generally, "female Gothic" describes novels written by women which foreground "domestic entrapment and female sexuality" (Ledoux 2). Given the chronological survivability of the genre, it appears inevitable that Hollywood would adapt it. But such certainty does not lessen the significance of the Hollywood Gothic romance in the 1940s, a film cycle that found great success with audiences. It also established film genre motifs related to identification, female spectatorship, and gaslighting. In this regard, Waldman's summary continues to ring true:

"The plots of films like *Rebecca*, *Suspicion*, *Gaslight*, and their lesser-known counterparts like *Undercurrent* and *Sleep My Love* fall under the rubric of the Gothic designation: a young inexperienced woman meets a handsome older man to whom she is alternately attracted and repelled. After a whirlwind courtship (72 hours in Lang's *Secret Beyond the Door*, two weeks is more typical), she marries him. After returning to the ancestral mansion of one of the pair, the heroine experiences a series of bizarre and uncanny incidents, open to ambiguous interpretation, revolving around the question of whether or not the Gothic male really loves her. She begins to suspect that he may be a murderer." (Waldman 28–29)

This chapter presupposes these narrative motifs and argues for their canonization as genre tropes that future films have both maintained and evolved.

Rebecca (1940)

Given Hitchcock's penchant for female identification and spectatorship, it seems appropriate for him to adapt a story in which the protagonist has no first name (Modleski 8). Mrs. de Winter, played by Joan Fontaine, is identified only by her relation to her husband; there is an absence of identification in the film's center. Through his use of close-ups and point-of-view shots, Hitchcock seeks to fill that absence with his audience. After the opening titles, the film begins with a medium shot of a towering iron gate, covered partially in shadow. Through voice-over, the protagonist Mrs. de Winter (who shall never be given a first name during the film) leads us through a dream: "Last night, I dreamt I went to Manderley again. It seemed to me I stood by the iron gate leading to the drive, but for a while, I could not enter, for the way was barred to me." The imposing architecture, coupled with Mrs. de Winter's claim that "the way was barred to [her]," invites the audience into her perspective. It also imparts the feeling of entrapment and paranoia that comes to dominate the rest of the film. Such paranoia, entrapment, and absence would be repeated in multiple Gothic romance films of the era, constituting a film cycle that jump-started depictions of gaslighting in cinema. The cycle acts as the starting point for this study because of its establishment of gaslighting conventions and its influence on subsequent thriller and Gothic films across eras.

It also introduces the notion of literal and figurative gatekeeping. This moment is the first of many times Mrs. de Winter will be denied entry into a world far different from how she grew up. If the gothic formula hinges upon "the image of woman-plus-habitation" (Holland and Sherman), *Rebecca* foreshadows such habitation in its first

frames. The sequence presages the effects of gaslighting and the thematic concerns of gaslight films themselves. In particular, gatekeeping prevents the yet-unnamed narrator from both entering the domestic space *and* fulfilling the high-class metaphorical status it affords. *Rebecca* immediately isolates its heroine and accentuates her outsider status, which almost none of the characters will help her overcome. Hitchcock pushes the camera through the gate, along a winding forested path, before reaching the darkened silhouette of Manderley, a massive mansion given distinctly Gothic undertones by the moonlight passing through the clouds above it. The camera continues to move along the wreckage of the destroyed estate before settling on a dark window. Modleski notes that the film's mise-en-scène "collaborate[s] with the script to convey the heroine's sense of her own significance" (45). Though this effect will inevitably take hold further into the narrative, Manderley's looming walls and shadows, coupled with the narrator's overt references to gatekeeping, introduce such insignificance early.

This shot is also the first of many instances in which Hitchcock imbues his camera with an identifiable point-of-view (Mrs. de Winter). Such identification becomes the film's central project. It leads to a number of the gaslighting tropes that will appear further into the Gothic Romance cycle, particularly the heroine's perception of the domestic space as overwhelming, which compounds her personal trauma and/or inexperience. Hitchcock's "famed ability to draw us into close identifications with his characters" allows for the film's frequent inhabitation of Mrs. de Winter's perspective (Modleski 8). It foregrounds Mrs. de Winter's sense of insignificance; the audience experiences her fear of inadequacy in the face of Manderley, her new husband Maxim,

and his staff. Belittling the victim's self-worth and perception is a crucial aspect of gaslighting, and Rebecca conveys these dynamics to its audience in a paradigmatic manner.

Mary Anne Doane identifies paranoia and suspense as the primary emotional fulcrums of Gothic filmmaking and points to these films' tendency to situate the woman as the "agent of the gaze" (Doane 134). Chief among the strategies carried out during this process is making the home "yoked to dread" by hiding things from the woman's—from our—sight. We can see the fulfillment of this strategy in the opening sequence and throughout the film's setting (coded as simultaneously high-class and menacing). Here, Hitchcock's most striking accomplishments as a filmmaker emerge from his use of space. In warping Mrs. de Winter's perception around the idea of helplessness or invalidity (she is in constant fear of not being good enough or at least paling in comparison to the specter of Maxim's first wife), he transforms Manderley into a Gothic maze. Surrounded by signals of a suffocating upper-class existence that was foreign to her just days before, Mrs. de Winter must navigate portraits and reminders of Rebecca, in danger of losing her way and herself. Waldman adds to this theme in her discussion of the Gothic's ambiguity:

"The central feature of the Gothics 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. Within a patriarchal culture, then, the resolution of the hesitation carries with it the ideological function of validation or invalidation of feminine experience” (Waldman 31).

The hesitation in *Rebecca* (an extension of Doane’s paranoia) primarily emerges from Mrs. de Winter’s unfamiliarity with the customs and staff of Manderley, as well as her fear of inadequacy. Together, these constitute the “inexperience” that characterizes many of the protagonists in gaslight films. Mrs. de Winter (and other gaslit women) are vulnerable to gaslighting because their patriarchal surroundings minimize their agency and experience.

In contrast to other films in the proto-genre, *Rebecca* presents a scheme not on the husband’s part (though he is unwittingly a tool in this respect) but the staff, led by Mrs. Danvers. Cloaked in black and first appearing in a confrontational close-up, Danvers acts as a surrogate for Mrs. de Winter’s fear of inadequacy. Her appearance and downcast eyes judge Mrs. de Winter against the specter of Manderley’s former mistress. Danvers’s entrance, in which she gazes judgementally into the lens, is the second instance of direct audience inhabitation of the camera’s gaze since the film’s opening sequence. Her expression and the shot of Mrs. de Winter’s overwhelmed look that immediately follows it reflects Linda Williams’ conception of “the female look,” which “shares the male fear of the monster’s freakishness, but also recognizes the sense in which this freakishness is similar to her own difference. For she too has been constituted as an exhibitionist-object by the desiring look of the male” (Williams 23). Williams’ claim is complicated in this case by the fact that the monster was universally male. Danvers is female, but her

appearance, outside of her plain black gown, is sexually amorphous. Regardless, Danvers stands in for the absence at the center of the film (that of Rebecca) and consistently interrogates Mrs. Danvers' "fit" in her new environment and her ability to "substitute her body for the body of Rebecca" (Modleski 46). Danvers is, for all intents and purposes, the film's ghostly monster.

Though Mrs. Danvers is not an object of desire, her relationship to Rebecca (and her memory) makes her a stand-in for the film's central object of desire. What's more, her attempts to manipulate Mrs. de Winter into first "becoming" Rebecca (by mistakenly wearing a dress Rebecca had worn) and then into committing suicide by throwing herself from Rebecca's window onto the cliffs below transform her into the primary manipulator. On its surface, Danvers's actions do not constitute "gaslighting" by definition. There is no direct attack on Mrs. de Winters' sanity, and Danvers wears her nefariousness and dislike of Mrs. de Winter on her sleeve by the halfway point in the narrative (in other words, there is no denial of ill intent). However, Mrs. de Winter's doubt of herself and her identity, and her lack of clarity regarding Maxim's true feelings toward Rebecca, allow her to fulfill the role of the gaslit woman. Thus, the fourth-wall-breaking close-up, which introduces Danvers, begins a cycle of manipulation reliant upon Mrs. de Winter's unfamiliarity and resulting paranoia about Maxim's perceived love of Rebecca. Her existence and actions hinge upon her desire to keep the affections of a man for herself.

The film's pivotal sequence involves the revelation of Maxim and Rebecca's combative relationship. In addition what the film's narrative implies (namely, Mrs. de Winter's nervousness about her new class position), Hitchcock's camera emphasizes

Rebecca's threatening absence. As Maxim details the heated exchange over the ownership of their estate, the camera tracks Rebecca's ghostly presence. She is not physically present, but the camera follows where she *was* (and, in Mrs. de Winter's mind, where she still is). The film thematizes Mrs. de Winter's worry over her husband's first wife, forcing her to constantly question whether Maxim can ever let go of Rebecca's memory. Without appearing on-screen, Rebecca comes to symbolize all that Mrs. de Winter cannot become. However, once the true nature of Rebecca's relationship with Maxim comes to light, her absence takes on a menacing edge to both parties. What's more, Mrs. De Winter's reaction to Rebecca's true nature (and Maxim's disclosure of his "hellish" relationship with her) signals a baked-in reliance on Maxim's approval. "You didn't love her," Mrs. de Winter exhales with a smile. Her reaction crystallizes another trope of gaslight narratives that would continue over time: the female protagonist's reliance on a male character to "correct" the misperceptions of her own experience. In this case, Maxim's switch from loving widower to hateful husband at once undermines Mrs. de Winter's perception while falsely bolstering her self-confidence. She had been wrong to think Maxim still loved Rebecca but realizing that he hated her brings relief.

This revelation allows for the film's fulfillment of the final identified trope. Though later scenes reveal that Rebecca inadvertently died after striking her head during a heated argument and that Maxim took her body to a boat and scuttled it to conceal the truth, the film treats Maxim as more or less exonerated in Mrs. De Winter's eyes. The exoneration takes a literal turn in the film's last third when a doctor reveals Rebecca's grim cancer prognosis, leading to the film's smoldering note of finality: Danvers sest fire

to Manderley, sending the mansion and the memories of her mistress up in flames. It thematically fits that Hitchcock would end on a close-up of a pillow with an embroidered “R.” But directly before this shot, Mrs. De Winter falls into Maxim’s embrace. “Maxim!” she exclaims, “Thank heaven you’ve come back to me!” Thus, Mrs. De Winter ends the film in the arms of a “non-manipulative” man or at least a man cleared of previous suspicions. The ending reaffirms not only Rebecca’s central relationship but also the patriarchal subtext underneath. It contrasts with the rest of the film, in which the traditional matrimonial structure seems restrictive and utterly dismissive of the female experience. Doing so suggests the strong continuation of conventional male-female relationships. This implication would remain trenchant throughout the 1940s gaslight cycle, even as some (especially *Gaslight*) challenged matrimony’s safety and stability for women.

***Suspicion* (1941)**

Hitchcock continued his Gothic romance filmography with *Suspicion*, a film in which the director employs the techniques of identification and point-of-view that marked *Rebecca*. Made just a year later, the film once again stars Joan Fontaine as lonely spinster Lina, who falls under the charms of Cary Grant’s playboy Johnnie. The similarities between the two films are so noticeable that one could reasonably argue Hitchcock was on the brink of repeating himself. Their narrative archetypes are practically the same—an inexperienced young woman, a charming, wealthy man, psychological manipulation, and a concluding correction of the female protagonist’s

misperception. *Suspicion* calibrates them slightly differently than its precursor. Still, the two films end on a similar note: the woman's fear of manipulation and murder by her husband is deliberately undercut, and she finishes in the arms of the same man who was just the source of her terror. However, the terror she experiences emerges out of an almost entirely inferred (or suspected) murder plot. In contrast to later films in the cycle, *Suspicion* gives the viewer virtually no evidence of the husband's murderousness on its surface, at least to the degree that it would appear in *Gaslight* and *My Name Is Julia Ross*. There are no scenes following Johnnie (Grant) away from Lina (Fontaine), and therefore the audience must calibrate its understanding of him through her. Interiority becomes the vehicle through which Johnnie appears to be a murderer. The film becomes an exercise in depicting (mis)perception.

The clearest example of this theme arrives during the film's "whirlwind romance." Lina switches between wearing and not wearing her glasses. Each mode of appearance directly affects her relationship with Johnnie; she wears the glasses when away from him and puts them away in his presence. To Waldman, this indicates that she chooses to *see* or *be seen*. This "opposition" continues throughout the film. During scenes where Lina is "blind" to Johnnie's lying and gambling, the glasses come off, such as during Johnnie's visit to her parent's residence. When she intentionally seeks information about Johnnie's background or schemes, the glasses are on. Thus, *Suspicion* thematizes the opposition between *seeing* and *being seen* through a costuming choice (Waldman).

The primary difference between *Rebecca* and *Suspicion* comes from the transference and degree of nefariousness between the two films. Namely, whereas

Rebecca presents a monstrous female surrogate for Mrs. de Winter's marital anxiety, *Suspicion* chooses the husband as the primary manipulator and makes his intentions physically murderous. The film deliberately conflates romance (and marriage) with murder; in one scene, Lina resists Johnnie's attempt to kiss her, and he responds, "What did you think I was going to do—kill you? I was trying to fix your hair." Already, the notion of a sinister husband rears its head. Notably, Hitchcock eschews close-ups in this sequence for a rigid, uninvolved two-shot, while Franz Waxman's score swells with atonal dissonance. Elsaesser argues that the film places implicit blame for Lina's worry at the feet of her sexual inexperience:

Hitchcock infuse[s] his film, and several others, with an oblique intimation of female frigidity producing strange fantasies of persecution, rape, and death—masochistic reveries and nightmares, which case the husband into the role of the sadistic murderer. This projection of sexual anxiety and its mechanisms of displacement and transfer is translated into a whole string of movies often involving hypnosis and playing on the ambiguity and suspense of whether the wife is merely imagining it or whether her husband really does have murderous designs on her." (Elsaesser 451)

Johnnie appears incapable of murder once the two elope but continues to wildly gamble and embezzle money from employers, all of which is waved away to Lina by Johnnie's naive friend Beaky. As Lina becomes more distrustful and suspicious of Johnnie's intentions, Hitchcock regularly blocks and frames him in a dominant position, whether leaning over Lina while she sits in a chair or simply glaring at her from a door frame. In

the film's key sequence, Lina and Beaky play Anagrams while discussing a real estate opportunity with Johnnie. "Why must we go up there?" Beaky asks, referring to the cliffside mansion the two are scouting. "You have to go up there tomorrow morning and follow it up," Johnnie says, and Lina takes note of his insistence as her letter pieces spell out M-U-R-D-E-R. Hitchcock then cuts from the word to Lina's face to a profile POV shot of Johnnie, back to the word, before panning to a photograph of the cliffs the two men are discussing. Suddenly, Hitchcock dissolves Lina's face over the picture as a depiction of Beaky's murder (by Johnnie) arrives onscreen. Doane writes that Hitchcock allows Lina's fear to "permeate the mise-en-scène" and "contaminate the 'third-person mode of the image'" using these techniques (Doane 149).

And yet, the film turns Lina's titular suspicion on its head, revealing it all to be a figment of her imagination. Johnnie's character is hardly a white knight, but Lina's suspicion of murderous intent ends up being completely misguided. Thus, the film brushes over the fear she experiences early on in the relationship in favor of simple relief at not being married to a monster. Like *Rebecca*, *Suspicion* appears to be a narrative of manipulation and gaslighting, as Johnnie goes behind Lina's back throughout the film to embezzle money and downplay his transgressions. But Johnnie's resolution to clean himself up—and rid himself of debts—signals a rash shift away from the story's Gothic elements, ending the film in a romantic mode. His actual plan to kill *himself* crystallizes Johnnie as a flawed-but-good-natured husband, transformed into a monster by Lina's subconscious. "I was only thinking of myself, not what you were going through," Lina exclaims. They resolve to "see it all through together," and the film ends with Johnnie

(finally) embracing Lina with a sly move of his arm around her in the car. If the ending “signals the consequent collapse of the opposition between subjectivity and objectivity,” it does so in service of “saving” Johnnie from the worst of the female protagonists’ misconceptions (Doane 149). But its reliance on dialogue during this process contrasts sharply with the visual techniques employed to raise suspicion of murder. The scene above in which Hitchcock visually links the word “murder” directly to Johnnie and then to a photograph of a seaside cliff (all through point-of-view shots) marks a point at which the entire film is infused with Lina’s subjectivity (Doane). By the time the truth comes to light, Hitchcock has forced his audience to occupy Lina’s perspective to such a degree that the ending’s “norm of objectivity” rings false.

From a generic perspective, the film’s bait-and-switch both undercuts and fulfills a number of gaslighting tropes. Johnnie is allowed to be both a malcontent murderer with plots to kill his wife *and* a loving (if manipulative) husband willing to admit his transgressions to restore patriarchal order. Through this admission, he corrects the female protagonist’s misperceptions while also fulfilling the role of nefarious manipulator (Waldman). The film has its cake and attempts to eat it, too. The speed with which the film throws its murder plot out of the window (or over a cliff) in service of a more standard “happy” ending is notable not only for its suddenness but because of the contemporaneous reception both during production and after release. Hitchcock famously clashed with RKO over the ending, which he preferred to be similar to the dark conclusion found in the novel: Johnnie serves Lina a drink that may or may not be poisoned, and she gulps it down (Spoto 242–244). Critics were quick to jump on the

film's ending and use it as the focal point of mixed reviews, one calling it "abrupt" and unsatisfying ("Alfred Hitchcock's 1941 'Suspicion' was met..."). The criticism suggests a broader suspicion not only of the bait-and-switch conclusion but the patriarchal ideology underneath. While *Rebecca* and *Suspicion* establish the notion of female misconception within gaslighting narratives, coupled with overbearing architecture and a possibly immoral husband, American culture appeared prepared to shift toward the protagonist's suspicion being correctly founded. That the film rejects this notion after suggesting it is reflective of what Jones calls "bruising but tender passion"; that the husband's physical or psychological transgressions toward the wife will ultimately give way to the love behind their marital relationship (Jones 1994). Shoos opines that this ideology makes "romance...completely compatible with manipulation and the threat of violence" (Shoos 43). Hitchcock's frequent return to this refrain (such as in *The 39 Steps* or future films such as *North By Northwest*) signals a consistency of theme that *Suspicion* easily fulfills.

One can detect a progression between *Rebecca* and *Suspicion* in the narrative fulfillment of this ideology; in both films, the husbands appear violent but are ultimately loving. If gaslight films ultimately revolve around the concept of female agency, *Suspicion* offers one of the first apparent attempts to delineate it. That Lina is proven "wrong" reflects Mrs. de Winter's discovery of Maxim's nature in *Rebecca*, and the two characters' relieved reactions are virtually the same. But Hitchcock and his writers also unknowingly preempted a noticeable shift in the deployment of said ideology in Gothic romance films, away from the rejection of female perception and toward its confirmation.

The wife's counterpart was once flawed but loving; he would soon become evil. The development turns such narratives into a heightened depiction of psychological and physical abuse. The cycle and its audience were now prepared for an "affirmation of female experience" (Waldman).

***Gaslight* (1944)**

It would be three years before Hollywood delivered such an affirmation, with George Cukor's *Gaslight*. If the previous films guarded their flawed husbands behind the veneer of patriarchal ideology, *Gaslight* was the first major Hollywood release to expose him. Set mainly in the London estate inherited from a murdered opera singer, the film foregrounds the domestic space as a claustrophobic one, trapping its protagonist Paula Alquist (Ingrid Bergman) inside for the majority of its narrative. Doing so "[undermines] the idea of the domestic realm as a secure one for women and, on a larger level, potentially [opens] up to scrutiny the patriarchal institution of marriage" (Shoos 45).

The film follows Paula, sent to live in Italy after her aunt's murder when Paula was a young girl. The opening sequence features a 14-year-old Paula led from the aunt's house, No. 9 Thornton Square, days following her murder. In the background of a close-up on Paula, the darkness covering the house already transforms it into an ominous Gothic space akin to those found in *Rebecca* and *Suspicion*. In Italy, she is swept up (in another whirlwind romance) into the arms of concert pianist Gregory Anton (Charles Boyer). He convinces her to marry and return to the London residence her aunt has left her. Gregory is really Sergius Bauer, the aunt's former lover and murderer. He is

obsessed with the aunt's jewels and has married Paula to track them down. He traps Paula in the house under the guise of concern for her well-being; in reality, he searches for the jewels in the house's attic by night. In between his searches, Gregory attempts to drive his wife insane, undermining Paula's sense of self by stealing objects away from her (a brooch, a watch, and later a painting), blaming her for their disappearance, and separating her from the outside world. Gregory disguises most of these manipulations as innocent mistakes or misunderstandings, and Paula ultimately bears the brunt of Gregory's feigned disappointment.

Though the previous films in this chapter established several norms, *Gaslight* is the first examined here to accurately depict gaslighting itself (a term coined by the flickering gaslight at the center of the film, which lowers as Gregory is searching for jewels). The film paints a startlingly clear portrait of domestic verbal abuse that bluntly questions the trust inherent to patriarchal marital relationships. It develops concepts and tropes from Hitchcock's films, primarily through its narrative arrangement of gaslighting elements which connects to its more omniscient visual style. If Hitchcock sought to foreground his female protagonists' subjectivity and orient the narrative around their perceptions, *Gaslight* offers a far more removed (even objective) view of abuse and manipulation. Here, the husband is made villainous within minutes, and the film regularly leaves Paula's side to watch him go about his schemes. It still fulfills some problematic tropes that assign implicit blame for the scenario to the central victim. But in the grand scheme of Gothic romances, it is a minor step forward in development.

Waldman links such development to socio-political shifts during WWII, mainly

introducing a previously untapped female workforce and the destabilizing effect this had on the notion of a patriarchal family. Writing about the popularity and influence of the female Gothic in 1940s Hollywood, he mentions that “certain material conditions of the period [that] may have suggested the Gothic, with its emphasis on sexuality and domesticity, as a particularly viable genre for generic ‘refashioning’ and ‘reappropriation’” (Waldman 34). In other words, with society offering an alternative for women outside of traditional domestic roles, patriarchal ideology encountered a significant challenge, a conflict that “marked a transitional period for women.” Waldman further reads post-war Gothic narratives as evolutionary in this regard. Suddenly, one female protagonist’s husband “is not just a *man*; this is a maniac.”

Gaslight embodies this more clear-eyed perspective primarily by presenting a vivid portrait of abuse. Gregory’s actions deliberately separate Paula from those who can help her. It is only through the efforts of a (male) outsider, played by Joseph Cotten, that she can escape Gregory’s mental clutches. Jacobson and Gottman note that the experience of being gaslit “subtly and insidiously” removes the abuser and his victim from the outside world (1998). As Shoos summarizes, “What is perhaps most harmful about gaslighting is that it makes the abused woman more dependent on the abuser” (Shoos 44). This dynamic is evident in the first scenes between Paula and Gregory, such as during his initial marriage proposal (which comes despite having known each other for barely two weeks). Paula rejects the offer and resolves to visit Italy by herself to consider marriage, but once on the train, Cukor cuts to a shot of Paula through the compartment window with a hand sneaking into the frame and grabbing her on her shoulder. The score,

by Bronislaw Kaper, accentuates the unsettling image with ominous strings and a slight crescendo before revealing the owner of the hand to be Gregory. Paula's shock (which she communicates primarily through her expression and saying Gregory's name) does not have time to develop fully; "You're not angry with me?" he says immediately, and after a moment of hesitation, she falls into his arms. Gregory has successfully preempted Paula's confusion (and possible anger) and replaced it through forced sympathy. Paula is conditioned to forgive his transgressions via the closeness of their relationship and her implicit trust.

The deception continues in a pair of later sequences, one which foregrounds Paula's need to please the man she loves and one which foreshadows Gregory's pattern of veiled suggestion followed by denial. In the former, a scene that immediately follows Gregory's unannounced arrival on the train, the couple discusses where they will live after their marriage. Gregory, secretly aware that Paula's aunt has left her the Thornton Square estate, waxes eloquent about his "life-long" desire to live "in one of those quiet houses in the little London squares." As previously discussed, the film treats the Thornton Square house as a terror-filled harbinger of memory for Paula. But Gregory's "dream" (which he quickly drops after its initial mention) couples with Paula's desire to please her fiancée, creating an impossible situation to which she ultimately acquiesces. She tells Gregory about Thornton Square and its background, and when Gregory feigns protest, she counters and insists that they move there: "You shall have your dream." In surrendering her will, Paula demonstrates the effect of the disruptive, abusive power of psychological manipulation. She allows the film to shift entirely into a Gothic mode,

moving the action into a house literally marked by the death earlier in the plot. The move allows Gregory's actions to continue even more insidiously, under the guise of caring for Paula's health and personal safety. Upon arriving at the house, his first act is to shut the door to the outside world, draw the blinds, and turn on the literal gaslights; the house becomes a figurative prison for its female owner. Any attempt she makes to leave the house is met with Gregory's false concern for her wellbeing or, in the case of her immediate suggestion of a party, for their honeymoon to continue "a bit longer."

Gregory's gaslighting will only grow more extreme over time, particularly with direct attacks on Paula's memory and confidence. In contrast to Cary Grant's Johnnie, Gregory rarely (if ever) attacks Paula physically, opting for verbal assaults. This form of abuse aligns with the theoretical conception of gaslighting, particularly from Patricia Evans' claim that verbal abuse targets the victim's perception. We can see evidence of this primarily in his theft and accusations toward Paula once they have moved into Thornton Square. He gifts her an heirloom brooch before a mid-day trip to the Tower of London; during the tour, Paula discovers that she has lost it, and the couple's return to Thornton leads to a tense confrontation. "I've lost it," Paula says sheepishly. Gregory plays up his reaction with a dramatic, "What?" In a later scene, a painting disappears from a wall, and Gregory makes a mockery of Paula's insistence that she did not remove it, calling in the housemaid Nancy (made jealous already by Gregory's flirtatious advances toward her) and asking if *she* stole it. The act is analogous to scolding a child, which Paula appears aware of when she sheepishly admits to "stealing" the painting. Her misplaced shame crystallizes the effect of the film's gaslighting; she now believes herself

to be the painting thief, against her initial better judgment. Almost predictably, later scenes reveal that Gregory stole the brooch, the painting, and other small objects.

In keeping with its narrative and stylistic subjugation of its female protagonist, *Gaslight* continues the trope of introducing a male voice to correct Paula's misperceptions. However, there is a slight evolution in this regard. Hitchcock's films used twists to make the husband innocent of suspected crimes *and* the voice of reason compared to his wife's subjective suspicions. *Gaslight* cannot rely on its murdering jewel thief of a husband to turn more innocent at the climax, so it looks outside of the marriage at its center for such heroics. It finds Brian Cameron (Joseph Cotton), a curious detective with a keen interest in Paula's house because of his childhood memories of her aunt (before her murder). Cameron pursues knowledge of Paula, piqued all the more by Gregory's hiding her from the outside world. In the film's climactic scenes, Cameron breaks through Gregory's layers of "protection" (usually in the form of the housemaid and cook, whom he has also manipulated through flirting and the guise of a concerned husband) and reveals to Paula the depths of Gregory's lies. But once Cameron leaves momentarily, Gregory reappears and pulls her back into the ruse, convincing her that Cameron was entirely a figment of her imagination.

The film's ending, however, features Cameron arriving once again as rescuer (with a local constable in tow), making it impossible for Gregory to ignore him or chalk his appearance up to his wife's "insanity." Almost predictably, the men send Paula to her room so that the two men can trade barbs and mocking insults. Even in a moment of affirmation, she is still treated as a symbolic child incapable of understanding a new set

of circumstances. As Gregory tries to escape (into the previously barred attic), Cameron and the constable rush after him, giving Paula a long-awaited chance to ascend the stairs after the noise from inside the attic has subsided. “Perhaps you’d like to see these things,” Cameron shows her the jewels. “It cost a woman’s life, and it cost you something too.” Inside, Gregory is bound to a chair.

“I’d like to speak to my husband,” Paula insists, and Gregory (or Sergius Bower) takes one last stab at gaslighting her. “[Cameron] told you a lot of things about me, didn’t he? They were lies...because he’s in love with you, I can tell!” He tells her to get a knife from a nearby drawer to free him, but it is at this point that Paula reverses Bower’s scheme onto the abuser with intense vindictiveness. “Are you suggesting this is a knife?” she asks. “Perhaps you have gone mad, my husband...because I am ‘mad’ I hate you. Because I am ‘mad’ I have betrayed you, and because I am ‘mad’ I am rejoicing in my heart with not a shred of pity, without a shred of regret, watching you go with glory in my heart! Come, Mr. Cameron, take this man away!” The monologue flies in the face of similar films made in years past, in which the husband is ultimately a flawed force of good. Paula’s speech embodies the previously mentioned “affirmation of female experience.” This embodiment is clearest in the moment Paula half-seriously gaslights Bower, offering a chance to “get even” while *Rebecca* and *Suspicion* offer only redemption for their less-flawed husbands. The retribution is far from even in practice; Bower will face trial for Paula’s aunt’s murder but remains unpunished explicitly for his abuse. Though the film affords Paula the chance to confront him, she is forced to do so literally behind closed doors (with Cameron and the constable right outside). In other

words, gaslighting is a serious domestic problem but *only* a domestic problem.

The film's final moments also solidify a number of the gaslight tropes found in previous films. As the authorities take Bower away, he attempts to explain himself to Paula: "I don't ask you to understand me. Between us, all the time, were those jewels, like a fire, a fire in my brain that separated us. Those jewels which I wanted all my life, I don't know why." These lines, spoken as the camera holds Bower in a wide-eyed close-up, explain the character's gaslighting: obsessiveness to the point of implied insanity. The trope of the especially nefarious husband, according to Shoos, implicitly shifts blame onto the female victim for "choosing the wrong man" while also depicting gaslighting as something only an obsessive madman would do. If the film challenges the institutions of marriage, it does so only because an unlawful criminal is an untenable, abusive spouse.

These distinctions, "between 'abusive monsters' and 'normal men' are the very ones that are upheld by the conclusions of later domestic violence films" (Shoos 56). The final sequence (which takes place on the roof, above the "fray" of the Gothic prison that held Paula) returns to the established trope of the victim finding a new man. Cameron, in a disappointing show of tactlessness, makes a pass at her. "Let me come here and see you and talk to you; perhaps I can help somehow," he says, followed by Paula's "You're very kind." The film ends on a cut to an old neighbor of Paula's exclaiming, "Well...!" As in Gothic romances, the implication is that Paula will end up in the arms of a "better" man. The difference in *Gaslight* is that the better man is a different one than Paula began with; the husband is not "fixed" or redeemed as he is in *Rebecca* or *Suspicion*. Far from progressive, the conclusion reflects Waldman's reading of Gothic romance films' second

romances. “In order to promote the ‘wrong man’ ideology,” Waldman writes, “the films must somehow imply that with the second one things will be different. The best way to do this is simply not to allow this romance to progress very far” (37). That ideology has troubling implications for women facing domestic violence, particularly because fictional women in the cycle are responsible for both their abuse and their escape from it. Later films in the cycle continued to demonstrate the myth’s continuing vitality by linking their abusive predicament to outright naïveté.

My Name Is Julia Ross (1945)

Films later in the cycle would further popularize the tropes seen in *Gaslight*. Joseph H. Lewis’ *My Name Is Julia Ross* (1945) solidifies the Gothic romance film as a precursor to gaslight films proper, hardening tropes and gesturing toward others that developed further into the genre’s history. Even more so than the previous three films, it makes the domestic space outright threatening and, in this case, literally prison-like. And like a reverse-*Rebecca*, the husband’s violence is the main horrifying factor in the narrative. Despite the film’s development in these areas, it still easily fits in the model that *Rebecca*, *Suspicion*, and *My Name is Julia Ross* all established.

The film follows the titular character Julia (Nina Foch), desperate for work, who goes to an employment agency in London with news of a potential live-in secretary position. The agency boss Mrs. Sparkes recommends Julia for the job working for a wealthy widow Mrs. Hughes only after learning that Julia has no nearby family relations. Hughes insists that Julia move in that night, but two days later, Julia awakens in a Gothic-

styled cliffside castle/estate in Cornwall, with her possessions gone. Mrs. Hughes' son Ralph insists to her that she is his wife Marion, and the staff are all convinced that "Marion" has suffered a nervous breakdown. It is later revealed that Ralph murdered his real wife in a fit of rage; Julia is meant to serve as a replacement as they convince the staff and nearby townspeople of her insanity. Then they will kill Julia and make it appear a suicide, thus "explaining" Marion's disappearance.

From the beginning of the film, Julia's characterization aligns her with the other "inexperienced women" in the cycle. The opening scene sees her enter her dingy apartment (with dim lighting and an angular staircase on frame right) to encounter the groundswoman Bertha. Bertha instantly berates her, both for Julia's economic instability and her relationship with her close male friend Dennis Bruce. Dennis forges Julia's only concrete connection to the opposite sex and acts as her secret admirer throughout the film. Their relationship is noticeably chaste, despite Dennis' clear affection toward her: the closest they come to a romantic rendezvous comes when he asks Julia to come out with him on the town moments after breaking off his engagement (an offer she turns down due to her newly hired position). Julia's innocence in this regard also coincides with her elevated class position. Bertha points out that Julia could be employed as long as she acquiesced to hard manual labor (or what Bertha calls "good honest work"), but Julia's recent bout with appendicitis gives her an excuse to avoid it. So the film works to position Julia as an outsider in both social and economic situations: too destitute to be rich, too injured to be an active part of the working class, and too "shy" to explore romantic options.

Like the other films, *Julia Ross* emphasizes its setting's Gothic architecture and upper-class set design with the goal of visually articulating the debilitating mental effects of non-stop gaslighting. When Mrs. Hughes first brings Julia to the estate, Lewis pushes in from a wide shot to a medium shot of the door as it closes behind them, with an ornate darkened knocker centered in the frame as we fade to black. Though the film does not provide immediate context, and we have no way of knowing precisely what is to come, the foregrounding of the door suggests that Julia has been sealed inside a makeshift Gothic prison. Like *Gaslight*, the film suggests the existence of a broader conspiratorial plot in a previous scene, during which Mrs. Hughes and Ralph meet after being introduced to Julia at the employment agency. "There's even a small resemblance," Mrs. Hughes says. Once the film fades into the next scene, Julia awakens in what appears to be an upper-class nightmare: in a canopied bed, wearing an ornate nightgown, and trapped in a room with easily opened windows overlooking a crashing surf. Ralph and Mrs. Hughes enter and answer Julia's concerned questions ("What does this all mean? Why did we leave London?") with feigned confusion ("You haven't forgotten us *again*, Marion?"). Julia's attempts to leave are met with physical force, such as Ralph grabbing her arm, and the film mirrors *Suspicion*'s poisoned milk sequences toward the end of its first gaslighting scene when Ralph insists that Julia "drink [her] tea."

Like *Gaslight* and *Rebecca*, *My Name Is Julia Ross*'s Gothic setting includes spaces barred to Julia. She overhears noises during her first night, a silhouetted hand crosses her body, and she cannot locate a secret passage into her room until much later into the narrative. The passage allows Ralph to enter in the dead of night and harm Julia

physically while she sleeps, and she awakens with bruises covering her body one morning. Thus, this Gothic estate and its various nooks, including a pre-built passageway for its monstrous male gaslighter to physically harm his victims, allow for the conflation of psychological and physical violence even more so than their predecessors, reflecting the dichotomy “between the known and unknown, the seen and unseen” that defines the Gothic film’s paranoia (Doane 134).

Ralph’s characterization assists in this regard by fulfilling the monstrous gaslighter trope. Lewis foregrounds Ralph’s foreboding presence and willingness to physically intimidate Julia throughout the film through Ralph’s behavior and blocking. Julia “plays along” with the scheme in a critical sequence after Ralph catches her trying to mail a letter to Dennis. The pair stops by a cliffside, and Julia uses flattery against Ralph to contact someone outside to help her. The scene recalls Johnnie’s and Lina’s cliffside “hair-brushing” incident that ultimately proved an innocent misunderstanding. But Ralph reacts with contrasting, simmering malice while overlooking the sea: “Beautiful, isn’t it? Would you like to listen to the sea and hear what it says? It doesn’t say anything, does it? That’s what I like about the sea. It never tells its secrets. It has many, very many secrets.” Lewis frames Ralph so that he leers over Julia and his shoulder covers her face except for her upward-cast eyes, much like Gregory/Sergius’s domineering position toward Paula. As if to further blur the lines between overwhelming romance and possible violence, Ralph aggressively kisses Julia after his monologue. His thinly veiled threat places the film’s cliffside sequence in stark contrast to a similar scene from *Suspicion*. Johnnie fixed Lina’s hair, and his actions were only accidentally

perceived as threatening. Ralph's behavior and true intentions are unknown but coded similarly threatening, and later narrative developments place him far away from the "misunderstood husband" label.

Later, Julia's intuitiveness allows her to cross the house's Gothic barriers. She discovers her room's secret passageway and overhears Mrs. Hughes and Ralph discussing their true intentions. Here, Lewis and screenwriter Muriel Roy Bolton contextualize Ralph's behavior in ways that recall Gregory/Sergius' obsession with Paula's jewels. Mrs. Hughes asks if "it" was an accident, and Ralph replies by describing the night he killed Marion: "I didn't plan it. I liked her well enough, but when she found out I'd been lying about my income, she accused me of marrying her for her money. I said, of course, that was what I'd married her for. Then she cried. She was always crying. Then she slapped me. I had my knife in my hand..." The passage ends as he rips the couch cushions around him to shreds. Ralph's inability to contain his rage when simply recounting a violent memory imbues his status as imprisoning, patriarchal husband with extremity. Frus argues that domestic violence in American film often positions the battering of a woman by a male figure as "not deviant behavior; it is merely excessive—an intensification of the system that gives men control of their households" (228). Ralph's entitled rage appears to counter this assertion, but in actuality, positions Ralph outside normality. His insanity and appearance (complete with George McCready's trademark scar across his cheek) make it impossible to equate him with any sort of traditional matrimonial partner. *My Name Is Julia Ross* "protects male entitlement...from the recognition that normality *is* the monster" (Shoos 78). In this way, one can read *My*

Name Is Julia Ross as applying the “affirmation of female experience” (which characterized *Gaslight* and made traditionally protective husbands out to be nefarious schemers) to *Suspicion* and *Rebecca*. While this necessarily counteracts the “protagonist with misguided perceptions” trope that privileges the male point-of-view, it also protects the cycle’s adherence to patriarchy from further thematic or metaphorical investigation.

The film further fulfills the heroic “normal man” trope through Dennis and hints at developments to the genre related to the protagonist’s agency and the abuser’s eventual defeat. Dennis only comes to Julia’s rescue (law enforcement in tow) after she successfully mails a letter to him in secret by fooling her captors. What’s more, Julia must play along with the scheme to overcome it; she throws her dress out her window and onto the cliffs to make it appear as though she committed suicide, then hides in the secret passage. (Lewis accentuates the film’s Gothic status by covering the mansion’s interior with near-Expressionist shadows and including a shot of Ralph’s silhouette ascending the stairs, which recalls a similar famed image from Murnau’s *Nosferatu*.) Once Ralph and Mrs. Hughes fall for the ruse, she sneaks down to the rocks and plays dead, opening herself up to danger to ensure Ralph’s capture. He tries to smash her head with a rock, but Dennis and police officers arrive in the nick of time and shoot him dead as he sprints away. Julia and Dennis drive away together, discussing marriage. The film’s final moments crystallize Julia’s development away from complete sexual naivete: “I’ll need some time to think it over.” “How long?” “Oh, about five seconds.”

The conclusion signals generic changes to come, specifically the protagonist’s ability to assert agency (through clever battles of wits) and overcome their abusers via

violent ends. The films grouped in this chapter embody the gaslight film's dominant tropes, thematic concerns, and eventual shifts within the subgenre's worldview.

Rebecca's Rebecca and *Suspicion's* Lina enter and exit their films ultimately subservient to their new environment and the men who govern it. Any rebellion is made impossible by the reveal of those men's revealed innocence. The women are made to be at fault for suspecting any wrongdoing. *Gaslight* and *Julia Ross* allow their protagonists to willingly rebel and escape their abusive predicament, even if the only route of escape ends in the arms of the "right man." If the previous three films establish the gaslight film's conventions, *Julia Ross* therefore represents the culmination of the gaslight film's minor development within its first cycle. Though the initial Gothic romance cycle would end, more or less, by the 1950s, later thrillers would pick up on the trend while moving away from passive heroines. Later gaslight films tended toward horror rather than melodrama, and the myth of female complicity lived on in modern gaslight films. I examine the emergence and continuation of those trends and connect them to further political and social developments in the second and third chapters.

CHAPTER TWO

Shifting from Melodrama to Horror in the 1960s

After the initial cycle of films, the Gothic romance subgenre was relatively dormant for the rest of the decade, with the “completion” of the cycle coming with William Wyler’s *The Heiress* (1948). The 1950s was a destabilizing period for Hollywood marked by increasing spectacle and the prevalence of showy genres (particularly the musical) coinciding with the potentially debilitating rise of television over cinemas. These trends were not a natural fit for the paranoia of gaslighting narratives, which shrank out of popularity. This was despite the continuing success of Hitchcock, who more or less carried the gaslight torch himself that decade with *Dial M For Murder* (1954), *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (1956), and *North By Northwest* (1959). Each of those films follows a protagonist being continuously lied to by conspiracies large or small, but their singularity within the era makes any indications of a cycle doubtful. In his discussion of the thriller, Martin Rubin remarks that the 1960s (labeled the Modern Period) saw the genre splinter into different varieties, such as the spy film or detective film (Rubin 119–144). Gaslight films, still a subset of the Gothic melodrama, were one of those categories, offering a return to the first cycle in style while developing away from the strictly trustworthy depiction of the patriarchy in narrative. But the subgenre did not stand pat. The following chapter outlines the shifts in female agency within the gaslight film’s conventions, and those shifts’ connections to broader socio-political concerns. It also follows the gaslight film’s journey from an offshoot of the thriller and Gothic melodrama to an offshoot of horror, with *Rosemary’s Baby* (1968)

acting as an inflection point. Imbuing female anxieties regarding bodily agency (which the growing second-wave feminism movement exemplified) with the fear of the macabre associated with the horror genre makes the gaslighter-victim relationship and the domestic space surrounding it more frightening and, by extension, reflective of changing attitudes surrounding gender roles. This chapter explores that transition.

Midnight Lace (1950, David Miller) exemplifies the transition. Released in 1960, the start of a socially and politically tempestuous decade in America and close to the dying breath of the classical Hollywood industry, the film shares many of the characteristics of past gaslight films, especially *Gaslight* (Cukor, 1944). Both films take place in London, emphasize a claustrophobic domestic space, and concern a gaslight-to-murder plot contained within an ostensibly loving marriage. But later films in this chapter either shirk those tendencies or rearrange the narrative in which they occur. *Hush...Hush*, *Sweet Charlotte* (Aldrich, 1964) at first resembles a classical Hollywood melodrama in style and story, but the film's chronological leap after its scene-setting preamble gives audiences a new lens through which to examine gaslighting's long-term effects. Its casting of classical Hollywood titans in starring roles (Bette Davis and *Gaslight*'s own Joseph Cotten) is somewhat poetic, its black-and-white palette even more so, as they both tie *Sweet Charlotte* back to Hollywood's golden years. That said, the film's narrative contrasts with the gaslight films of those years, combining psychological abuse in the moment and with the decades-long fallout of a past lie. As other sections in this chapter will demonstrate, the genre was in flux or at least proving capable of handling an atypical structure, even if the aesthetics suggest a debt toward its precursors. *Rosemary's Baby*

completed the genre's evolution by way of New Hollywood and countercultural subtext. Already a text oft-cited within feminist scholarship for its conflation of the monstrous and the maternal, the film represents an underlying change for the gaslight film (Fischer, Valerius). The film displays an internalized awareness of gaslighting that was at least partially precursed by the rising women's rights movement and "high profile public debates on abortion [and] the status of women as legitimate political and legal subjects" (Valerius 117). What's more, the film moves out of melodrama entirely, opting instead for horror. They move, in Clover's words, from one "body" genre to another ("Her Body, Himself").

Williams, who further groups melodrama, pornography, and horror under the "body genres" label, offers a paradigm through which to understand this transference. Williams's conception of body genres makes the gaslight films' transference from one to the other less extreme than it might initially appear. *Rosemary's Baby* takes the concepts of psychological abuse and motherhood and, rather than making their connection to the domestic its primary subtextual concern, toxifies them. This depiction is in sharp contrast to the films that came before but reflects a rising cultural awareness of women's issues that had been steadily unpacked in the years before the film's release. The idea of being sexually assaulted, of being deathly pregnant, and of being gaslit by one's abusers is made expressly horrific, a trend that would continue for future gaslight films. Melodrama became horror, just as the private started to become public. Vivian Sobchack writes, "at a time when the mythology of our dominant culture can no longer resolve the social contradictions exposed by experience, the nuclear family has found itself in nuclear

crisis,” summarizing the era’s destabilizing social effects (Sobchack 174).

This chapter examines each of these three texts as steps in the gaslight film’s development, with *Rosemary* acting as a generic inflection point. The process of defining the gaslight film as a body genre contains within it a budding history of feminist movements and debates and aesthetic changes to Hollywood’s production practices. One may characterize gaslight film’s adherence to melodramatic tropes as a misfit of the underlying genre from which its second cycle eventually withdrew in favor of horror.

***Midnight Lace* (1960)**

David Miller’s *Midnight Lace* most often emerges in analyses as a minor blip in Doris Day’s frequently dissected career, during which the famed big band singer-turned-box office draw was best known for her comedies and musicals. Her dramatic breakthrough in the late 50s, along with her rom-com Rock Hudson pairings such as *Pillow Talk* (1959) and *Send Me No Flowers* (1964), coincided with her ascent to the height of Hollywood stardom. Thrillers were fewer but still made up a significant portion of Day’s filmography. Her co-starring role in Hitchcock’s *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (1956) opened the door for her to dabble in the genre (Day and Hotchner). All of this is to say that *Midnight Lace* was slightly outside Day’s traditional star persona. As an example of said stardom, the film is a footnote. Bingham, for example, mentions the film only briefly in his discussion of Day’s film career and the decline of the female comic, arguing that the film best served her as a “fashion show” designed to display her clothing (Bingham 12–13). Corber is more direct in his assessment of the “tensions” in Day’s

stardom. He labels “chasteness” her defining characteristic, one which *Pillow Talk* narratively undermines but otherwise remained consistent throughout her career (Corber 154–157). This chasteness bears subtextual influence on *Midnight Lace*; though unable to label Day’s character “inexperienced” like previous protagonists, her persona implies a form of innocence upon which the film relies.

Despite the relatively little attention it has received academically, *Midnight Lace* represented a significant moment for American gaslight films. Universal Pictures jump-started the second cycle via an update to the picture that coined the very term. In setting, aesthetics, and narrative, *Midnight Lace* shares striking similarities to Cukor’s *Gaslight* while rearranging essential aspects for the sake of modernization. Miller’s film fulfills many of the “traditional” gaslight tropes established during the first cycle, including a Gothic upper-class domestic space, a husband with a complex nefarious scheme involving gaslighting, and a female protagonist who ends up in the arms of a “better” man. The primary difference involves the decreased obviousness of the husband’s scheme to the audience and the work *Midnight Lace* does to keep the abuser’s identity a mystery. Miller’s film successfully keeps its audience in the dark and pushes the gaslight film from melodrama to thriller, and from dramatic to horrific, and foreshadows the gaslight film’s future close relationship with the horror genre.

The film features Day as American heiress Kit Preston who lives in London with her businessman husband Tony (Rex Harrison) when she begins to receive death threats from ominous stalkers. Tony is the ultimate culprit but takes care to alleviate suspicions from the audience and diegetic onlookers. In the meantime, he uses a voice recording to

torment his wife into insanity and steal her fortune. The film's opening scene establishes the narrative stakes and the thematic importance of London as a Gothic setting (styled similarly to *Gaslight's* London). Kit gets lost in a dense fog while heading home from work. A high-pitched voice calls out to her, threatening her life: "Mrs. Preston, over here. So close I can reach out and put my hands on your throat!" Kit understandably panics, sprinting past overhanging twisted tree branches and black metal fences to get away from the voices unseen source. Miller frames Day behind the fence's spiked bars with the fog obscuring any other background images, metaphorically implying her presence in a foggy prison with her stalker. The opening titles play over Kit as she arrives home to her upper-class townhouse, with the word danger (attached to a construction sign) placed in the foreground. The musical score swells with dissonant strings and atonal sounds. Day's performance emphasizes Kit's panic even further with gasps and wide eyes as she enters the townhouse elevator. Floors ascend past the windowed door, contextualizing the setting (Kit and her husband must live on a high floor) and marking the domestic space safe and protective. The contextualization continues once Kit reaches her unit. The door slams shut and the music abruptly ends, leaving us with the impression of the townhouse as a protective bunker. These sequences mix that impression with Gothic signifiers, such as the aforementioned black fencing and heavy shadows dominating Kit's apartment once she is inside. Clear visual metaphors such as Kit's blocking behind the prison-like fencing or the "DANGER" construction sign undercut the safety that her home provides. Though Kit has escaped from her unseen stalker, she has entered into a Gothic domestic space that may be insidiously dangerous.

Sequences further into the film present angled architecture, chiaroscuro lighting, and expressionist color palettes to emphasize Kit's deteriorating trust in herself. When an unnamed character dressed in a black trench coat crawls up the building's scaffolding toward Kit's bedroom, she spies him in the window and cries out for Tony. Tony comes running and peers down the scaffolding, but the man has disappeared. The film covers both characters in shadow, but Kit stands against the wall bathed in red lighting. The rest of the room is covered in low blue lighting, and an outside light source casts long, disparate silhouettes onto the room's occupants as Kit begins to doubt the truth of her perception and even stops Tony from calling the police, fearing she may have been wrong: "Maybe it was just a shadow that I saw." The film's ending similarly wields shadows. After a scarred man crawls into the townhouse and frightens Kit (who believes he is her stalker and high-voiced murderer), Tony lunges after him and commences a protracted fight sequence again covered in shadow. Kit, who watches from the sidelines, has only part of her face covered in close-ups that recall the darkened aesthetics of *Gaslight's* conclusion. The lighting obscures the identity of both men as they grapple, and the visual borders between stalker and protector blur. Kit cannot see the victor until Tony steps into the blue light, but he reveals his scheme almost immediately: he was the stalker and caller all along.

With this revelation comes a shift of the townhouse from protective to threatening, even prison-like. The hallways, living areas, and staircase that were previously warm and inviting now appear cold, distant, and Gothic as Tony leers over Kit. "I'll be phoning the inspector in a few moments to report an accident...there have

been times, over these past three months, when I've regretted the inevitability of this moment." The conception of the domestic space as one governed by shadow and angular architecture recalls films from the previous gaslight cycle, especially *Suspicion's* concluding sequences in which Lina believes Johnnie is delivering poisoned milk. The townhouse's transformation into a maze from which to escape mirrors the protagonists' combined suspicion or discovery of their primary domestic partner as an evil manipulator. *Midnight Lace's* climax, with Kit crawling out the townhouse window and descending the scaffolding to flee Tony's clutches, visually metaphorizes the escape from such manipulation. Miller shoots the scene from a low angle, offering small glimpses of Kit through the scaffolding's twisted metal knots and platforms. The mise-en-scène provides a stark contrast between Kit's opening ascent and her closing descent. She begins the film rising above the fog to the protective domestic sphere and willingly climbs back down to that fog once the sphere turns against her. Thus, *Midnight Lace* draws implicit connections between the web of deceit Kit has been caught inside and the metal web she must navigate.

Through these specific sequences and the consistent undercurrent of architecture and stylized lighting, *Midnight Lace* fulfills the "paranoia and suspense" inherent to Gothic films (Doane 134). However, crucially, architecture is not immediately overwhelming to Kit as it is to previous gaslight protagonists. She is allowed to be a comfortable inhabitant and owner of her own house, a status that her accessibility to all parts of the house exemplifies from the beginning. Unlike the junk-filled attic in *Gaslight* or the boathouse outside *Rebecca's* Mandalay, the Preston townhouse is fully open to its

female owner before her husband reveals his nefariousness. Doing so allows him “to isolate her within the nuclear family, literally within the house,” which Waldman calls “a necessary condition for the husband's success or failure in invalidating the heroine's experience” (Waldman 35).

Tony's characterization throughout the film is crucial to his eventual reveal as a manipulative schemer. Tony exhibits behavior typical of gaslighting husbands. When Kit returns home after the opening scene, Tony defuses her understandable panic by chalking the threatening voice up to “practical jokers” (a suggestion that Kit notably receives with relief). Other characters follow suit; Kit's aunt Bea calls the proceeding death threats ordinary and recalls past experiences with similar phone calls. But these and Tony's reactions are portrayed less as direct manipulation and more due to naivete. Most other gaslighting narratives have focused exclusively upon their female protagonists, allowing little space for the audience to witness her husband away from her. *Midnight Lace* changes that structure, supplying several scenes in which Tony “confides” in other innocent bystanders about his wife's fearful behavior. These conversations slowly turn Kit's friends and family against her, but their purpose in doing so remains elusive until the twist ending. Outside of tiny seeds Tony plants to make Kit doubt her perception (a false remark about Kit overpaying a shop worker for a dress is a small example), Tony's actions are not obviously manipulative in ways similar to past partners in the genre.

Much of Tony's behavior — his supposed worry, his defense of his wife against accusations of mental illness, and even his apparent attempts to catch the stalker — characterizes him as an empathetic and loving husband. He eventually has no other

choice but to assume Kit is lying. The Prestons' repeated attempts to alert law enforcement are met with extreme, sexist skepticism from Inspector Byrnes, who would be the film's primary gaslighter if not for the film's twist. Byrnes calls the phone calls "pranks" and offers almost no solutions (though the ending reveals that he secretly bugged the phones). Byrnes later interviews Tony and Bea about a series of incidents, gradually twisting the accumulated evidence which Kit supplied against her. When Kit describes an attack in which a mysterious man invaded her home, Byrnes asks incriminating questions under the guise of logic: "Why didn't you fight back?" Eventually, the questioning becomes so aggressive that Byrnes implicitly forces Kit into an apology for her anger toward him and her perfectly reasonable (and necessary) warnings about her stalker: "I'm sorry, inspector. I shouldn't have said what I said." The gaslighting has forced her to vocalize her deteriorating trust in herself. A key aesthetic detail in this process of manipulation is the lack of diegetic voice over the phone. Though we see Kit answer the phone and react distressed to the contents of the threat, we are not privy to exactly what is said. The voice's only confirmed appearance occurs during the opening scene, and the others are implied to happen. Such reliance on implication keeps the existence of the other voice (and, by extension, the stalker) perpetually in doubt.

Midnight Lace teeters between a portrait of mental collapse and a gaslight narrative,

Miller couples these sequences with nods to three possible suspects other than Tony. The first, Malcolm, is the son of the Preston's maid Nora and frequently cheats his mother out of money. During a performance of *Swan Lake*, which both he and the Prestons attend, he accosts Kit for money and turns aggressive when denied. "One day,"

he growls, “you’ll both change your minds about Malcolm Stanley.” His behavior and vague threat implicate him in the stalking, though he does not appear in the film after the ballet. The second suspect is Brian Younger, a construction foreman overseeing work outside Kit’s townhouse. His relationship with Kit grows flirtatious during her ordeal, and the two grab a drink at a local pub. The encounter appears to set the stage for Kit to fall in love with Brian later in the story, but once Kit leaves the pub, Miller returns briefly to Brian while the barmaid asks him about a series of mysterious phone calls Brian made the night before. Brian asks to put the rings on his tab, and the camera pushes into a close-up as the score turns sonically sinister: Brian is still a possible culprit.

The final suspect is an unnamed man who appears in several sequences, watching Kit from a distance. His costuming (a long coat and wide-brimmed hat, both jet black) contrasts with the more colorful outfits worn by most other characters and recalls the violent gangsters or assassins found in other thrillers. What’s more, the film’s effort to hide his face suggests narrative importance that is yet to be revealed. In one sequence, the man turns away from the camera to watch Kit walk into Scotland Yard. In another, the man appears, watching Kit wait for a bus, directly before she “falls” in front of it (nearly to her death). Kit later reveals that someone pushed her, which implicates the man further. The film eventually exonerates each of these suspects. Malcolm, as mentioned, disappears from the narrative after his *Swan Lake* appearance. Brian rescues Kit from Tony during the conclusion. And the mysterious black-dressed man turns out to be the husband of Tony’s lover Peggy, who invades Kit’s home looking to rescue her before getting into the previously mentioned fight with Tony.

Midnight Lace, therefore, exhibits gaslighting on two levels: first, within its diegesis (Tony vs. Kit) and second, toward the audience (the film vs. its viewers). The film intentionally gaslights its viewers into believing Tony's innocence through his confiding in other characters and his ostensible "good husband" behavior. It also casts doubt toward the existence of the threatening voice on the other end of the phone by only providing Kit's reaction to it. Further doubt emerges from Kit's trip to a psychiatrist, who broaches the possibility of split personality disorder without committing to a diagnosis. Tony admits to Bea that he may have "no choice" but to believe the doctor's suggestion, pinning the blame on the authoritative and medical powers that be. These aesthetic and narrative choices allow for Tony's doubt in Kit to appear at least somewhat plausible, and the presence of three suspects other than Tony pushes suspicion away from him. In contrast to *Gaslight*, the Gothic melodrama to which *Midnight Lace* owes the most narrative influence, Miller's film leaves its husband's guilt in perpetual doubt until the final twist.

While this change does not represent a large-scale generic development in terms of tropes, the choice to make Tony appear trustworthy and the sole authority figure Byrnes seem overly skeptical upends the idea of the husband needing to be obviously sinister. Tony Preston is no Sergius Bauer, glancing menacingly in close-up or sneaking away in the middle of the night in front of the camera. Additionally, the twist implies an underlying insidiousness connected to the patriarchal matrimony, which was equally absent from the film's predecessors. The husband appears helpful but still emerges as a monster.

Tony's sycophantic transition into monster-dom leaves Kit without a patriarchal partner at the film's end, setting the stage for the film's fulfillment of another trope: that of the romantic "better man" whose arms the protagonist must fall into during the film's conclusion. Brian's flirtatious rendezvous with Kit earlier in the film would have made him the perfect fit if not for the subsequent implication as a stalking suspect. But Tony's reveal puts Brian's past actions (and his absence from scenes in which he might be the caller) in a forgiving light. The film's conclusion strategically places Brian at the bottom of the makeshift knotted ladder that Kit uses to descend away from her monstrous husband, and Brian's fulfillment of his "better" destiny comes when he ascends in an elevator to meet her in the middle. Kit struggles to shimmy along a thin piece of metal, and the two reach toward one another until Kit falls into Brian's arms. The score swells, and Brian holds Kit as they take the elevator down. "Just a moment, Mrs. Preston," he says. "You'll be alright. Just catch your breath." The final shot follows Kit as she walks away from the townhouse flanked by Brian and Bea, first in close-up before pulling back to a wider angle.

Though the trio's blocking makes Brian and Bea equals in their protection of Kit, the film's romantic gestures between Kit and Brian, as well as Brian's literal ascent to meet Kit and replace Tony moments after his evilness comes forth, allows the film to take on the Waldman's "wrong man" ideology. Kit can now choose to be with Brian in the future, just as she incorrectly chose to be with Tony (allowing the notion of patriarchal matrimony to represent stability still...as long as there is not a monster involved).

Midnight Lace ends by visually positioning its heroine between literal family

(Bea) and family that she may absorb later (Brian). Tony, the devious manipulator “husband,” has been pulled aside and imprisoned by an authority figure who ironically was most responsible for the film’s direct gaslighting (Byrnes). Thus, the film sticks to the Gothic melodrama tropes established in films two decades earlier but makes generic strides in manipulator identification. These strides constitute a move slightly away from melodrama and toward the thriller, a genre that relies on covering up information and delaying what the audience sees as inevitable (Konigsberg 404–421). This move presages an eventual shift for the gaslight film, from dramatic to horrific, further encapsulated in *Hush...Hush*, *Sweet Charlotte* and completed with *Rosemary’s Baby*.

Hush...Hush, Sweet Charlotte (1964)

Like *Midnight Lace*, Robert Aldrich’s 1964 Gothic thriller *Hush...Hush, Sweet Charlotte* remains relatively uncommented upon within film scholarship beyond its placement in the careers of its stars (Bette Davis, Joseph Cotten, and Agnes Morehead) and its director. Shelley, for example, writes that the film “recycled many of the same elements” from Aldrich’s 1962 release *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?* (57). Still, some groundwork exists. Williams writes that the film “challenge[s] the ideal of the young, pure Southern belle,” becoming “the first Southern maternal horror hybrid film” (Williams 11). Indeed, *Hush...Hush, Sweet Charlotte*’s semantic tropes recall horror and Gothic melodrama, making the film another important steppingstone for gaslight films as they move toward their eventual horror mode. Furthermore, Aldrich’s film pushes the gaslight film beyond its melodramatic roots and proves the subgenre capable of

sustaining its tropes even as its “normal” narrative underpinnings changed. In particular, *Sweet Charlotte* at first depicts an inciting incident concerning psychological manipulation (pinning a murder on the titular young girl Charlotte) and then jumps ahead 37 years to find Charlotte still living, now alone, in her family’s crumbling Southern mansion. The film presents some visual signifiers consistent with past gaslight works but tweaks their setting, context, and resulting narrative fallout.

The film opens with a series of contrasting establishing shots showcasing the Hollis mansion, situating the audience in the Southern Gothic setting. Aldrich shoots the estate in a wide shot, cuts at a slightly closer 45-degree angle of the same mansion, and continues this back-and-forth pattern while an argument between the patriarch Big Sam Hollis and Charlotte’s married lover John Mayhew plays in voiceover. Mayhew and Charlotte plan to elope during a party the Hollises are hosting, and Big Sam acts as a fatherly protector as he characterizes Charlotte primarily through her perceived innocence. His dialogue and Aldrich’s direction return the gaslight film to the “innocent female protagonist” trope, which was more subtextual in *Midnight Lace*. “My family’s seen this state crawling with lousy carpetbaggers that knew more about behaving like a gentleman than you do,” Sam says. “You ain’t gonna have my home or my child. I created both and I’m gonna keep ‘em. I ain’t watched over my girl all these years to have some creature like you take her away.” Mayhew defends Charlotte’s autonomy in response: “Your daughter ain’t a little girl anymore, and there’s gonna be other men in her life besides you.” As the two men circle each other in Big Sam’s study, Aldrich frequently shoots Big Sam from a low angle, emphasizing the power he holds over both

his domestic domain and Charlotte. In one shot, he leans over Mayhew with Charlotte's portrait hanging behind him as if he is standing guard; in another, Big Sam's portrait dominates the background over Mayhew as Sam instructs Mayhew to break off the relationship. The next scene, in which Mayhew follows through on Big Sam's demand, further drives home Charlotte's status as an innocent and trapped Southern Belle. As Mayhew leans into Charlotte and whispers his apology, Aldrich's camera circles around them, allowing a caged, chirping bird to slide across the frame. "I could kill you," Charlotte exclaims, a statement that ends up inciting the rest of the narrative.

These early scenes, shot primarily in classical Hollywood style, evoke a number of standard melodrama conventions Hayward describes: a woman suffering through social repression, a focus on family issues, and men who struggle to navigate a feminized domestic setting (Hayward 213–226). But the film turns its initial classification and Charlotte's innocence on their head when an unseen assailant murders Mayhew and pins it on Charlotte; a meat cleaver's disappearance serves as effective foreshadowing. Once the murder occurs, Aldrich changes his approach dramatically, with a silhouetted hand crawling along the wall next to Mayhew and a rising musical score that suddenly turns minor-keyed. A series of sharply-cut close-ups display the cleaver rising and falling and Mayhew's decapitated corpse. Mayhew's murder presents a deliberate shock, not only for the stylistic shift in the film's camerawork and music but also for the injection of gore into a narrative that previously appeared rote. The sight of Charlotte wandering into the crowded family mansion wearing a blood-stained dress shatters the melodramatic illusion of her established inexperience and innocence. *Sweet Charlotte* has taken its first step

toward horror. Big Sam leads her away from the stunned crowd, and the film jumps forward 37 years.

The rest of the film places Charlotte's early characterization in opposition to the desperate anger and grief which defines the rest of her life. The title sequence (which occurs after a "1964" intertitle) captures that dichotomy. Charlotte has remained confined to the Hollis mansion with the family housekeeper Velma. A group of local boys spread rumors of a "Hollis ghost" that murdered John Mayhew years before, and they goad one boy to try and enter and exit the house unscathed. His entrance and short exploration of the mansion's first floor begins the process of coding the previously bright, populated mansion as dark, empty, and Gothic. The boy encounters Charlotte in the living room, asleep in her chair. She awakens and starts after the boy (who panics and runs) before calling out "John?" Aldrich first places the audiences within the boy's perspective, with Charlotte's ghostly white nightgown clashing with the otherwise dark, moody interior. The music swells once again, and one can understand the boy's fear as she rises as the house's monster. But the sequence immediately changes once the boy runs away. Charlotte goes to a nearby window and gazes outside, and Aldrich pushes into a close-up and holds on Charlotte's face as the credits appear. Charlotte weeps silently.

The sequence exemplifies *Sweet Charlotte*'s perpetually dichotomous treatment of its titular protagonist. Charlotte Hollis is a harder-edged and slightly more contemptible character than previous gaslit women due to her moment-to-moment caustic treatment of those around her. She berates Velma and Drew constantly and clarifies to Miriam that her only reason for being invited to the Hollis house is to try and save it from

demolition. At one point, Charlotte even wields a shotgun to defend her ancestral home from construction workers. The way she stalks through her derelict family home, transforms her grief and misguided belief that she *did* murder John Mayhew into an outward facade of everyday monstrousness. Simultaneously, the film's opening scene, title sequence, and small moments interspersed throughout its runtime ensure that the audience does not lose sight of her childlike innocence. Thus, the film both fulfills and expands one of the gaslight film's primary tropes, demonstrating a filmic willingness to subvert expectations of the subgenre's protagonists. Gaslit women in these films are no longer required to be consistently naive or inexperienced (though, in this case, they are required to start that way).

Similar changes to the formula occur during the film's shifting of the monstrous abusers and subsequent "better man" ideology. Those shifts begin with the film's inciting incident. Party-goers pin John's murder (which remains unsolved in the film's time-jumped second half) on Charlotte. Her responsibility is generally assumed among the local populace (despite charges never having been brought) until the film's later narrative developments reveal John's murderer to be his wife, Jewel. She only reveals her responsibility in a posthumous letter delivered to Charlotte. In the meantime, Charlotte calls upon her wealthy cousin Miriam (Olivia de Havilland) and the family doctor Drew Bayliss (Cotten) to prevent the Hollis estate's demolition, making way for a highway that cuts through the area. Unbeknownst to Charlotte, Miriam and Drew conspire to drug her and commit her to an asylum, thus usurping her fortune. Charlotte begins experiencing vivid hallucinations of John Mayhew's disembodied head and hand after the drugging

begins, elements which are revealed to be props that Drew and Miriam wield in the dead of night. Velma, suspecting the scheme, goes to local law enforcement for help only to be fired and then bludgeoned to death by Miriam with a rocking chair. In the film's critical gaslighting sequence, Charlotte runs out of her room in a drug-addled haze, and her two abusers manipulate Charlotte into "shooting" Drew with a blank-filled gun, convincing her that she has accidentally killed him. The mental fog essentially constitutes a dream sequence, flashing back to the party during which the murder occurred. Charlotte at first dances with her illusion of John and kneels before him, only to look up and see a handless and headless body standing in his place. Shocked, she reaches out with her bouquet (which transforms into a gun) and fires incessantly at it, watching it collapse on the floor as she regains awareness and discovers that she just "shot" Drew. Miriam appears, feigning shock, and Charlotte screams in terror as she recognizes her horrible "deed."

Here we witness the full extent of Miriam's manipulation. "You idiot," she sneers. "You wretched idiot. He's dead. And you killed him." She runs for the phone, but Charlotte panics and begs her not to call the sheriff (just as Kit begged Tony not to phone Scotland Yard in *Midnight Lace*). "Don't call sheriff," Charlotte cries. "People are staring at me, hating me. It will be just like the night John was murdered...hate is everywhere, you can feel it." Miriam continues playing along with her manufactured scenario, essentially leading Charlotte to suggest hiding the body. "I've got lots of money, [and] I'll give it to you, all of it," Charlotte continues, and Miriam's eyes (captured in an extreme close-up) light up at the thought as she turns to face her gaslighting victim with a

look of relief and pity. The two drag Drew's "body," but Miriam increases the psychological pressure on her prey by vehemently berating her cousin: "I'm the one who's helping you! Do you want me to wash my hands of the whole thing? Call the sheriff? Is that what you want?" By placing the blame for Drew's death on Charlotte and then manipulating her to suggest hiding the body, Miriam and Drew essentially close off all hope of Charlotte escaping from the web of lies they have spun. And unlike other gaslight films, the abusers are successful in their aim to turn the victim insane. Miriam and Charlotte hide Drew's body, but Drew appears to Charlotte in the mansion when they return, covered in moss and mud. Charlotte screams and then goes mute while Miriam sits beside and pets her, her cousin now metaphorically domesticated, harmless, and no longer monstrous.

Several narrative and visual signifiers help position Miriam and Drew as monstrous and separate from the stable foundation of the patriarchal family. Their scheme and willingness to invoke fake decapitation and gore, coupled with Aldrich's Gothically-styled blocking and cinematography, imbue their gaslighting plot with undertones of horror. This is not altogether unsurprising in context; Kozol notes the frequent transformation of abusers into monsters within domestic violence narratives, for example (646–650). But similarly to Tony in *Midnight Lace*, Miriam and Drew appear initially helpful only to be later revealed as murderous, though *Sweet Charlotte* takes after *Gaslight* in its choice to show the two of them conspiring in individual scenes. Miriam, therefore, undercuts her familial relationship with Charlotte and the expectations of allegiance that come with it. Though neither Miriam nor Drew is Charlotte's husband

or romantic partner, the film allows them to transfer into the gaslighter role normally assigned to such a position. Charlotte's decision to call Miriam (and inadvertently incite the gaslight plot as a result) connects to Waldman's wrong man ideology by implying blame for what happens. If Miriam were not there, then none of this would have happened. Charlotte did not choose the wrong man, but she may have chosen the wrong cousin.

Sweet Charlotte's surface-level absence of a "better man" for Charlotte to elope with at the film's conclusion initially places its relationship to Waldman's ideology in doubt. However, the film's clever narrative arrangement allows for its adherence to that ideology. Though John Mayhew does not fit the traditional definition of a better man (he planned to leave his wife for a woman many years his junior and frequently appears headless), Charlotte's remembrance of him allows for this characterization. In particular, the "drugged haze" sequence positions him as the man of her literal dreams and the only memory that seemingly brings her any happiness. She never gets the opportunity to be "with" him in a physical sense, though the ending (discussed below) suggests living with his memory might be an appropriate recourse. The fit is not perfect and represents a subgenre reflexively shifting its core identifiers, but the result still perpetuates patriarchal undertones. For example, the film's final scene where the authorities lead Charlotte away brings John Mayhew's memory back into the story as a stand-in for a "better man" savior. As she sits in the backseat of a police car, an insurance investigator (previously on the edges of the narrative) delivers a letter from Jewel Mayhew, recently deceased. It admits that *she* murdered John, not Charlotte, and the news leaves Charlotte wide-eyed

and slightly smiling as the car drives away. Though not nearly the same as ending the film in matrimony, the affirmation of Charlotte's ultimate innocence and the continuation of John's memory allows her to think, "What might have been?" In this case, tragedy and lying monsters kept the protagonist from experiencing a stabilizing relationship with another man.

The film's ending intersects several of the gaslight subgenre's tropes with Aldrich's rearrangements of them. First, Charlotte follows *My Name is Julia Ross*' precedent by having Charlotte first overhear her abusers admitting to the plan (and celebrating it) and then exerting her last remaining breath of agency violently: she pushes a stone flower pot onto their heads, killing them both. Aldrich cuts from an overhead shot of the bodies to a medium shot of Charlotte, smiling in exhausted triumph. The moment refracts the similar victorious moments from *Gaslight* and *Julia Ross*, but this time extends the violence from the latter film to its protagonist. It is the female gaslighting victim, not law enforcement or an outside male force, who violently ends the gaslighting, a pattern that later films continue in the subgenres contemporary period. Charlotte is much more active in achieving autonomy over her abusers than the relatively passive women at the center of past Gothic melodramas, though the conflation of agency with overt violence in gaslight is, in a word, problematic. I contextualize and expand on this conflation in Chapter 3.

Hush...Hush, Sweet Charlotte, therefore, perpetuates several gaslight film tropes, especially the use of the Gothic domestic space, while changing or rearranging several others in response to a rapidly changing social environment. The film altogether

complicates the notion of angelic female innocence but provides enough context and dramatic irony to keep Charlotte sympathetic. Similarly, the “wrong man” is a “wrong cousin and family doctor,” and the eventual “better man” is a dead remnant of a tryst who only offers a final respite in memory. Regardless of these changes, this film demonstrates the subgenre’s continued adherence to underlying patriarchal principles as it moves steadily toward horror through its inclusion of on-screen gore and the macabre.

***Rosemary’s Baby* (1968)**

Rosemary’s Baby, adapted from Ira Levin’s 1967 best-selling novel and released a year later, has long been accorded significance by broader feminist film scholars. Its themes related to motherhood and the contemporaneous positioning of women in society (which the film reflects) are frequently covered. Clover, for example, frequently mentions the film in relation to horror in *Men, Women, and Chainsaws*, explicitly noting the challenge it presents to a genre that often presents male-centered stories: “...the experience of the affected woman herself is the center of attention and the experience of the husband of only passing interest” (Clover 86). Valerius extends this note by situating the film historically and socially within the American abortion debate, a context which imbues Rosemary’s demonic pregnancy with immediacy. In particular, Valerius notes the film’s articulation of “this charged public debate on abortion with a literary and cinematic tradition of horror” through the film’s intentional “perversion” of the Immaculate Conception narrative (118). Both interpretations foreground the film’s investigation of female experience within a politically tumultuous moment.

Changing expectations of the traditional family structure were natural extensions of these conversations, leading to Sobchack's focus on the "conflation of melodrama and horror with the invasion of the familial space" at the film's center. Comparing the infants at the center of both *Rosemary's Baby* and *2001: A Space Odyssey*, Sobchack points to a transformation of "both patriarchy and the nuclear family" that these films facilitated. Making a baby, a figure central to the family unit, either monstrous or metaphorically ethereal, explicitly critiqued the normality of that same unit. Children in horror films "are verbally articulated as 'possessed' and 'victims,' [but] they are visually articulated as in possession of or victimizing their households" (120). What was once preserved in melodrama was now being questioned or even attacked from within:

As the culture changes, as patriarchy is challenged, as more and more families no longer conform in structure, membership, and behavior to the standards set by bourgeois mythology, the horror film plays out the rage of paternal responsibility denied the economic and political benefits of patriarchal power. The figure of the child in the genre is problematic and horrific because it demands and generates the articulation of another figure, Father is the synchronic repressed who, first powerfully absenting himself, returns to terrify the family in the contemporary horror film. (Sobchack 180)

Sobchack's reading of the Father and Child as disrupting forces within the horror film's family unit signals a deeper thread of rebellion within the genre. In particular, *Rosemary's Baby* and similar films interrogate the perceived "validity" of traditional gender roles within their popular context.

This move away from patriarchal adherence suggests the tendency for horror films to become sites for progressive politics, particularly in the genre's foregrounding of both the monstrous Other and groups that have been "othered" by society writ large. Robin Wood's claim that "the true subject of the horror genre is the struggle for recognition of all that our civilization represses or oppresses" (Wood 1979, 9–10) brings into sharper focus the gaslight film's newfound project during this period. *Rosemary's Baby* is an example because it makes the unseen child monstrous and the mother's experience with sexual assault and pregnancy achingly frightening.

Each of these approaches to melodrama and horror proves helpful in this analysis, particularly when situating the film in relation to second-wave feminism's rise and the aforementioned women's liberation movement. Scholarship regularly links the film's politics with its genre definition (horror) providing background for the gaslight film's shift from melodrama to horror. Combined, its background and narrative (which follows Rosemary being gaslit into a demonic pregnancy by her desperate actor husband and their elderly Satanist neighbors) make it a natural fit for this study. Of the previous films, *Rosemary's Baby* most clearly represents the gaslight film's broad transference into the horrific by combining "the visual representation of bodily difference" with a consistent fear of death or harm (Grant 2015, 6). Rosemary's biological and social status as a hopeful mother becomes the focal point of the narrative's thematic and ideological concerns, and as a result the film acts as a noticeable inflection point within the gaslight film's history. The Gothic's multilayered gendered aspects naturally transfer over in ways that the following analysis will explore.

Rosemary's Baby wastes little time trading the castles, mansions, and upper-class townhouses from past films for a relatively modest apartment in the heart of New York City, a geographic displacement that allows for the continuation of Gothic tropes within a modernized counter-cultural context. The film opens with an ornately lettered title sequence (rendered in bright pink) overlooking New York. The camera glides over the city in a panning and tilting master shot, first offering a wide view of various residential buildings and green park areas before pushing closer in to accentuate the nearest group of buildings' angular Gothic architecture. The shot ends on a high-angle view of the Bramford, marked by pointed arches, columns, and piers, as Rosemary (Mia Farrow) and her husband Guy (John Cassavetes) walk inside. The film cuts to a medium-wide shot of the newlyweds underneath the Bramford's entry archway, and a realtor invites them inside. Immediately, the film has led viewers away from the varied bustling city and into a claustrophobic domestic space through its camerawork and mise-en-scène. The process continues for the next five minutes as the unnamed realtor leads them on a tour, during which the camera explores and exposes the film's adherence to Gothic domestic tropes. For one, the cramped hallways and rooms are adorned with ornate lamps, chipped wallpaper, and upper-class furniture (which the Woodhouses can claim "just by asking") with extended tracking takes following the couple to establish the story's primary space. But the sequence also stops in its tracks to acknowledge a huge dresser blocking an entrance. "That's odd," the realtor remarks, and the camera tilts downward to show tracks on the carpet; the previous owner must have deliberately moved it. The two men struggle to lift it aside, but the resulting door only leads to a tiny broom closet. "Why would she

cover up a vacuum cleaner and her towels?” Rosemary asks, and the realtor essentially closes off the inquiry: “I don’t suppose we’ll ever know.”

Rosemary’s Baby continues the tropes associated with a Gothic domestic space in the brief setting of its stage, moving beyond simple architectural tropes and into the theoretical. The film immediately fulfills Doane’s Gothic room barred from entry for the woman inside (the broom closet). Guy and the realtor move the proverbial roadblock aside, but the back of the closet acts as a second door blocking entry into a nearby satanist den. The presence of multiple doors exhibits Doane’s writing on the paranoid Gothic film’s use of doors “activating the dialectic of concealing and revealing” and the denaturalization of the familiar—in this case, the home (Doane 137). The process of denaturalization eventually extends to Rosemary’s neighbors (through their unusual behavior), to Guy (through his gaslighting and cold behavior toward her), and the notion of motherhood (through Rosemary’s painful, prolonged pregnancy), all of which take place surrounded by the Gothic. The Woodhouse’s friend Hutch imbues the space with even more dread by explaining its history, chiefly its dark past of murder, cannibalism, and witchcraft. Hutch’s casual verbalization of the violence while slicing open a cut of cooked meat (“The Trench sisters were two proper Victorian ladies. They cooked and ate several young children, including a niece”) conflates the Victorian era Gothic-ness of the film’s setting with the horror’s sensational undertones. The transformation of the gaslight film from a child of melodrama to a demonic offspring of horror begins here. Polanski’s presentation of the apartment remains admittedly non-Gothic (or at least suppresses its Gothic-ness) for much of the film afterward. However, the barred closet comes open at

the climax, revealing a passageway to their satanic neighbor's apartment. This revelation of an inner sanctum of sorts (Rosemary will discover her baby with demonic yellow eyes) coincides with the Gothic spaces in other gaslight films opening up to their prisoners over time.

If the Gothic domestic's pattern of "disrupt[ing] dominant culture's representations of family, heterosexuality, ethnicity and class politics" continues in *Rosemary's Baby*, one can sense this disruption most prominently in Guy's characterization (Halberstam 22–23). From *Hush...Hush, Sweet Charlotte*'s generic rearrangement of the gaslighter from husband to non-husband, the return to the former in this film may appear a way backward in the gaslight film's development. However, the film's push into horror means the subgenre could more accurately reflect the marital anxieties gripping its audience with the husband as a monstrous facilitator of Rosemary's pain in utero. Guy begins the film as an object of clear adoration for Rosemary, the platonic ideal of a white upper-middle-class husband (even as his struggles to find reliable acting gigs occasionally threaten the couple's finances). Rosemary even spends some of the film's first act prefacing her statements with "Oh Guy," a strategy positioning him as perfect partner and Rosemary as childlike admirer. But both illusions get slowly and systematically shattered over time, beginning with the introduction of their older neighbors, the Casteverts. The Woodhouses grow tired of their frequent and unannounced social invasions, in ways that point to underlying marital tension; the choice to go or not go to dinner nearly escalates to a shouting match. But Guy seems to take a liking to them after the dinner, remarking that he wants to "go over there again

tomorrow night and hear some more.” What follows is Guy’s and the Castevet’s systematic assault on Rosemary’s perception; having been taken under the Satanist’s wing with promises of professional success, Guy eagerly gaslights his wife at their behest.

The first instance occurs on the couple’s “baby night,” when Minnie Castevet arrives at their door with a chocolate mousse. Guy delivers it to Rosemary and insists that she eat it, outright denying her claims of a “chalky” undertaste. “I don’t get it,” he says. “That’s silly honey; there is no ‘undertaste.’” When Rosemary refuses to eat further, Guy guilties her into doing so: “Come on, the old bat slaved all day. Now eat it.” She refuses again, and Guy presses. “All right, then don’t. There’s always something wrong.” Rosemary relents but spills the rest into her napkin once Guy leaves the room. More so than practically any previous sequence examined in this thesis, Guy’s belittling insistence that Rosemary consume a neighbor’s (insidious) gift speaks to real-life gaslighting’s casualness. This continues even the morning after Rosemary grows “dizzy,” falls asleep, and is raped by Satan, all a result of the mousse’s implied anesthetic effect. Guy is quick to try and deflect the aftereffects, including a headache, lasting pain, and scars all over Rosemary’s body. “You didn’t go to sleep,” he says. “You passed out. From now on you get cocktails *or* wine, not cocktails *and* wine.” When she sees the scars, he blames his nails with a sheepish smile: “Don’t yell, I already filed them down...I didn’t want to miss baby night, and it was kind of fun in a ‘necrophile’ sort of way.” Later, Rosemary tries to confront him about how he “hasn’t been looking at her” since the night of her assault. “What are you talking about?” he responds. “I’ve been looking at you.” Guy’s refusal to

give an inch in any one of these small conversations could be perceived as a reflection of his enormous ego in a different context. But within the gaslight subgenre, his behavior continues a long history of psychologically manipulative husbands, each of whom tears down their female victims little by little. The most insidious implication of Guy's gaslighting is that Rosemary is to blame for worrying about these sorts of concerns in the first place. "I know I've been busy working on this part," he tells her. "But that doesn't mean I don't love you." Within the claustrophobic mental trap Guy and the Castavets have laid for their pregnant prey, the mere suggestion of something "wrong" falls back upon the person suspecting it. If she senses something is off, it is all in her head. Bringing it up only puts pressure on an already teetering marriage.

Guy's status as husband allows him a crucial level of Rosemary's trust, but his direct involvement in the Castavets' scheme also signals a patriarchal continuation of the themes at the gaslight film's heart. Even within the same era, past films did work to move the manipulator outside of the family metaphorically or otherwise. Guy is unmistakably under the Castavets' control, and scholars have been right to identify the titular baby as the film's monster. But his willingness to offer his wife as a target for sexual assault for the sake of his career deliberately critiques the implicit trust in traditional marital relationships. Gaslit protagonists have questioned and suspected their abusive husbands in the past, but few films have presented as snide an abuser as Guy. His swagger and sarcastic mockery of Rosemary's suspicions (disguised as light teasing) project overconfidence that the Castavets easily warp to evil ends. Even his name, Guy, invokes the macho-patriarchy undergirding to his behavior. It adds up to a husband defined, more

so than past gaslighters, by his adherence to masculinity's patriarchal norms. Guy is the man of the Gothic house pushed to near-parody. In the end, he cannot look at Rosemary out of shame, and she spits in his face when he tries to comfort her with the possibility of having a human child. Even at his lowest moments, Guy remains loyal to the family structure of eras past.

Later instances of gaslighting, such as when Rosemary is directed toward a "family" doctor and away from traditional medical help, come directly at the hand of the Castavets and their lackeys and are all calibrated for maximum physical discomfort. But they all return to Guy in one way or another. Later scenes devolve into increasingly horrific images of physical horror based around pregnancy anxieties. For example, when Rosemary's child arrives, the film slips into a hallucinatory dream state much like the one that appeared during her assault. Rosemary writhes in horrific pain as the villainous coven of neighbors descends around her, holds her down, and delivers the baby. Rosemary's cries ("Somebody help me!") are lost in the ever-loudening soundscape until the film cuts to black. When light returns, the camera pans down to Guy's face, looking directly into the lens. The close-up, shot from a low angle so that Guy looks down upon the audience, captures the husband's route from a source of comfort to a source of overbearing control. There is nothing Rosemary or we can do to escape his hardened gaze. If the baby is the "monster," then the husband is the privileged, patriarchal overseer of its arrival.

Rosemary's Baby may assign the gaslighter role to its husband, but the lack of a "better" man to rescue Rosemary makes it the first gaslight film that does not directly

follow Waldman's wrong man ideology. Instead, the ending finds Rosemary acquiescing to the role of the mother. After the film's twist, during which Rosemary's baby is revealed to be the spawn of Satan and the Castevets are revealed to be the head of a Satanic cult, the leader Roman Castevet invites Rosemary to rock the baby's cradle with an upside-down cross hanging overhead. "Are you trying to get me to be his mother?" she asks incredulously. "Aren't you his mother?" he responds, and Rosemary approaches the cradle as the cult gathers around her. The baby's cries eventually subside under Rosemary's care, and she smiles. The film then pans to the window before dissolving to the overhead view of the Gothic apartments seen earlier, while the score returns to the opening lullaby.

If the goal of the ideology Waldman describes is to help adhere its texts to society's patriarchal underpinnings through the use of a romantic male character, *Rosemary's Baby* ostensibly finds another avenue to do the same thing. One can read the protagonist's choice to remain a mother as a comment on the overwhelming biological magnetism that motherhood fosters in women. The film's ideology suggests that they cannot help but be mothers. But the film, as mentioned earlier, also toxifies this idea, replacing whatever family Rosemary had with a cult of evil lunatics. If Rosemary cannot resist the patriarchy's pull because of her baby (instead of romantic interest), *Rosemary's Baby* appears to question the morality of that ideological system. She makes a choice, but what choice does she have?

Thus, *Rosemary's Baby* is deeply emblematic of an era in the process of questioning societal assumptions. Its ending is decidedly non-committal on an ideological

level despite evoking “feminist arguments for sexual and reproductive freedom”

(Valerius 119). As Fischer comments:

Maternal ‘instinct’ triumphs; ambivalence is quashed. On the one hand, this ending can be seen as oppressive. Even in the hands of the devil, the dominant (Christian) ideology of mothering abstains. From another perspective, the denouement is progressive, rather than reject the devil-child (the virtual anti-Christ), Rosemary accepts it, distancing herself from the Catholic Madonna.

(Fischer 451–452)

The film’s teetering between these two readings again connects to the transitional period in which it was released, as debates regarding gender roles continued to rage in and around theaters.

From a generic perspective, however, the film is a more precise moment of development for the gaslight film, syntactically arranging gaslighting’s debilitating effects into a horror narrative. Previous films in the second gaslight cycle began this transition slowly; *Midnight Lace* has more in common with the first cycle, but *Hush...Hush, Sweet Charlotte* combines gaslighting tropes with the traditions of Southern Gothic horror. From here, it is a natural leap into a full-blown horror narrative in *Rosemary’s Baby*, even as melodramatic signifiers hang around its edges. The shift into a genre defined by its aim to evoke audiences’ nightmares, revulsions, and fear of the macabre coincided with growing skepticism and civil unrest during the 1960s, as various social movements bristled against women’s traditional roles in society. *Rosemary’s Baby* is therefore emblematic, turning a typical male-female marital relationship into a warden-

prisoner relationship; more so than past gaslight films, the abusers ignore, manipulate, and torture the protagonist, and the domestic space is even more suffocating. From this point forward, gaslight films would continue to showcase gender-centered anxieties through horror rather than melodrama. One can chart shifting social conceptions of female agency and womanhood through gaslight films' change in mode.

CHAPTER THREE

Contemporary Changes to Gaslight Films, 2000 to Present

Once gaslight films broadly shifted into the explicitly horrific with *Rosemary's Baby*, the subgenre went through various recalibrations, each of which reflected societal discourse around the concept of female agency and independence. Shoos outlines much of this history by describing the “nascent women’s liberation movement” (which she pairs with 2nd wave feminism) and its promotion of the idea that “personal” and “political” were one and the same. This idea coincided with spreading awareness of domestic violence as a national health crisis; 300 domestic violence shelters were open in the U.S. by 1982, for example (Pleck). The rise of American New Conservatism undid most of this in the 80s with films such as *Sleeping With The Enemy* (1991), reflecting an anti-feminist backlash taking hold culturally. Susan Faludi traces the view of feminism as “anti-family, anti-male, [and] anti-Christian” to a political, gendered debate playing out in popular media (Shoos 64). The 80s and 90s are ripe for discussing the gaslight film’s generic development and such development’s relation to popular abuse-centered discourse. Gaslight films such as *Sleeping With The Enemy* (1991), *Candyman* (1992), and *Dolores Claiborne* (1995) are examples of domestic violence narratives spread across multiple different genres that could easily be relabeled gaslight films.

This chapter, however, focuses on films from the contemporary period (2000–present) because of their increased stylistic, generic, and political self-awareness. Recent movements such as #MeToo have foregrounded women’s experiences with sexual harassment and assault, including psychological abuse. Jones labels this movement “a

deep cultural reckoning,” which drew attention to the ways women’s voices have been “systematically ignored, undermined, and excluded...for the better part of a century” (Jones 1–2). As awareness of and commentary regarding psychological abuse towards women evolved, so did films depicting it. *Flightplan* (2005), *Unsane* (2017), and *The Invisible Man* (2020) possess detectable markers of such awareness, both through their depiction of its central victims and in the narrative restructuring compared to previous cycles. In these films (and others like them), the narrative frequently moves outside of an explicitly domestic space into other spaces, sometimes public, each capable of adapting Gothic features to create the subgenre’s necessary, imprisoning claustrophobia (an airplane cabin or a shadowy mental hospital, to name two). The change demonstrates gaslighting’s geographic malleability and pervasiveness and suggests more profound realism in the idea that a group of people is inherently skeptical of a woman calling for help. The protagonists in these films also follow in the vein of Julia Ross, Charlotte Hollis, or Rosemary Woodhouse, each aware that their perceptions are being ignored or minimized and taking steps to challenge the gaslighting towards them. They are on guard all the time and distrustful of characters who might have been trustworthy in previous eras. Lastly, each film offers similar climaxes: the woman realizes she is gaslit and, to gain the upper hand on her abuser, “plays along” with his manipulations by surrendering her agency and performing the damsel role (ironically, one that most directly recalls Ingrid Bergman’s Paula in *Gaslight*). These films also shirk some other previously established tropes. The women are no longer “required” to end up in the arms of a non-problematic male partner (though they each have a connection to a problematic male

figure coming into the narrative).

These changes reflect the overall historical development of gaslight films that scholars identify as integral to the definition of “genre.” Grindon notes that a combination of “external and internal changes” are inevitable during a subgenre’s development, both of which hinge upon “the social conflicts animating a genre” (Grindon 52). More immediately, the changes fulfill Grindon and other scholars’ definition of “genre” in relation to film cycles. If the first cycle of the gaslight subgenre included an abundance of “prototypical works” which “give a genre stability” (Lakoff 12) and the 60s represented a continuation of the first cycle that developed the budding subgenre out of its initial melodramatic leanings, then the modern period completes its definition by attaching its newfound horror affiliations to the cultural reckoning described earlier. In short, the subgenre now concerned “long-standing dramatic conflicts vital to the culture” much more openly than before (Grindon 44). The subtext became text, despite these films continuing perpetuation of problematic abuser characterizations (Shoos 56). Thus, the gaslight film’s multiple cycles allow for it to take on the “subgenre” mantle.

Though not necessarily “reflexive,” modern gaslight films frequently “demystify [the] fictions” of their previous cycles through “playful, parodic, and disruptive relation to established norms and conventions” (Stam xi). Gaslight films in the first and second cycles accumulated the syntactic and semantic conventions described in previous chapters. Third-cycle films both embody, interrogate, and modernize these conventions. Moving beyond the early films’ misfit of generic leaning (melodrama instead of horror), *Flightplan*, *Unsane*, and *The Invisible Man* take cues from *Rosemary’s Baby* and are

outright psychological horror films. In *Flightplan*, the gaslighting itself results from a broad conspiracy involving not just the primary gaslighter but one of the flight attendants. But airline passengers with no knowledge of the villains' scheme also get caught up attacking the protagonists' experience. The unexpected inclusion of numerous "accidental" gaslighters supercharges the notion of a single abuser and connects the idea to broad skepticism toward women in general. *Unsane*, meanwhile, transforms a mental hospital into a Gothic nightmare, imbuing bland exteriors with shadows. There is still a conspiracy, namely that of the hospital trapping healthy patients while it collects their insurance, and the film also makes its villain an unhinged stalker who can cross illogical distances and somehow remain employed on the hospital's staff. Transforming a corrupt healthcare conglomerate into one of the two primary gaslighting villains imbues *Unsane* with a trenchant awareness of broad systemic abuses towards women. Blaming a single "wrong man" is no longer tenable. *Invisible Man*, meanwhile, crosses its gaslighting plot with science fiction, weaponizing the debilitating absences found in *Rebecca* into a physical monster. Here, the transformation of the protagonist's abusive partner into a brilliant tech genius (whose literal invisibility originates from a classic Universal Pictures monster film) evolves and further problematizes the notion of the abnormal abuser. Thus, the gaslight film's increase in severity and conflation of particular tropes, along with its mixing of multiple genres, constitute a broader trend toward better engagement with ongoing cultural conversations.

Each film offers relatively easy solutions to its woman's gaslighting: vindictive retribution. As mentioned, all three narratives reach a point where the protagonist

becomes aware of her abuser's manipulations but willingly "plays along" to gain the upper hand. This leads to a climax that allows her to perform violence on that abuser, connecting a surrender *and* eventual assertion of female agency to explicit violence. The reduction of escape from abuse to a simple solution ("Just kill them!") problematizes the films' depiction of the female experience but also solidifies gaslight films as horror pictures. Previous films introduced murder as a potential narrative solution (*Sweet Charlotte* in particular), but the solution's evolution into a repeated convention is an excellent example of the subgenre's overall development. Hitchcock's pair of films ended with the reveal of the husband's innocence; *Gaslight* made the husband guilty but let law enforcement whisk him away as punishment; *My Name is Julia Ross* allows for the abuser's death but takes the trigger out of its protagonist's hands. The second cycle problematized the patriarchy, but it chalks up the only direct "victorious" murder to the protagonists' debilitated mental state. Charlotte could push that pot because she is insane. Yet the three films in this chapter each feature an otherwise "stable" woman overcoming the antagonist through outright murder. We began with the embrace of a safe and misunderstood husband, and we will end with a knife to the throat.

Contemporary gaslight films continue to deliberately undercut the safe patriarchal conclusions to Hitchcock's Gothic romances, but their replacement solutions are, nonetheless, in Hess Wright's words, "simplistic and reactionary" (Hess Wright 60). The narrative necessitates the violence; each woman sees no other way out, and the choice to commit violence emerges not out of a desire for revenge but out of desperation. Yet those caveats connect again to the "wrong man" ideology. Women who kill their abusers (with

little legal scrutiny) can do so because the abuser is almost illogically monstrous, creating a problem with no other solution. The transformation of the abuser into an overtly nefarious “wrong man” also forces the protagonist into the act of murder, deliberately coded as a *choice* on her part, and egregiously equates the concept of choice with female agency. This calibration, as noted by several feminist scholars, “ignores the power relations, economic factors, and social structures that shape gender relations and family dynamics” (Kozol 663). What’s more, the relegation of agency to an act of violence minimizes the other ways that abused women have consistently employed non-violent tactics against abusers to survive abuse (Abraham). All of this is to say that the surface-level shift away from Gothic romance film’s adherence to patriarchal relationships, hinted at in several 1960s films, still problematizes the notion of agency. Contemporary gaslight films imply that the victims of psychological abuse such as gaslighting always have an option for escape (murder!) and transform that option into “thrilling entertainment...making violence against women by their male partners into horrifying but pleasurable spectacle” (Shoos 83).

In total, while these changes to the gaslight film offer a surface-level corrective to previous, equally problematic depictions of abuse, the changes themselves help solidify gaslight films not as a collection of independent cycles but as a series of films capable of long-term development; i.e. a subgenre. They build upon the tropes of the previous era and change them through reflexive rearrangement, fulfilling what Deleyto calls the “constantly shifting nature of the generic system, in which genres are in a process of constant evolution” (Deleyto 225).

***Flightplan* (2005)**

Robert Schwentke's *Flightplan* wastes no time reflecting some of its precursors. The film's inciting incident—the death of protagonist Kyle Pratt's (Jodie Foster) husband, which investigators rule a suicide—hangs the specter of a loving husband (David) over the entire narrative. However, this time, every indication suggests that Kyle's husband was loving and non-manipulative (in contrast to Rebecca or other absent embodiments of ideals). What's more, the film pairs Kyle with Julia, her 6-year-old daughter, who becomes the focus of the film's high-concept scenario. Partway through the flight, Julia disappears without a trace, and none of the passengers (or attendants) have any memory of her being on the plane. Eventually, the film reveals that Carsen, the air marshal on board (Peter Sarsgaard), and stewardess Stephanie (Kate Beahan) have conspired to kidnap Julia, hide her in the plane's hold, and hijack the plane for a \$50 million ransom. Carsen has hidden explosives in David's casket after murdering him and plans to frame Kyle (due to her knowledge of the plane's design as an aviation engineer) after forcing her to unlock the casket.

This set-up immediately embodies some of the core tropes of gaslight films, namely a claustrophobic setting and the central woman's immediate trauma. In *Flightplan*, however, these conventions are modernized. Instead of a traditional Gothic mansion serving as a prison-like domestic space, the film places Kyle in a sky-bound plane and makes her eventual panic a more public affair. Beyond the cosmetic implications (the transference from an old apartment to a sleek passenger jet signals a move into a more contemporary world), the new setting also implicitly moves the

“housewife” out of the house. Though still defined, essentially, by her relationship with her dead husband, Kyle is allowed to exist outside of domestic spaces, even if the aircraft provides much of the same claustrophobia. Yet, as mentioned, Kyle’s agency is hampered mainly by the film’s scenario, particularly her husband’s death. Kyle’s grief over the sudden loss (from what she outwardly refuses to accept as suicide) is a frequent source of dramatic tension and becomes the “excuse” for her paranoid behavior. Dialogue further emphasizes this tension when Kyle explains why they are traveling. “We’ll be in New York,” Kyle says. Julia responds, “Daddy too?”

Kyle (its traumatized female protagonist) exists in relation to the film’s protective male figure. This definition remains after his death, particularly after the introduction of Kyle’s daughter Julia (who the film cuts to from a shot of David’s open casket). As Julia sleeps nearby, Kyle swallows back a pair of pills (later revealed to be the anti-anxiety medication Klonopin). Through the associative sequence, *Flightplan* openly defines Kyle according to her status as an anxious widow (i.e., loving wife) and a grieving parent (i.e., mother). This definition, and Kyle’s nervous reaction to the idea of parenting on her own, is rigidly patriarchal, emphasizing the father’s absence as particularly debilitating and Kyle’s attempts to fill that space as ultimately futile. The feminine caregiver replaces the masculine defender of the family, which fosters mother-daughter tension. Kyle’s reliance on medication connects to that futility; the film implies that she is incapable of handling reality (let alone a child) independently.

Narratively, the film borrows much of its structure from *Gaslight*, particularly in its opening. Like *Gaslight*, *Flightplan* opens with the untimely death of a stabilizing

figure and the movement *away* from a domestic space. *Flightplan* treats David's death as its inciting action: international laws require Kyle to ferry his body from Berlin to the United States. The death sets the stage for a return to a claustrophobic space that is consistently coded Gothic: the state-of-the-art aircraft in which most of the film's action will take place. Complete with a winding staircase (further reminiscent of the staircases in *Gaslight* and *Julia Ross*), frequent shadows, chiaroscuro lighting, and divides between first class and coach (high and working-class), the plane offers a corrective evolution from previous gaslight films. The domestic can now move smoothly into public transportation spaces or from private to public. The film takes the "paranoia and suspense," which a Gothic home fosters, and demonstrates that it can emerge outside of the domestic (Doane 134). Furthermore, the plane's architecture, and that architecture's importance to the narrative structure, recalls gaslight film's previous architectural designs. Kyle constantly navigates the enormous maze-like rows of seats while searching for Julia, and Schwentke uses long tracking shots and darkened mise-en-scène to emphasize the plane's near-Expressionist styling. Parts of the plane being inaccessible to Kyle until late in the film (particularly the hold) assist in this regard, fulfilling Doane's note about this phenomenon discussed previously (Doane 137). Kyle is not the master of the space around her.

The plane's arrangement of its passengers and staff allows for a change to occur on the level of the singular gaslighter trope. In contrast to previous gaslight films, the gaslighting itself is not instantly connected to an evil male figure but instead treated as a natural occurrence among both the crew and passengers. Throughout the film, murmurs

among the staff set the stage for a general feeling of disbelief toward Kyle. “It’s okay to hate the passengers,” says one stewardess. As Kyle brings her allegations forward, Schwentke frames her to suggest she is cornered or ignored by an uncaring staff. One sequence blocks Kyle from angles that make the stewardesses domineering as they crowd around her; in another, the camera pushes in on Stephanie as she tells Kyle that she has not seen Julia to her face, as if to emphasize the act of gaslighting visually. At the same time, *Flightplan* continuously puts the public-ness in the foreground. Passengers meet Kyle’s increasing desperation with whispered verbal snipes, annoyed at her interruptions of their individualized private activity. When Kyle asks a pair of children whether they have seen Julia, their father encourages them not to talk to Kyle. As Kyle sprints through the plane, passengers murmur disparaging remarks to themselves. This combination has broader ideological implications. In particular, the conflation of the public and the private underscores an awareness that gaslighting is no longer confined to the domestic space.

The film nonetheless features a male primary gaslighter (and female secondary gaslighter) with outrageous or unrealistic motives. The film’s formal choices continuously foreground Carsen’s frequent gaslighting of Kyle and the pilot Marus Rich (Sean Bean). Like Stephanie, Carsen openly lies when questioned about having seen Julia. The camera pushes in from a medium close-up to an extreme close-up as he answers, “No, I didn’t,” and looks directly at Kyle. The cinematography appears to emphasize the crushing loss of hope for Kyle, but the visual focus on Carsen’s behavior foreshadows his involvement in the scheme. In fact, Carsen and Stephanie’s scheme is illogical and even ludicrous. But leaving aside the plan’s validity and the fact that it

hinges upon so many things going right to succeed, its reliance on murder and kidnapping immediately places Carsen outside the realm of “normal” men. Stephanie’s involvement appears half-hearted at best, and she abandons Carsen and his scheme before his climactic confrontation with Kyle. Once the film reveals Carsen’s involvement with Julia’s kidnapping and his true nature, Schwentke frames him to accentuate his immorality. In one shot, Carsen’s features are deliberately warped and made inhuman through the use of a fisheye lens and turquoise neon lighting. Kyle knocks him nearly unconscious with a fire hydrant and injures his ankle, so blood partially obscures his face, and he walks with a noticeable limp. At this point, his ruthlessness takes on a nearly demonic quality; he taunts Kyle and laughs at her attempts to run from him, even using his gaslighting as an insult. “Nobody’s coming for you,” he says with a smirk. “You know why? Because nobody cares.” The sequence’s central power imbalance (and the relationship between fleeing victim and powerful abuser) comes through formally, with Kyle and Julia framed underneath a metal walkway in a low-angle shot and Carsen unknowingly looming over them in the reverse high-angle shot. Throughout the film, Carsen has implicitly wielded his status as a male law enforcement officer to gaslight Kyle and turn others against her. At this moment, that elevated social position is made literal.

Carsen’s characterization necessitates Kyle’s violent confrontation and his eventual defeat. After being chased to the plane’s nose (and discovering a drugged, unconscious Julia), Kyle sneaks past a rambling Carsen and into a small air duct with the detonator to Carsen’s rigged explosives. At the last moment, Carsen notices and fires a

flurry of bullets at the air duct's closing door as Kyle activates the detonator, encompassing the entire section in a fiery explosion but protecting herself and Julia from harm. The crowd outside the (landed) plane gasps and turns before Kyle emerges from the smoke and debris holding Julia, backed by a triumphant musical score. Law enforcement rushes to help her, with wailing sirens on trucks and helicopters, before the film fades to the following day. Kyle, still holding Julia, speaks to Rich, who apologetically notes that Julia "looks like you." "Yeah," Kyle says. "There's a little bit of her dad in there too." After officers walk by with a handcuffed Stephanie (who escaped the plane during the climactic showdown), a pair of FBI agents ask Kyle to identify a morgue director related to David's murder before Rich rebuffs them on Kyle's behalf: "Can it wait?" Though there is no direct implication of a budding romance between them, Rich's gesture of good faith for Kyle (after spending hours unknowingly denying Julia's kidnapping) reflects the old habits of classic Gothic films in which a "better" male figure arrives as a corrective for the monstrous abuser and a representative for a functioning, stable patriarchy. His purpose fulfilled, Rich exits, letting Kyle exit with Julia in her arms while overhearing the murmurs from the grounded passengers (including "See, I told you!" and "She's so brave.").

The film's final moments further accentuate Kyle's status as a mother, momentarily substituting the previous husband (David) with a good-natured male figure. The last shot, in which Julia awakens (presumably for the first time since before her kidnapping) and asks, "Are we there yet?" returns Kyle to her position as a mother. For the first time, there is some assurance that she can fulfill the role by placing Julia in

Kyle's protective arms as the two climb into a van. She has proven capable of physical protection extending to violence while simultaneously fielding the kind of innocent questions one might expect from a child. Kyle's arc not only covers the journey from damsel to agent but also from feminine to masculine, coding her confrontation with Casen as the culmination of her growth into a dual role as mother (holding Julia in her arms) and father (protecting "the family" at all costs). Her insecurity as a single mother, noticeable in her difficulty comforting Julia in the film's initial act, ties directly to David's absence, the closeness of his casket, and the passengers' and crews' skepticism towards her ("How could a mother lose a child?" they wonder). The scene in which Carsen opens the casket to find it empty (besides a bundle of explosives) drives home the "missing" element of the film's patriarchy. But over time, due to her narrative and formal positioning, Kyle rebalances the traditional family structure by herself. The film's frequent changing or challenging of its other tropes speak to the gaslight film's flexibility and self-awareness in the mid-aughts.

***Unsane* (2017)**

Released twelve years after *Flightplan*, Steven Soderbergh's *Unsane* offers the kind of surface-level generic evolution that its chronological distance from the previous film might suggest. The film stars Claire Foy as Sawyer Valentini, a victim of stalking (the film's online synopsis describes her as a "troubled woman") who has moved from Boston to Pennsylvania to get away from her stalker David Strine (Joshua Leonard). Sawyer holds a high-powered bank job but continues to suffer debilitating effects of past

trauma. Her mother — who offhandedly refers to Sawyer’s father’s death years prior — appears to be her only social contact outside of work. Though the film does not introduce the concept of stalking into the narrative until later, early scenes demonstrate Sawyer’s tenuous relationship with physical intimacy. She meets an online date at a bar 10 minutes into the film and openly invites sex but is triggered when he initiates contact and hides in the bathroom with multiple prescription pill bottles. The incident pushes her to seek counseling, which she ostensibly finds at Highland Creek Hospital. But after a seemingly helpful counseling session and after being told to fill out “boilerplate” forms, Sawyer is practically imprisoned in the hospital for seven days after involuntarily committing herself. Inside, she is repeatedly gaslit and experiences physical abuse (such as being strapped to her bed or drugged) under the guise of medical treatment. The situation worsens when David appears disguised as an orderly named George Shaw. David feeds Sawyer medication, murders Sawyer’s mother when she tries to intervene, tortures and kills a friendly patient named Nate when David overhears him flirting with Sawyer, and traps Sawyer in solitary confinement.

The film’s narrative set-up immediately integrates conventions from past gaslight films, including a Gothic space (modernized like the one in *Flightplan*), the presence of gaslighting by multiple characters, and the violent retribution described earlier in this chapter. To begin, however, Sawyer fits the trope of a traumatized female protagonist. Her characterization largely hinges upon her trauma and uneasy, even prickly relationship with men in general. Sawyer’s boss makes an unwarranted pass at her by inviting her to a banking conference in the opening sequence. Her colleagues adjacent to her in the

workplace remark on her cold demeanor to customers over the phone. And her only romantic or sexual encounter in the film ends in a way that gestures toward deep-seated wounds, the effects from which she is still suffering. *Unsane*'s use of its first few minutes establishing Sawyer's fraught male relationships reflects similar work in *Flightplan* and other gaslight films. *Unsane* also signals an undefined traumatic experience (or experiences) through Sawyer's reaction to a sexual encounter. The prescription pill bottles (also carried over from *Flightplan*) mark a connection between medication, trauma, and overall emotional instability, which in turn leaves Sawyer vulnerable to the type of gaslighting she later experiences at the hands of both Highland Creek and David. The film frequently pulls bait-and-switches through its editing and cinematography, featuring glimpses of David at the edges of the frame (he appears so briefly at Sawyer's office that he is difficult to recognize) or making it appear as though Sawyer is "seeing" him in other members of the hospital's staff. Sawyer screams for help from inside the patients' sleeping quarters on her first night, desperate for an escape in a critical sequence. Hospital staff burst through the door, and David (or someone who appears as David to Sawyer) immediately rushes up and towers over her. Sawyer strikes him in disgust, but a reverse shot reveals that "David" was actually a staff member who only looked like David to Sawyer. The film continues its pattern of keeping the audience off-balance, unlike Schwentke's film, which confirms Julia's existence throughout.

Similar to *Flightplan*, *Unsane* packages a logically innocuous building in a Gothic veneer. Highland Creek's lobby and front-facing counseling rooms are brightly lit and manned by smiling people, trained to de-escalate any sign of customer disgruntlement.

When Sawyer's mother complains to management, the hospital's overseer vaguely mentions how *well* Sawyer is doing in their care while threatening legal action if Sawyer leaves before her "voluntary" commitment is over. Once Sawyer involuntarily commits herself, however, the hospital becomes a maze-like series of dimly lit hallways, beige-colored walls, and a basement full of dark solitary confinement cells. Highland Creek, in other words, is Gothic.

Xavier Aldana Reyes points out that the Gothic's primary identifying factors are the distinct "Gothic atmospheres, settings, music, tropes or figures" meant to inspire dread or fright (Aldana Reyes 388). To this end, Soderbergh's decision to shoot the entire film on an iPhone 7 Max accentuates the building's overwhelmingly claustrophobic nature. The camera's wide-angled lenses bring out the building's and staff's threat to Sawyer. Soderbergh shoots each sequence in which Sawyer takes medication in low fluorescent light, while David's close-ups present a visually warped version of his face courtesy of those same lenses. Like the Gothic domestic spaces presented through the gaslight film's historical development, parts of Highland Creek are inaccessible to Sawyer. The hospital's punishment for repeated "outbursts" (of which Sawyer's are almost all justified) is to send patients down to the hospital's basement and seal them in solitary confinement. Thus, the film fulfills the tenets of the traditional Gothically-tinged "domestic" space (even as that space moves *away* from the domestic) both visually and narratively.

Unsane is particularly unique within the gaslighting subgenre because of its demonstrated awareness of corrupt institutions and rampant casual sexism facing women.

In particular, the film initially treats the American healthcare system as its primary source of physical and psychological abuse, upending the notion of gaslighting as a conflict stemming from an amoral individual. Most of the film's minor characters (many of the men in positions of power, such as Sawyer's boss or Highland Creek's head physician) either wave away or refuse to hear Sawyer's concerns. During her daily visit to the aforementioned physician Dr. Hawthorne, Hawthorne is distracted by a phone call and refers to the other physician's notes before simply prescribing her an increased level of lithium. When Sawyer's mother calls a lawyer to try and get Sawyer out of the hospital, the lawyer does not take the problem seriously and hangs up on her. Even David's new identity "is that of a controlling male" (Tallerico). The only person to believe Sawyer and try to confirm David's identity (besides her mother) is fellow patient Nate who David eventually murders.

Thus, though the film introduces David later on, the film treats a massive healthcare conglomerate as the narrative's primary gaslighter, merging the Gothic space and the claustrophobic paranoia it fosters into a single entity. The transference of gaslighting from an abusive individual to an ingrained bureaucratic system suggests a growing awareness of widespread biases and abuse towards women, which the film manifests in ways both large and small. Such a transference also serves as an evolution and continuance of the "wrong man" ideology that marks other gaslight films. *Unsane* differs from most other Gothics in this respect, at least on the personal level. It deflects implicit blame for David's abuse away from Sawyer through its flashback sequence chronicling Sawyer's hospice work through which she "met" David. As Sawyer explains,

David began to covet Sawyer while she cared for his father in his final years, even as she pointedly expressed discomfort at his romantic passes. A series of vignettes within the flashback crystallize the devastating psychological toll David's stalking fosters. In the first, David grips Sawyer's hand, unprompted, during his father's funeral. Soderbergh cuts to a close-up on Sawyer as she furrows her brow, clearly disturbed and confused, and David turns to her: "He would want us to be together." Later, David sends Sawyer a massive rose bouquet with a note confessing his love ("You are always on my mind."). Soderbergh dollies out into a wide shot as Sawyer's co-workers, most of them women, surround her desk and gossip, clearly misunderstanding the context of David's gift. Next, David begins spamming Sawyer with texts in the middle of the night, each more unnerving than the last: "Seriously, call me. I love you!!" followed by "...or at least text!!" and "Helloooooo??!!" Sawyer blocks his number before falling asleep. The next morning, she walks out of the shower to find a blue dress laid out on her bed, implying that David broke into her home to leave it there. The flashback effectively ends when Sawyer consults a local detective, who advises her to stay off social media, alter her routine, and otherwise adhere to a book titled "The Gift of Fear, and Other Survival Signals That Protect Us From Violence." Sawyer's look of horror, which Soderbergh holds in a tight close-up as she stares into the lens, solidifies how her life has come apart at the seams. All of this is to say that *Unsane* hammers home Sawyer's complete innocence in her relationship to David: in no way did she "choose" the "wrong man." It offers an implicit critique of that very notion.

At the same time, the film shifts the "wrong man" ideology onto a "wrong

hospital,” simply rearranging the problematic involvement of female choice in the initiation of psychological abuse. Though Highland Creek commits Sawyer involuntarily, the “fault” for the situation is frustratingly applied. The hospital takes part in a multi-layered insurance scam (imprisoning patients until their insurance refuses to pay), but it requires them to sign away their freedom unknowingly. Thus, *Unsane*, like *Flightplan*, moves away from previous gaslight films such as *Midnight Lace* or *Gaslight* by making it clear that the protagonist did not subconsciously “invite” her male gaslighter. However, it still gestures toward some manufactured culpability for her predicament. The film clarifies that Sawyer is not at fault but still includes scenes in which administrators can legally refer back to Sawyer’s signature on her consent forms. She may not have known about the scam any more than Rosemary may have known about Guy’s amoral ambitions. But the signature remains.

Still, David’s introduction and the film’s stalking flashback return to classical notions of an overly nefarious abuser. Though said flashback ostensibly removes Sawyer from responsibility for David’s involvement, it also characterizes David as mentally unstable. Later sequences in which David murders Sawyer’s mother, electrocutes Nate to death and kills another patient with his bare hands all solidify David as a classically evil abuser far outside the “norms” of society. He is unquestionably a monster, and *Unsane* perpetuates the myth that only monsters are capable of damaging psychological abuse.

The film’s other generic shift occurs during its climactic sequences, in which Sawyer confronts David in solitary confinement directly about his stalking, psychological violence, and generally insane behavior. The cell, padded with pointedly blue walls that

recall David's obsessive statement that Sawyer "look beautiful in blue" during the film's title sequence, becomes the site for the two's verbal sparring. Though cowering in the corner, terrified of David during the first few moments of his arrival, Sawyer eventually lashes out at him, dramatically attacking his behavior and inability to integrate into society. David proposes marriage, using Sawyer's mother's wedding ring that he stole, offering an escape to a small cabin in New Hampshire. Sawyer's response rejects his suggestion of romance:

"We will never be happy. You could never make me happy. Look at where we are, David. Look at what you've done. There is no path to happiness from here for either of us. You keep saying that you love me, but you're not capable of loving anybody. [Your father] losing his mind was the best thing that could have happened to him. What, too mean? If you love me, love me like this, David! That sweet, kind girl in your head? That's not me." (Unsane)

Sawyer's monologue, coupled with the scene's cramped, blue *mise-en-scène*, metaphorically moves the confrontation from horror-riddled confinement into the realm of fantasy and domesticity. David's decision to lock Sawyer in a blue-walled cell symbolizes his fantasy of a life with her, locked in a confined space (such as his cabin) with the same color as what David thinks Sawyer "should" wear. Sawyer's verbal attack nearly breaks that illusion, and David responds by briefly choking her in a fit of rage before retreating from the cell. When he returns the next morning with breakfast for Sawyer, she exhibits a similar surrender of agency in the form of "playing along" with his psychological manipulation, complimenting him on his manners (Thanks for this, I'm not

used to people being so considerate.”) before tricking him into bringing a specific female patient down to the cell to “prove” his sexual prowess. Knowing the patient (Violet) hides a shiv in her waistband, Sawyer sneakily grabs it and stabs David in the neck to escape the cell before running through the hospital looking for an exit. Here, the film’s generic gaslight elements converge as she sprints through a mazelike series of dark hallways: the traumatized protagonist overcoming an insane or nefarious abuser in a claustrophobic and Gothic-inspired space by surrendering her agency only to reclaim it violently. Sawyer will later kill David by slicing his neck open in the forest surrounding Highland Creek, which Soderbergh shoots with a blue filter covering the camera lens, completing the climactic violence trope.

Unsane is most important to the gaslight film in its depiction of a publicly maintained gaslighting system. Highland Creek is ruthless and methodical in manipulating Sawyer, just as David is in *his* manipulation. Like *Hush...Hush*, *Sweet Charlotte*, *Unsane* introduces multiple sources of gaslighting. But it combines this notion of multiple gaslighters with *Flightplan*’s notion of public scrutiny. David is a monstrous lunatic, but the film’s second gaslighting body is an entire hospital absorbing insurance money by attacking Sawyer’s trust in herself. Soderbergh moves the gaslighter out of the house and makes medical invasiveness psychological as well as physical.

The Invisible Man (2020)

If there is any doubt about the continuance of Gothic gaslight film tropes in contemporary cinema, Leigh Wannell’s *The Invisible Man* offers a reassurance in its

opening shot: a castle-like house, sitting atop a cliff, overlooking the churning waves below. The film's placement at the end of this chapter is purposeful because of its relatively recent release—February 2020—and its striking generic similarity to the Gothic romances that began this thesis. The film, which rearranges the narrative elements of H. G. Wells' original text, exhibits the developed versions of standard gaslight film tropes while weaponizing the absences found at those films' centers. Where there once was a "missing" figure who metaphorically haunted the protagonist (a dead mother, a missing child, and so on) now stands the titular invisible man who physically manipulates and attacks her.

Of all gaslight films, *The Invisible Man* is the most clear-eyed and progressive in its depiction of gaslighting itself. Its focus on the systematic deconstruction of protagonist Cecelia's perception, coupled with the film's subtextual acknowledgment of widespread biases against women, represents the gaslight film coming to contemporary terms with itself. Yet the film fits all of the problematic tropes snugly, particularly that of the monstrous abuser, while stylistically mixing a science fiction concept with Gothic romance signifiers. The film follows Cecelia Cass, played by Elizabeth Moss, and the fallout from her escape from Adrian Griffin, her abusive and manipulative boyfriend with a vast fortune procured through his groundbreaking work in techno-optics. Once Cecilia escapes Adrian's clutches, he stalks and torments her using an invisibility suit, turning her friends and family against her to force her to keep their baby. Cecilia eventually overcomes Adrian by attempting suicide (causing him to reveal himself and "protect" her baby), only for Adrian's brother Tom to be in the suit. Cecilia visits Adrian, apparently

newly escaped from Tom's scheme, only to confirm that Adrian was behind it all. Cecelia murders Adrian with a hidden second invisibility suit and wanders away from his house, freer than she was after her last exit.

The film reinterprets a pair of foundational science fiction texts, Wells's *The Invisible Man* and its Universal monster movie adaptation, as a paranoid gaslight thriller, a move that speaks to the gaslight film's ability to intermix with other genres at this point in its development. With this malleability comes the paradoxical continuation of the genre's significant tropes. Adrian represents the overtly nefarious manipulator archetype reaching its theoretical apex. A movie monster has become a gaslighting abusive man.

The film's opening sequence (in which Cecelia drugs Adrian with diazepam, tiptoes through his seafront mansion, turns off all of the necessary cameras and alarms, and slips away into a waiting getaway car) captures the effects of Adrian's physical and psychological violence without depicting the violence itself. It relies instead on its mise-en-scène. The opening shot, as mentioned, sets the Gothic stage with Adrian's cliffside high-tech castle held in a low-angle master shot. This image recalls both Manderley from *Rebecca* and the Cornwall mansion in *My Name Is Julia Ross*. Once inside, Wannell alternates between close-ups and long shots of empty concrete hallways to capture Cecelia's anxiety. As she dresses out of her nightgown and into escape-appropriate clothes, Wannell pans away to one of those empty hallways, zooming in slightly on the pitch-black bedroom from which she just escaped. Paintings and modern furniture adorn the mise-en-scène, but the blue-tinted low light and occasional musical swells imbue them with menace. The house is cramped, overwhelming, and malicious, and its

oceanside placement allows for a recollection of domestic gaslighting spaces from the past. When Cecelia descends a staircase into Adrian's private lair, meanwhile, the production design recalls a science fiction film. Computer screens combine with glass walls and metal tables, giving the entire room a glossy digitized sheen, while the rest of the house's Gothic-ness is still present. This blending of semantic elements from different genres speaks to the tension at the film's center as it oscillates between Gothic horror and science fiction throughout. Furthermore, Cecelia's behavior tips us off to the room being off-limits, which in turn fulfills Doane's note about the Gothic house's forbidden room, though her planned movements represent another development away from past gaslight films in which the protagonist gets "lost" in the maze (Doane 136). This time, she immediately (but fearfully) navigates through that maze with apparent familiarity. Elizabeth Moss's performance similarly tips us off to the extent of Adrian's abusive control without the film directly portraying it in the opening scene. This woman is frightened of the man (or monster) she is trying to escape.

As if to make the house's prison-like qualities more explicit, Cecelia's escape involves her climbing over a tall concrete wall surrounding the grounds and into the dark forest outside. Once she makes it through the trees, she is forced to wait in terror for her sister Emily to arrive and whisk her away in a getaway car. Once Cecelia is in the passenger seat, Adriana explodes out of the darkness and slams his arm through the window, putting Cecelia in a literal and metaphorical chokehold until Emily accelerates away. Cecelia may have gotten away from her abusive partner's clutches, but the transition away from a contained system of psychological and physical abuse brings with

it a dense thicket of trauma and ongoing fright.

If the opening scene establishes the film's primary Gothic setting, the rest of the film takes cues from both *Flightplan* and *Unsane* by moving most of its narrative action outside of it. The first and second acts take place beside Cecelia as she stays at her friend James' house, sharing a bed with James' daughter Sydney. Wannell continues many of his formal tendencies in the setting's characterization. Winding long takes focused on seemingly empty hallways take center stage as Adrian stalks Cecilia in an invisibility suit. Shots imply his presence without ever depicting it by holding on innocuous compositions of household spaces. Though not "Gothic" in the same concrete-centered way as Adrian's fortress, these segments still include domineering lighting, maze-like hallways, and an attic hidden from Cecelia that later proves pivotal in her battle against Adrian once she discovers it. In other words, the house is implicitly coded Gothic, which helps the film metaphorize notions of lasting trauma beyond the spaces in which Adrian's abuse took place.

A majority of Adrian's gaslighting and intimidation take place during these segments. As a preamble, authorities discover Adrian's "body" (dead from apparent suicide), allowing Cecelia to relax for the first time since escaping. Then, during a wide shot that lasts for nearly two minutes, Cecelia cooks eggs on a stove before leaving to wake up Sydney. A chef's knife slides behind the counter, affected by an invisible force, before the stove inexplicably turns up to full blast, lighting the eggs ablaze and setting off the fire alarm. Cecelia rushes to the kitchen in panic before Sydney uses a fire extinguisher to put them out, and the two share a moment of relieved silence. "Wow,"

Sydney sighs. “You did that.” Cecelia exhales with her. “Yeah.” Already, the film presents a misassignment of blame onto its central female character, and Adrian accomplishes this using a third character as a proxy.

Later scenes ratchet up the film’s creeping paranoia by demonstrating Adrian’s invisible presence. When Cecelia hears faint footsteps in the middle of the night, she investigates and finds the front door unlocked and wide open. She stands outside for a moment, with her fogged breath in frame, before Adrian’s fogged breath appears behind her. Just as Adrian’s memory metaphorically follows Cecelia, Adrian literally follows and stands over her, unseen but felt. His later actions isolate her from her family and support system. Before a job interview, he removes her work samples from her portfolio and drugs her with the same diazepam she used during her escape. During the interview, she blacks out after embarrassing herself in front of the interviewer (who hits on Cecelia before diving into questions). Cecelia, who suspects Adrian’s involvement, turns to Emily for help, only for Emily to give her the cold shoulder over an email Cecelia never sent. When Cecelia returns home and opens her laptop, there is a mean-spirited email sitting in her “sent” folder, which causes her to collapse in teary-eyed horror. Sydney comes to comfort her, but Adrian punches Sydney just as Cecelia reaches out her hand. James comes running in as Sydney repeatedly shouts, “She hit me!” Despite Cecelia’s desperate pleas, James whisks Sydney out of the house for the sake of her “safety.” These scenes result in Cecelia being separated from any influence other than Adrian’s, a key feature of textbook gaslighting (Abramson).

The film’s clearest connection to and development from *Rebecca* arrives after this

isolation, with Cecelia outwitting Adrian slightly and pouring paint on his suit to confirm his presence. Adrian runs to the kitchen and washes it off, but Cecelia chases after him, leading to a tense visible/invisible standoff. Wannell focuses on Cecelia in a wide shot as Adrian grips her neck, lifts her off the ground, and throws her against the wall, eventually panning around to follow apparent nothingness around the kitchen. The shot compositions recall *Rebecca*'s twist, with the camera focused on something that is not "there." But *The Invisible Man* weaponizes the absence which marked the earlier film; rather than just haunt Cecelia psychologically, the unseen monster stalks and attacks her physically. Wannell's film, therefore, develops Hitchcock's visual concept for the modern era. As social awareness of assault and gaslighting grows, the threat is more "real" in the film's depicting it.

The third act sees Adrian murder Emily and frame Cecelia, so she is committed to a mental hospital where she learns of her previously unknown pregnancy. While the film's depiction of the hospital is not as openly overbearing or Gothic as the one in *Unsane*, Cecelia's entrapment in a literal cell reflects the mental and metaphorical state Adrian's gaslighting has left her in. It does not take long for the doctors to inform her that she is pregnant; she is trapped by both the hospital walls and the baby tying her to Adrian. *The Invisible Man* uses this opportunity to critique patriarchal notions of motherhood through Cecelia's unexpected pregnancy. At her lowest point of control, trapped in her hospital cell with an invisible Adrian hanging over her, Cecelia recognizes the power her pregnancy (and Adrian's desperate desire for a child) potentially affords. She sneaks a pen into the room, stands under a running showerhead, and readies the pen's

sharp point over her wrist before speaking to Adrian directly: “You won’t get the baby, and you won’t get me.” Cecelia slices the pen into her wrist before Adrian physically stops her, allowing her to stab him directly through the invisibility suit. From this point forward, everyone else can see him as he flickers in and out of visibility. Cecelia’s weaponization of her pregnancy deliberately undercuts traditional assumptions surrounding pregnant women’s to-be-protected social status, exemplified and critiqued in *Rosemary’s Baby*. Past films mined that status for tension and paranoia-inducing identification; Mia Farrow’s performance and that film’s direction work together to produce maximum discomfort and empathy. Wannell’s film, in contrast, allows its pregnant protagonist to flex her agency over her domineering “husband” figure. Granted, that “agency” amounts to a threat to her own life, which reflects Shoos’ violent “spectacle” critique. Nevertheless, the film’s allowance for female mobility within that status speaks to the social climate from which the film emerged.

Like the earlier fight scene, the following attack sequence allows gaslighting to take on a heightened physical form. Security guards swarm Cecelia when she runs out of her cell, but they ignore her heightened pleas for them to look behind them where Adrian stands, flickering in and out of sight. The guards’ inability to trust Cecelia and do as she asks (“He’s right there!”) leads to their violent deaths. Adrian brutally kills each of them, spraying blood and viscera against the facility’s white walls. The depiction amounts to the weaponization of gaslighting’s commonly psychological effects. The guards refused to believe a woman crying for help, and the result is violence tinged with horrific gore.

Finally, the film returns Cecelia to the opening castle during its conclusion, with

her resourcefulness (she hides Adrian's second invisibility suit in a small nook multiple scenes earlier) allowing her to overcome her abuser violently. The sequence fulfills the retribution trope in a way designed to elicit maximum satisfaction in its viewers. Cecilia visits Adrian for dinner wearing a wire, intending to get Adrian to admit to his scheme (rather than framing Tom). But Adrian's refusal pushes Cecilia to head to the bathroom, don the second invisibility suit, grab Adrian's knife-wielding hand, and slice his neck open, leaving him to bleed out on the floor. Moments later (in full view of Adrian's security camera), Cecilia emerges from the "bathroom" dressed normally, feigning shock and horror as she calls the police. But she steps out of the camera's sight, hangs up the phone, and sits on a small pair of steps overlooking Adrian with a blank, calm expression as the life drains from his body. "Surprise," she whispers, echoing a taunting remark Adrian said to her during his gaslighting. Adrian's eyes widen just slightly before he turns over and succumbs to his wound, with his "victim" staring down at him in a low-angle shot reflective of Guy's domineering gaze at Rosemary.

The sequence involves several literal and metaphorical reversals: from visible to invisible, living to dead, hunted to hunter, and victim to domineer. In the clearest departure from past films, a segment of the Gothic domestic space (the nook hiding the suit) is now closed off to its male occupant. The scene's concluding shots depict the gaslighter's murder as the same vindictive form of revenge seen in both *Flightplan* and *Unsane*. David from *Unsane* and Adrian even share the same manner of throat-slashing death. Like the two films before it, *The Invisible Man* offers a do-or-die solution to gaslighting that relies on violent spectacle, in this case, a spectacle that explicitly

rearranges the central roles. Shoos calls climaxes such as these “postfeminist fantasies” because they tend to brush past domestic violence’s complexities and shared culpability in favor of easy solutions (Shoos 81–82). Broadly, the subgenre suggests that escape is in the eye (and the hands) of the victim.

Thus, *The Invisible Man* is much more cognizant of the threats and sexist skepticism facing women in its outright depiction of them. The esoteric or suspected threats have been made physically real, and being pregnant no longer necessitates deference to a male “superior.” It also moves wholly beyond the “wrong man” ideology by allowing Cecelia to walk away from Adrian and James (who, in a more traditional gaslight film, might readily serve as the “better” man). Yet the film, beyond its sci-fi high-concept narrative, depicts assault and gaslighting in a way that bears little resemblance to real-world instances; it still occurs at the hand of a monster (in this case literally descended from classic monster movies) and the total isolation Cecelia experiences necessitates a fake act of suicide and eventual murder to save herself. Despite its consciousness mentioned above, *The Invisible Man* still keeps us at a comfortable distance from the realities of physical and psychological abuse. The film stops short of implying, “if you watch and do not take action, you simply participate in the continuing crisis” (Halberstam 1993, 261). Reviews called the film “a powerful story of abuse [and] gaslighting” even if its depictions are not without their disconnections from gaslighting as it really occurs (Kerr). Still, by displaying clear development of conventions first seen 80 years earlier, *The Invisible Man* joins *Flightplan* and *Unsane* as clear signs of the gaslight film’s vitality and propensity for evolution going forward. This cycle’s changes to the

gaslight film format provide crucial evidence of the group of films as a legitimate subgenre as described by this chapter's genre studies scholars. They also demonstrate gaslight films' status as historical and cultural artifacts, chronicling changing attitudes toward gender roles, growing awareness of psychologically abusive behavior, and shifting representations of the female experience through its eight-decade development.

CONCLUSION

Over the past 80 years, the aesthetic and narrative styles of gaslighting's portrayals on film have developed a direct link to gaslighting's perception within the popular American consciousness. These styles eventually coalesced into repeated conventions which borrow heavily from the tropes of gaslight films' "dominant" genres. The Gothic-coded settings, "innocent" protagonists, monstrous gaslighters, and a "better" man/rescuer add up to a legitimate subgenre of both Gothic melodramas and horror films. Further, these conventions create "easy" solutions to black-and-white problems which "relieve the larger society of responsibility" for the epidemic of psychological abuse toward women" (Shoos 12). That subgenre's development, and the label itself, speaks not only to gaslighting's continuing relevance, but to genre's function as an ideological mechanism. My decision to use that label is meant to closely tie their faux-progressive politics to these conventions. If genre is truly a "vehicle for ideologies," then this thesis offers an illustrative example.

Reflecting this goal, my approach focused on the films as cultural and industrial artifacts primarily using a genre studies approach informed by Klein, Grant, Grindon, Shoos, and others. I justify the subgenre categorization by splitting its development into three cycles (Klein) and referring to Grindon's argument that genres solidify into genres over the course of multiple cycles. The first chapter zeroes in on the Gothic melodramas in the 1940s, a period which established a number of gaslight film tropes by proxy. The focus on four specific films leaves open numerous other texts. Entries in Hitchcock's filmography such as *Shadow of a Doubt* (1943) and *Notorious* (1946) could join other

gaslight films: *Undercurrent* (Vincente Minnelli, 1946), *Shock* (Albert L. Werker, 1946), and others. Each demonstrates the Gothic-coded settings, innocent female protagonists, and nefarious gaslighters that define the early gaslight film. They also set the stage for problematic ideological conclusions, including the “wrong man” ideology that blames the gaslit victim for her choice of monstrous man.

The second chapter moves to a second cycle in the 1960s, tying the 1960s’ tumultuous socio-political conflicts to the changing depictions of gender roles in gaslight narratives. Gaslight films’ dominant genre shifted this decade from melodrama to horror, reflecting growing awareness and frustration of women toward the patriarchal structures in which they operated. Husbands, children, and the very concept of motherhood grew even more monstrous than before, even as *Midnight Lace*, *Hush...Hush*, *Sweet Charlotte*, and *Rosemary’s Baby* mostly fulfilled the previous cycle’s conventions. The trend continues to evolve as contemporary gaslight films demonstrate their predecessors’ collective influence while forging ahead into new narrative and aesthetic territory. These films moved across genres and retrofitted their modern settings and characters with Gothic and horrific conventions. The process exhibited the subgenre’s growing awareness of multiple systemic injustices facing women, while its propensity for further development was on similar display. That said, the gaslighting in these films still relies on the fantastic, creating a layer of separation that absolves their audiences of responsibility.

Refining this project’s scope inevitably created gaps in its approach and opportunities for further research. In particular, examining the gaslight film through a

cultural studies lens would allow for a deeper dive into the surrounding socio-political movements and understandings of psychological abuse that informed gaslighting's depictions. Waldman's integration of Clara Thompson's "The Role of Women in This Culture" (1941) in Waldman's Gothic melodrama survey offers a model for this sort of analysis. Thompson gestures toward post-war economic factors which trapped women "in a patriarchal culture...in which positive gains for them are failing" during the 1940s (Thompson 307). The Gothic woman's film's emergence during this period, Waldman argues, is not coincidental, considering the genre's tendency to foreground the same "role redefinition, frustration, and confusion" felt by women within industry and the household (Waldman 30). Future scholarship can expand on the conflation between social reality and cinematic representation in other eras of the gaslight film, which my analysis only introduced. The second chapter refers to several cultural debates regarding abortion and gender roles during the 1960s. But the choice to skip over the 1950s, during which the gaslight film was relatively dormant, ignores several films that feature gaslighting without necessarily fulfilling the rest of the subgenre's conventions. *Cause for Alarm* (Tay Garnett, 1951), *Sudden Fear* (David Miller, 1951), and *Dial M for Murder* (Hitchcock, 1954) are immediate examples ripe for analysis. Chapter Three only briefly contextualized #MeToo's impact and it will be critical to track future gaslight films as the movement affects our collective perception of female-targeted abuse.

Gender and feminist studies approaches are equally crucial going forward. My analysis refers to various film scholars who reckon with gender (Modleski, Valerius, Clover, others) but I do not substantially consider their frameworks. Such consideration

can begin with several of Modleski's influences, such as Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure In Narrative Cinema" and E. Ann Kaplan's *Women and Film: Both Sides of the Camera*. Both works interrogate the notion of female spectatorship, the gaze, and Hollywood's penchant for privileging patriarchal points of view. While they are not contemporary, their influence on more modern scholars opens the door for new theory. In addition, a star studies framework would help comment on the actors' personae in relation to their "innocent" or "nefarious" characters. Chapter Two mentions Doris Day's chaste persona but comments little on the others' effect on their respective films.

It is my sincere hope that the observations made here draw attention to the ongoing ideological conflicts playing out in the films we readily consume, discuss, and consider. Women targeted for gaslighting and other forms of psychological and physical abuse often have too little support, and cinematic depictions of their plight tend to belittle their uncomfortable, horrific reality. Representation matters, especially when it implies that gaslighters are monstrous and their victims are defined in relation to other men. Labeling this new subgenre, with luck, brings further light to Hollywood's tendency to perpetuate harmful myths surrounding gaslighting, gender roles, and domestic violence. As a Motion Picture Association executive wrote in 1947, "the motion picture...leaves behind it a residue, or deposit, of imagery and association" (Mayer 34). The work to improve the effect of these deposits continues in perpetuity.

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