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The Feminine Appeal of British Horror Cinema

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Abstract

When *Séance on a Wet Afternoon* (1964, Bryan Forbes) was set for release, cinema managers were advised that ‘feminine appeal’ was a strong angle for publicity, and the film went onto to be a critical and commercial success. Yet it is relatively unknown in existing academic histories of horror cinema. The female lead, spiritualist premise and psychological horror makes it an uneasy bedfellow with existing accounts of 1960s British horror films, which focus on the sexualised colour-saturated violence of Hammer Studios and its associated offspring. This article reverses this trend by revealing a cycle of 1960s black-and-white British horror films whose primary textual address is to women, manifested through complex female characters, interiority, and stories of motherhood, stillbirth and child murder. Utilising Mary Ann Doane’s work on maternal melodrama, the article explores the parallels between this cycle and the woman’s film, and draws upon reception analysis in order to consider how the critics responded to the female-centered films. It is suggested that not only have film historians failed to note that this cycle exists, but more importantly they have also failed to understand how frightening the films could be for a female audience.

Keywords

British cinema, horror cinema, spiritualism, *Séance on a Wet Afternoon*, woman’s film, melodrama

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When *Séance on a Wet Afternoon* (1964, Bryan Forbes) was set for release, cinema managers were advised that ‘feminine appeal’ was a particularly strong angle for publicity. The press book suggests that exhibitors should make a leaflet ‘aimed directly at the ladies for insertion in the large-circulation women’s magazines or for door-to-door distribution. Quantities should be left in beauty parlours, cosmeticians, hats and dress shops and all leading stores and restaurants’. The following text was suggested for inclusion: ‘Ladies, Do you have a choice in which film your husband or boyfriend sees? If so, then you will want to know about *Séance on a Wet Afternoon*’, explaining ‘it tells the off-beat story of a woman who is a professional medium, her weak-willed husband and the terrifying real-life events which spring from her sheltered world of twilight’. Describing the two stars, ‘Richard Attenborough and Hollywood’s Kim Stanley’, the pitch concludes ‘*Séance on a Wet Afternoon* is an unusually powerful drama which every woman will want to see’ (Rank Organisation 1964, 4). The macabre film went on to be a critical and commercial success in Britain. *Kinematograph Weekly*’s ‘Box Office Business’ revealed in the first week ‘the critics mostly preferred *Séance on a Wet Afternoon* from Allied Film Makers... [the film] had an excellent press and has opened to satisfactory business, very strong on Saturday and Sunday’ (‘Box Office Business’ 1964a, 9). It ‘ended up its first week at just under £3,000 which pleased Rank very much and second week started at the same level’, while by its third week the film had ‘more than satisfied its backers’ (‘Box Office Business 1964b, 8; ‘Box Office Business 1964c, 7). When it was released in the United States at the end of the year, it met with almost-unanimous critical adoration, the reviews lingering on its darker qualities: the *Boston Globe* referencing it in terms of ‘tragedy and horror’ (Adams 1964, 14), the *New York Times* describing it as a ‘flow of sensuous experience that has the eeriness and tension of a spell’ (Crowther 1964, 30), while the *Washing Post* revealed it is ‘a film of haunting, enveloping horror’ (Coe 1964, 26). Kim Stanley went on to be nominated for an Academy Award for Best Actress in a Leading role, while the *New York Film Critics* and the US National Board of Review voted Stanley the year’s best actress (Rank Organisation 1964, 2).

Yet despite the international plaudits, *Séance on a Wet Afternoon* is relatively unknown in histories of British horror cinema. The female lead, the preoccupation with spiritualism and the psychological (rather than corporeal) horror mean that *Séance on a Wet Afternoon* does not fit into established histories of horror film, where in the 1960s, a very different kind of text is foregrounded. When *Séance on a Wet Afternoon* opened at the Odeon Haymarket in London, across town the ABC-South was showing Hammer’s *The Evil of Frankenstein* (1964, Freddie Francis). Of Hammer’s offering, the *Observer* commented it was

a 'horror film, so foully true to the genre', and classified it as a 'nightmare' X certificate, that the 'woman with knife in her chest and just the handle showing – is the *hors d'oeuvres*' ('Briefing: Films' 1964, 22). The pre-eminence of Hammer during the 1960s is evident in the critical histories of the genre. In *Hammer and Beyond: The British Horror Film*, Peter Hutchings argues that 'to a certain extent, 1956 – 64 can be seen as the classic phase in British horror production...the most famous (or infamous), influential commercially successful sector of British horror at this time was that produced by the Hammer company' (1993, 54), while David Sanjek writes, there was a 'rich and substantial body of horror films produced in England from the 1950s onward, particularly but not exclusively those released by Hammer Studios' (1994, 195). In *A New Heritage of Horror: The English Gothic Cinema*, David Pirie (2008) reveals his obsession with Hammer as he devotes unnecessarily large chunks of the book to the studio, while in his forty-page chapter on horror in Sixties British Cinema, Robert Murphy (1992) dedicates the first thirty pages to Hammer and its offspring.

I'm concerned here with gendered implications of the films and studios chosen to represent British cinema in the 1960s. The British horror films usually discussed, particularly those made by Hammer, are commonly characterized by the kind of motifs described in the Observer review: physical violence, in full colour, often sexualised and enacted upon women by male or male-coded monsters. Indeed, in Hutchings' book on Terence Fisher, he notes almost in passing, female rape as a plot point across a number of Fisher's films, including *The Two Faces of Dr Jekyll* (1960) and *The Curse of the Werewolf* (1960) (2001, 14-16). As Sue Harper points out, 'Hammer was conservative in the textual functions it allotted to women... the studio's preoccupation in the 1950s had been with the uncontrollable body; by the 1960s that body had become exclusively female' (2000, 114). And when we think of 1960s British horror, it is these films we remember. But what about the 'feminine appeal' of *Séance on a Wet Afternoon*? How does a horror 'film that every woman will want to see' fit into this history?

This article suggests that – contrary to existing writing - there is a cycle of 1960s British black and white horror films whose primary textual address is to women. The progenitors of these texts come not from Hammer but the nervy black and white European horrors, *Les Diaboliques* (1955, Henri-Georges Clouzot) and *Les yeux sans visage* (1960, Georges Franju), not to mention *Psycho* (1960, Alfred Hitchcock). The cycle includes *Séance on a Wet Afternoon* but also *The Innocents* (1961, Jack Clayton), *The Haunting* (1963, Robert Wise), *Night of the Eagle* (1962, Sidney Hayers) and *Bunny Lake is Missing* (1965, Otto Preminger). These films are often mentioned in passing in horror film histories, frequently

under the subheading of ‘psychological thriller’. For example, Murphy’s final comment in his horror chapter is on ‘the other important group of horror films made in the 60s are contemporary thrillers which involve madness or the illusion of madness – what Todorov calls “an experience of limits” – rather than supernatural forces’ (1992, 199). This may be an ‘important’ group of films to Murphy, but his references to madness films, including *Bunny Lake is Missing*, take up less than one page. The 1960s films discussed here have become relegated to a brief reference, a line, a paragraph, a final page in a chapter as a bridging device, or filed away neatly in the catch-all ‘psychological thriller’ footnote. Or, in the case of *Séance on a Wet Afternoon*, almost never referenced at all. It is a shame when this cycle of films so clearly provides a basis for later female-led horror films, including *Rosemary’s Baby* (1968, Roman Polanski) and *The Haunting of Julia* (1977, Richard Loncraine).

There is more to this exclusion though than a lack of fit in prevailing discourses. I’m suggesting here that there are gendered implications arising from the decisions made by male writers as they select, categorise and write our horror film histories. As it currently stands, when discussing 1960s horror films, if the terror is interior, formed by a woman, taking place inside her mind, it is not usually recognised (or prioritised) as a horror film. Instead, it is considered a thriller (and probably not that frightening). I’m seeking here to overturn this, and to suggest that what Hutchings, Murphy, Forshaw et al have failed to take into account is how frightening and disturbing this cycle of films could be for a female audience. To describe them as ‘psychological thrillers’ is to miss the dark heart at the centre of each narrative. *Séance on a Wet Afternoon* deals with stillbirth and child murder, *Bunny Lake is Missing* is child kidnap and the (temporary) loss of motherhood, and *The Innocents* depicts Deborah Kerr attempting to protect two young children from potentially insidious supernatural forces. Even *The Haunting* and *Night of the Eagle* explore how women are forced to turn to the supernatural in order to regain control of their lives.

These female-centered horror films can be perhaps more profitably understood by turning away from much of the existing work on British horror film, and looking instead to critical work on woman’s film, particularly Mary Ann Doane. In *The Desire to Desire: The Woman’s Film of the 1940s*, Doane explains that the woman’s film is ‘in many ways a privileged site for the analysis of the given terms of female spectatorship and the inscription of subjectivity precisely because its address to a female viewer is particularly strongly marked’ (1987, 3). Her work on classical Hollywood cinema explores female protagonists with significant access to point of view structures, and narratives that ‘treat problems defined as ‘female’ (problems revolving around domestic life, the family, children, self-sacrifice, and

the relationship between women and production vs that between women and reproduction)' (1987, 3). She nuances the relationship between woman's film and genre, explaining that woman's film does not possess 'consistent patterns in thematic content, iconography and narrative structure' (1987, 34), but it does 'have a coherence and that coherence is grounded in its address to a female spectator. The woman's film, quite simply, attempt to engage female subjectivity' (1987, 34). This is where her account grows useful for understanding the 1960s films I have discussed in terms of their address to female audiences, their genre categorisation, and their placement of examples of British cinema. In their edited collection on British woman's film, Melanie Bell and Melanie Williams draw on the work of Janine Basinger to define the woman's film as 'a movie which places at the centre of its universe a female who is trying to deal with the emotional, social, and psychological problems that are specifically connected to the fact that she is a woman' (2010, 3). Bell and Williams then usefully note how the majority of the critical work on woman's film has been done in relation to Hollywood, and explain that they hope to bring to light 'a parallel heritage of British woman's films', asking not simply 'what makes a woman's picture?' but 'what does it mean when... the woman's picture is also a British picture?' (2010, 3 – 4). We can similarly ask here, what does it mean when the British woman's picture is also a horror film? Or, conversely, what does it mean when a British horror picture is addressed to women?

This is particularly pertinent as horror has its own long-standing theoretical debates around gender, spectatorship and address (see Williams 1984, 1991; Modleski 1986; Clover 1993; Pinedo 1997; Briefel 2005). As Tim Snelson has noted, the 'idea that the horror genre is addressed to a male audience has become an almost common-sense assumption in scholarship, whilst recognition of any potential female pleasure derived from horror spectatorship is certainly assumed to be a contemporary phenomenon' (2009, 174). In his analysis of *The Spiral Staircase* (1946, Robert Siodmak), he explains that the film was considered a horror film at the time of its release, yet is now usually seen as a woman's film. He argues 'the redefinition of films like *The Spiral Staircase* as woman's films could be seen as an attempt to make text fit established theory – the film is addressed to a female audience and thus cannot be a horror film as horror films are addressed to a male audience' (2009, 174).

To better understand how *Séance on a Wet Afternoon* as a horror film can have 'feminine appeal', it is worth returning to Doane and her categorisation of the 1940s woman's film. She suggests there are four main categories: 'films in which a medical discourse is activated and a male doctor treats a female patient suffering from either a psychical or

physical disease’, the second ‘maternal melodramas in which an enforced or separation between mother and child tends to produce an alignment of the mother with the figures of masochism’, the third ‘the classical ‘love story’ which investigates the feasibility of female desire’ and finally ‘films heavily influenced by the gothic novel which link the woman with paranoia through a conflation of legalised sexuality (marriage) with violence’ (1987, 34). Crucially, she points out ‘the boundaries separating categories in this taxonomy are not impenetrable, and frequently one film will be discussed in the context of two subgroups’, explaining that *Now, Voyager* (1942, Irving Rapper) ‘is both an instance of the medical discourse and a love story’ (1987, 36). The ensuing film analysis will explore how the tropes of the medical discourse and maternal melodrama, so prevalent in woman’s film, are brought to bear upon *Séance on a Wet Afternoon*, and in so doing, attempts to reconfigure existing thinking about British horror film, genre, and audience address.

Amanda and Arthur

A single candle flickers in the darkness. At first, there is silence. The hands of the sitters are in close up, each fist gripped by the next. In a low, calm voice, Myra Savage (Kim Stanley) reveals a message for her assembled group. A man wishes to converse with them, ‘it’s a young face, he’s waving’. The youngest sitter, a woman in her early 20s, begins to sob, silently. Myra murmurs platitudes, that he’s ‘peaceful, oh very peaceful’ before opening her eyes and looking into the candle flame. She reaches forward, snuffs it out with her thumb and finger, and the séance ends. In less than ninety seconds and with only a few lines of dialogue, the central premise of the film is revealed with stylish economy. Myra is a middle-aged professional medium, with a young spirit guide named Arthur. She makes her living from séances on a Wednesday afternoon, £8 charged and a biscuit tin proffered. However, she is frustrated by her ordinariness and the monotony of her existence. The plot then pivots around her convincing her weak husband Billy (Richard Attenborough) to kidnap schoolgirl Amanda Clayton, the only child of Charles Clayton, a wealthy businessman. Myra will then visit the Claytons, offering her services as a medium; at the same time Billy will collect the kidnap money. Myra’s aim is simple: using her ‘gift’, she will lead the Claytons to their daughter, and her powers will be publicly, perhaps nationally, recognized. However, as the narrative unravels, we discover that there may be far more to Myra’s plan than we realized.

At the end of Act One, Billy (in disguise) kidnaps Amanda from her school, chloroforms her and brings her back to the house. Myra and Billy have already painted the spare bedroom stark white, and removed most of the furniture. Dressed as a doctor and nurse,

with unsettling matching face masks, they inform Amanda she has German Measles and is in quarantine in hospital. Myra then visits the Claytons to tell them she has had a premonition, and at the midpoint of Act Two, the police then come to check up on Myra's credentials. As a search of the house is planned, Amanda is chloroformed once more, bundled back into Billy's motorbike sidecar and taken out. However, when Billy later checks on her, he discovers she has vomited on herself and is running a high fever. He puts her back in her 'ward', which directly adjoins Myra's séance room. There is a peephole fashioned in the wall, and Myra stands with her back to the sick child, ignoring her, and spying through the hole as people begin to file in: Amanda may be ill but it is Wednesday afternoon and the sitters have arrived. Mrs Clayton unexpectedly arrives to join the circle, and Myra is delighted, saying 'now I can help her. I can help her Billy. Now she can share my truth'. Myra's warped view on the world becomes properly evident: she treats Mrs Clayton's appearance as divine intervention, an opportunity for her psychic gift to be used for good.

The second séance, towards the end of Act Two, demonstrates how fully the film is invested in maternal melodrama. Myra enters the séance room, closes the curtains and lights a candle. The group join hands, and Mrs Clayton sits next to Myra, nervous and fearful of disappointment. The scene crosscuts between Myra's trance-like state and Amanda in the next room, where Billy now stands guard. The candle burns, time passes, and Myra murmurs her usual fake inanities. But now in the cutaway, Amanda regains consciousness. She lies in bed, her face slick with sweat, hair in rats tails, tears rolling down her cheeks. She cries loudly for 'mummy'. Thus begins an almost unbearably painful sequence of cuts between the sobbing Mrs Clayton pleading with Myra to contact her daughter, while her lost girl cries on the other side of the wall. Neither knows the other is there, but somehow they feel each other's presence. With every cut between the mother and the daughter, the framing grows closer: medium shot to medium close up to close up. The two are visually connected, so physically near but narratively far apart. Amanda cries out 'mummy' one last time, and tears begin to run freely down her mother's cheeks. In moments such as these, we see how Doane's interpretation of 'maternal melodrama' can become most useful for understanding female address in film. Doane argues melodrama is aligned with the lack of social power that is 'so characteristic of the cultural positioning of women', before arguing it is not surprising 'that the social function most rigorously associated with femininity – that of motherhood' is brought together with the cultural positioning to form maternal melodrama (1987, 73). She argues 'maternal melodramas are scenarios of separation, of separation and return, or threatened separation – dramas which play out all the permutations of the mother / child

relation', and because of their emphasis on sacrifice and suffering, 'the maternal melodrama is usually seen as the paradigmatic type of the woman's film' (1987, 73). Here, the film uses tropes of maternal melodrama to play upon audience knowledge of Amanda's whereabouts, and the recognition of Mrs Clayton's pain to engender pathos in the audience. Mrs Clayton suffers terribly here; a quiet and restrained woman she breaks down in the circle, weeping, as she yearns to make contact with her daughter, the pain heightened for the audience as they know her heart's desire is just a few steps away. This is made even worse by the knowledge that her daughter is extremely ill, and cries for her in her delirium. Providing a suitably dramatic conclusion to the séance, Myra screams 'dead!' then faints. But the final turn of the emotional screw is when Mrs Clayton leaves the house. She stops Billy at the front door and tries to press payment upon him, explaining innocently 'you see, I am so worried and she has give me some hope'. Billy briefly shuts his eyes, unable to bear it. Doane goes on to discuss how this type of film 'obsessively structure themselves around just-missed moments, recognitions which occur 'too late', and blockages of communication which might have been avoided' (1987, 90). Here, mother and daughter are desperate to be reunited, but are destined to remain apart. Her gentle thanking of Billy at the end of the session then evokes the worst kind of pity.

After the sitters leave, Myra invites Billy into the parlour, with the promise of news. She stands in the bright sunlight of the bay window, gaily brushing her hair and explains that her spirit guide Arthur has grown fond of Amanda. Quite casually, she reveals 'and he kept saying how much happier he would be if we sent her to him'. Myra wants to kill Amanda. After pandering to her for the first half of the film, acquiescent, asthmatic Billy is finally forced to acknowledge the true depths of his wife's madness. Here, at the end of the second act, Billy dissolves into a hitherto-unseen rage. As he shouts at her, the awful truth at the heart of the film is finally revealed: 'it's what you've been thinking. It's you. It's all you. Arthur doesn't exist! He's never existed! He was dead! He didn't live, he was dead Myra, he was born dead! You never saw him. I was the only one who saw him. They wouldn't let you see him. It's you Myra, it's always been you'. Myra protests, but the forbidden words tumble out of him: 'Arthur. Is. Dead. You always wanted him so much but he's dead'. Crucially, it is motherhood that makes Myra's desires so terrible. In the original novel, by Mark McShane, Myra was 'an only child, and childless' (2013, 32), and indeed shows no interest in having children. Forbes not only directed the film but also adapted the screenplay from the novel, and in doing so created stillborn spirit guide Arthur. He has revealed that his invention of the boy emerged from a fairly prosaic need: he was at the end of Act Two, but 'I couldn't actually

find a climax. So I invented the dead child that she's always talking to, who is her medium, as it were' (Forbes and Newman 2006). By making Myra a mother, she is made much more vulnerable and a clear reason is provided for her madness. Whether her psychic abilities have caused her madness, or whether her madness gives rise to her belief in her psychic nature, is to be debated. The critics were clear about who Myra was: she is variously described across the reviews as 'mad', 'crazy', 'insane', 'demented', 'deranged', 'unbalanced' and 'a crank'. She is described outright by six reviews as mad, a further three discuss her madness, another two describe her as 'more than half-mad'. Only *The Listener* and the *Evening News* acknowledge her potential psychic credentials. Although, Stanley's performance indicates that Myra's delusions run a lifetime deep, and for the actress there was no question as to Myra's psychic power: 'she's a real, true medium. Not a fake. And she's also schizophrenic – whether that helps or not I don't know' (Watts 1963, 9).

While Mrs Clayton functions very straightforwardly in melodramatic terms, Myra is represented in a fashion that befits the film's categorisation as horror. There is very little written on the relationship between melodrama and horror film. In one of the few journal articles on the subject, an analysis of Joan Crawford biopic *Mommie Dearest* (1981, Frank Perry), Annette Brauerhoch argues that the film demonises Crawford (played by Faye Dunaway) in her role as a mother. Brauerhoch suggests that 'each time there is a sequence in which we feel close to Joan, in which we, sometimes in a melodramatic mode, have pity or understanding for her, the scene is immediately followed by a "horror film" sequence... [disallowing] any kind of positive engagement with the figure' (1995, 59). Here, melodrama is utilized for empathy, but is immediately undercut by the visual tropes of the horror film; a rather cruel play upon the mechanisms of audience identification. When Myra faints, and then reveals her true intentions to Billy, the audience can no longer reward her with any kind of empathy or acceptance. Indeed, her dark drives that are so disturbing that (as we shall soon see) the critical reception was incapable of fully engaging with them.

As Billy quietens, his anger ebbs into exhaustion, and the audience is able to replay the story from a different perspective. We realize that Arthur is Myra and Billy's son, and Myra's repressed bereavement has led to her wish to deny another mother of her own child, which could be read a 'structuring absence', in terms of the symptomatic reading strategy of *Cahiers du Cinéma* (1972). Earlier, when the police looked around the house, the Police Inspector noted a brand new, shrink-wrapped pram in the garage, and now we understand its poignant lack of use. To murder Amanda was Myra's plan all along, and the press book suggests as much. The main poster is 'séance' written in dripping blood, with the tagline 'was

it magic... or murder they planned?’ (Rank Organisation 1964, 1). However, and somewhat mysteriously, Myra’s desire to kill the child was not picked up in the press. Nearly every North American and British review attributes Myra’s decision to kidnap Amanda to come from her desire for wider recognition of her abilities. The words ‘kidnap’ and ‘fame’ are used again and again. Only a small number of critics picked up on the darker meaning of her actions. The *New Statesman* points out that the kidnap for fame premise is ‘pretty thin motivation, but bright Mr Forbes is a step ahead and Myra’s reasons turn out to be madder and more devious yet’ (Coleman 1964, 886), similarly the *Daily Telegraph* comments ‘so much for the surface motive; underneath is an association between the living child and the dead, not for possession, but destruction, it appears’ (Gibbs 1964, no page).

The general lack of recognition of Myra’s underlying motivation is intriguing. It could be due to the nature of film reviewing. *Séance on a Wet Afternoon* is one of those rare films that transforms with subsequent viewings, and the majority of the reviews will have been written after one cinema screening, probably one of several films seen that day. Indeed, the *Boston Globe* even suggests that if you still have questions, or have fail to understood the significance of the scenes, ‘a second visit to the film may give you the answer’ (Adams, 1964, 14). The hidden meanings not acknowledged until the end of Act Two are subtly embedded in Forbes’ subtle and delicate dialogue throughout the film, but it is with prior knowledge that the full extent of the horror becomes apparent. For example, when Amanda is first installed in the bedroom, Myra dresses as a nurse and attends to her. Billy listens in to their exchange, and as Myra leaves the bedroom he chases her down the staircase, saying ‘you didn’t tell her she’d be going home soon! I think you ought to tell her. I thought you were going to tell her that right away’. Suspicion has already crept in. Each wheedling expression or flash of wild anger from Myra, or Billy’s desperate and fatalistic caress of Amanda’s hand as she lays unconscious – they all become blacker with prior knowledge. However, the other reason for not addressing Myra’s real purpose could be its culturally forbidden nature, the horror not only of child murder, but also of a murdering mother. Understandably, Forbes had a great deal of trouble casting, as many actors did not want to be associated with the role. As he explains, ‘very few of the leading ladies were keen to do it because of the kidnapping aspect. We offered it to Simone Signoret and Deborah Kerr, both of whom said no’ (Forbes and Newman 2006). Clearly Signoret’s performance in *Room at the Top* (1959, Jack Clayton) and *Les Diaboliques* appealed to Forbes; the same can be said for Kerr’s madness in *Black Narcissus* (1947, Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger) or *The Innocents*. But again, even with Forbes, the emphasis on kidnapping. The lack of discussion of Myra’s real motivation is

intriguing; perhaps Forbes did not want to complicate the casting for an already sensitive role? Certainly, when it was released, Bosley Crowther of New York Times commented ‘it embraces a topic that is exceedingly touchy for the screen (and indeed, is discouraged in Hollywood pictures -)’, but then pauses, in a sense, with the dash, as if passing over a thought he did not wish to declare, ‘that is, the abduction of a child’ (1964, 30).

However, there are more subtle ways of recognizing the drives and desires of dark and complex female characters. References to Lady Macbeth materialized repeatedly in the press, Felix Barker in the Evening News describing her as a ‘suburban Lady Macbeth’ (1964, no page) while Penelope Gilliat for the Observer perceptively comments ‘the hard knot at the middle of the plot is the powerful myth about a childless woman who grows big with ambition instead, like Lady Macbeth’ (1964, 25). The comparisons require little effort: a married woman with a desire for social standing and power, who entreats her weak husband to carry out her murderous plan. At the end of the first act of Shakespeare’s play, Lady Macbeth convinces her husband to kill King Duncan. At first he refuses but she goads him into accepting, in much the same way that Myra does with Billy over Amanda’s kidnap. The similarities continue: at the beginning of Act Two, hysterical Macbeth returns to his wife after killing Duncan. She chides him for returning with bloodied hands, ‘you do unbend your noble strength, to think / so brainsickly of things. Go get some water / and wash this filthy witness from your hand’ ([1601] 2006, 168). After Billy has kidnapped Amanda, he dumps her in the sidecar of his motorbike. The following shot is of Myra’s bathroom, and Billy’s single, bloodied hand is suddenly thrust urgently up into the frame, grasping wetly at the air. Myra appears behind him, he washes his hands and she dries him. While the visual insinuation was murder - the blood on his hands – it is revealed as a feint. He is washing out the black hair dye used in his disguise, and in the black and white film stock the dark dye is the same hue as blood.

Yet, it is in the relationship between motherhood and horror, that Lady Macbeth has primary importance. In one of her most oft-quoted speeches, she reveals to her husband ‘I have given suck and know / How tender ‘tis to love the babe that milks me: / I would, while it was smiling in my face, / Have pluck’d my nipple from his boneless gums, / and dashed his brains out / Had I so sworn as you / Have done to this’ ([1601] 2006, 166). What shocks is not her cunning plan, nor her ruthlessness, nor even her desire for power. It is her proclamation that she would murder her child even as it fed from her, if this meant her desired task was completed. This is perhaps what is subtly hinted at in Shakespearean references in the

reviews, the extremely sensitive and dark depths to the script that few dare to explicitly acknowledge.

In a chapter for *British Horror Cinema*, Steven Jay Schneider writes on ‘psychologically unstable female protagonists’ in 1960s and 1970s horror films, grouping *Séance on a Wet Afternoon* with *The Innocents*, *The Haunting*, *The Haunting of Julia*, *Repulsion* (1965, Roman Polanski) and *Asylum* (1972, Roy Ward Baker) (2001, 117). He draws links between the six films in terms of identity, sexuality, domesticity, foreignness and subjectivity, but it is his remarks on sexuality I particularly want to focus on. He notes that all the (female) protagonists share a ‘near-total lack of sexual interest’ in men, and suggests, instead that sexuality must emanate from a ‘more-or-less transparently coded same-sexuality’, suggesting a potential lesbianism in the characters (2001, 122). Whereas this is evident in Nell’s responses to Theodora in *The Haunting*, it makes far less sense in films like *Séance on a Wet Afternoon*. He describes it as ‘a film in which expressions of physical desire are notable only for their absence, presents audiences with an alternative, vaguely lesbian, paradigm’, and he describes Mrs Clayton’s (Nanette Newman) decision to come to a ‘female sitting’, in these terms. This reading makes little sense: as I have shown, Mrs Clayton has attended the second séance to make contact with her missing daughter, and the séance has the same mixed-sex attendance as the first. Most worryingly though is his concluding pronouncement on sexuality:

Though it would be going too far to conclude that asexuality and lesbianism are pointed to in these films as the sole reason for their protagonists respective illnesses, and although the progressive possibilities inherent in such representations should not be discounted, it can hardly be denied that the non-heterosexual characteristics and tendencies figure prominently among the causes, symptoms and / or consequences of specifically female neuroses (2001, 122-123).

For Schneider, if the characters are shown not to desire men, then they must desire women, for sexual desire must be at the root of it. Further, their absence of sexual interest in men is potentially making them ill. This is another problem with a great deal of work on British horror film, where the analyses provided are in terms of patriarchal notions of sexuality, wrapped around penetration, castration, and the apparent female fear of the phallus. For Schneider to discover the absence of sexuality in these films, and to thus proclaim lesbianism, is typical of such approaches. As this analysis of the second séance and the critical reception of *Myra* suggests, *Séance on a Wet Afternoon* speaks to core, basic emotions: grief, the desire to nurture, to love and be loved, emotions that – while universal – are to be found in the address of woman’s film. In this cycle of British female horror films, in the first half of the

1960s, sexual desire is not a central need for the women; they are entirely consumed by motherhood and loss, 'feminine forms' that akin to melodrama and the woman's film (see Doane, 1987, 73).

We might begin to think about this film's 'feminine appeal' then, as being less about explicitly targeting women as horror film consumers, and much more about encouraging the female demographic to engage with films that explore female-centered issues. The women in these films certainly suffer, but in vastly different ways to those in the well-known horror films of the period. At Hammer, as Forshaw points out, 'Michael Carreras and Anthony Hinds were canny enough to promote the pretty, innocuous blondes who invariably served as juvenile-leads-for the menacing' (2013, 60), where 'blonde' is a synonym for woman. Films like *Séance on a Wet Afternoon* offer narrative depth, deeply flawed female protagonists and an emotional engagement missing from the majority of female representations in 1960s horror film. These films offer the space for female audiences to psychologically explore the female protagonists, to consider who they are and why they do what they do. Frequently, their motivation revolves around the perceived loss of children. The final section of this article addresses how this specifically maternal mode of suffering may be addressed in relation to horror and melodrama, and how, in this example, spiritualism provides an ideal foil for these ideas.

'He is not dead'

In an interview about *Séance on a Wet Afternoon*, Nanette Newman (Mrs Clayton), suggested that the film could not be made today: the 'core of the story has to be treated with such care because it's such a horrifying thing, the kidnapping of a child. I think that area has become even more frightening over the years and I don't know quite how you could handle it today'. She muses, 'they'd probably have to make it into an out and out horror film which this wasn't, was it? It was a horrific story, but not a horror film. It was much more a psychological drama, with horrific overtones' (Forbes and Newman 2006). The way that Newman considers the film in terms of multiple genres demonstrates the depth and fluidity of the text, yet what is of most interest is her refusal to categorise it as a horror film. Arguably, Newman is underestimating the potential impact of the film upon its audiences, as well as reducing the definition of a 1960s horror film to one particular 'type': given the discussion I had in the introduction, it is the sort we are all too familiar with. Instead, following Doane's earlier argument that the woman's film can encompass multiple subgenres, I would argue that this film would be better understood by accepting that psychological thriller, melodrama and

horror do not need to be mutually exclusive. In fact, they can profitably draw from each other to heighten dramatic impact. *Séance on a Wet Afternoon* was received in the press in a variety of ways: the *Daily Mirror*, *Times*, *Monthly Film Bulletin* and *Kinematograph Weekly* described it as a thriller, the *Daily Express* as thriller and melodrama, and *Sight and Sound* as melodrama. Significantly though, many other critics categorised it as a horror film. Alexander Walker of the *Evening Standard* explained that the film ‘does nothing so crude as springing its horrors out at you like a ride down the Ghost Tunnel’ and ‘the horrors are all in the mind’ (1964, no page). Cecil Wilson of *Daily Mail* became rather poetic: ‘this film stops at nothing to scare us out of our seats... it shudders with shrill percussive music resembling blood dripping into a bucket’ (1964, no page). In this final section, which examines Myra’s last séance at the culmination of Act Three, I want to explore this generic flexibility further. Doane argues that due to its ‘sheer ease of readability’ the maternal is frequently associated with melodrama, ‘two discourses of the obvious which have a semiotic resonance. Both are inscribed as sign systems which are immediately readable, almost too explicit’ (1987, 71). I want to take this further by thinking about how Doane’s reading of motherhood and melodrama in the woman’s film can be understood in relation to the representation of madness and horror, picking up on Tony Williams’ suggestion that ‘melodrama is a sister genre to family horror because it has a specific relationship to it in terms of depicting family trauma’ (2014, 17).

In 1960s British horror cinema a precedent had already been set for the mad woman, epitomised by Nell (Julie Harris) in *The Haunting*, Miss Giddens (Deborah Kerr) in *The Innocents*, and Tansy (Janet Blair) in *Night of the Eagle*. All three are potentially psychically sensitive or possessed, enmeshed in witchcraft, or mad. They all embody a kind of hysteria too: Nell is a fluttering bird, Miss Giddens forever surprised, wheeling around in dismay, Tansy crumbling when her husband discovers her witchcraft practices. But crucially, all are in thrall to their strong, leading men. Here, while Billy plays a crucial supporting role, it is absolutely Myra’s film, a centrality then confirmed in the film’s final sequence. Our previous analysis paused at a crucial juncture, the tipping point into the final act: the revelation of Myra’s desire to kill Amanda, and Billy’s declaration that Arthur was stillborn. As this moment passes, we hear a high, clear voice cry out ‘mummy’. Not thinking to put on his doctor’s disguise, Billy runs out into the hall and discovers Amanda at the top of the stairs, escaped from her room and half asleep. He bounds up the stairs and bundles her back into bed, distancing her from his diabolical wife. He closes her bedroom door and pauses at the top of the staircase and his wife stands at the bottom, perfectly still. She points out ‘she’s seen

your face. Do it for me Billy. Then we can both be safe forever'. For Myra, the course of action is now unavoidable: the child could identify them and so must die. The third and final act begins as, with a heavy heart, Billy removes Amanda from the house, dumps her in the woods, and returns home to his wife, where he finds Myra finally overcome by her madness, cocooning herself in an old blanket. She speaks to Billy in a little girl voice, tremulous and acquiescent, all signs of Lady Macbeth washed away. She pleads softly with him, 'we'll never quarrel again. We'll just do things to please you. Say you love me', but he cannot look at her, and cannot respond.

In her chapter on medical discourse films, Doane notes that 'neuroses and even psychoses are evidenced not by contorted limbs and paralysis but by a marked lack of narcissism on the part of the sick woman. The illness of the woman is signalled by the fact that she no longer cares about her appearance. (1987, 40-41). Here, Myra's descent into madness, her 'giving in' to it, is signalled at first by her physical transformation: her clothes remain the same but her hair is askew, she no longer wears make up, and her hands are so busy: repeatedly (and needlessly) studding an orange with cloves. Yet it is in her face that the madness really shows. Myra's face is now somehow 'fallen', a startling transformation that was noted by the critics, who repeatedly comment on Stanley's abilities with facial expression - but in an often curious and disparaging fashion. Philip Oakes of the Sunday Telegraph comments on Billy and Myra's relationship, noting 'Stanley in extremis, with the high tide of madness washing away worry, leaving her face as smooth as a wax apple' (1964, no page). Vogue is, unsurprisingly, simultaneously flippant and cruel about Stanley's appearance, commenting 'Kim Stanley - yes, she may be too fat for some tastes and too taut for others', before 'the movie is full of wonderful faces' (Hardwick 1965, 25). The New Statesman comments 'Miss Stanley has never used the somehow kneaded contours of her nearly beautiful, plain face to better purpose' (Coleman 1964, 885). This metaphor of kneading can also be traced in the Mirror's review, where the critic suggests 'the medium looks like a plump 40-year-old schoolgirl whose face has the form and consistency of unbaked bread' ('Medium Rare' 1964, no page). There is a focus on the physical repugnance of Stanley as Myra in extremis, a wild, uncontrollable woman who stands in complete contrast to the precise, very British and undeniable classical beauty of Newman as the other lost mother, Mrs Clayton. The repeated metaphor across reviews of wax / fat / kneaded / bread all signal a kind of pliable quality to Myra's skin, a malleability that cannot be trusted.

Billy goes to answer the door, and the police enter. Superintendent Walsh, an apparent Spiritualist, flatters Myra into thinking the police require help to find Amanda, and she agrees

to give a final séance. However, Billy understands that the purpose of the police visit is far more sinister and Myra leads them all into the séance room, he watches, in agonies. Here, we can see again how the context of the woman's film helps us to understand the film's framing of Myra. Doane has argued that in the 'logic' of the woman's film, if the film requires the woman to assume the 'agency of speech, of narration, let her do so within the well-regulated context of an institutionalised dialogue (psychoanalysis, the hospital, the court of law)', and that the narratives are structured then in such a fashion that 'the courtroom provides a space and a mechanism for narration / revelation' (1987, 54-55). Spiritualism is Myra's method of enunciation, clairvoyancy becomes an act of storytelling. Myra's status as a medium gives her a special, gendered form of power, as Alex Owen has noted in her study of spiritualism and British society, 'women's involvement with spiritualism was at one level all about gender expectations, sexual politics, and the subversion of existing power relations between men and women' (1989, xiii). In the context of the horror film, Myra's apparent ability to contact the dead is drawn upon to provide the final revelations required to conclude the narrative: even if those revelations will eventually lead her to condemn herself.

This initial section of the séance is filmed in a very straightforward fashion, cutting between medium shots of Myra going into a trance, individual medium shots of the three male participants watching her silently, and wide-angle overhead shots of the whole table. In her trance, Myra mutters of bringing a child downstairs for tea. It feels very performed, as if she is merely playing at being a medium. Then something changes. There is a dissolve to a close-up of a half-melted candle, heavy with thick veins of old wax. A child's laughter echoes in the room. Bells ring. Myra sits straight up and smiles, 'Arthur'. We hear Billy shouting 'he was born dead!' and we realize the laughter, the bells, and Billy's voice are heard only by Myra. She sets her chin, hard, and spits 'can't see him. Can't see him. You. They wouldn't let me see him'. Then comes the raw, barren grief, a whisper 'all that waiting, all that time' and 'nothing, nothing to hold'. Tears fill her eyes, and for the first time, she begins to cry. In the same way that spiritualism provides Myra's enunciative mode, it is also the film's emotional anchor. The film begins with a séance in which a young woman silently weeping for her lost beau; the second séance reveals the separated mother and ill daughter crying feverishly and in unison. Here, in the final séance, Myra is moved to tears herself as she finally acknowledges her own loss. Steve Neale (1986) has explored the potential of melodrama to move its audience to tears; relatedly Doane has noted that maternal melodramas foreground 'sacrifice and suffering', thus 'incarnating the "weepie" aspect of the genre' (1987, 73). While Neale is postulating in relation the power of film upon its audiences to make them weep, and Doane is

pointing out how specifically maternal melodramas are the weepiest, it is Myra's own teary dissolution that offers the most emotional pull to this film's audience. Crucially though, as a horror film, the melodramatic qualities are tempered to suit the genre. Myra's tears certainly occur within a classical melodramatic context, but their power is in their rarity. Similarly, the impact upon the audience is emotional, but it is not pathos. What Myra relives is without a doubt a terrible experience for any woman. But this woman whom we watch, who weeps, who has lost her son, has done such terrible things. She has plotted to kidnap and kill a child, to join an innocent girl with her own dead child. This scenario is too dark, too horrible, to conjure empathic audience tears. Myra does not make us cry. As she weeps she conjures up our gooseflesh and makes it ripple instead.

Moving into a more intimate medium close up, Myra opens her tear-stained eyes and the bells ring again and again, louder and louder. She descends into a screaming, weeping tantrum, 'he.is.not.dead... he is NOT, he is NOT'. And then, an unexpected confession, 'she was here. In Arthur's room'. Myra smiles as a child whispers to her. But this calm is only momentary, and Myra transforms once more, her face a mask of fury. In a scratchy, gritty voice, she shrieks 'take her Billy, kill her Billy, all this waiting Billy'. The policemen exchange glances, and the momentary break of concentration on Myra gives necessary pause before her final, terrible action. Smiling, she shrugs the blanket off her shoulders and folds it to make a swaddle. Cooing, she positions her invisible baby into position for breastfeeding, and then rocks it gently from side to side. Myra disappears into herself and the séance trails into nothing, the three men left sat around the table in silent and acute discomfort. Billy turns to the Superintendent, his eyes filled with hope and says 'she's alright is she? I put her where the scouts would find her'. As Walsh nods his assent, Myra's arms drop, little by little, and her imagined baby disappears as she discovers Amanda is alive. The swaddle flops limply against her chest, and she unfolds it, confused at the emptiness inside. She turns to Billy and asks, slack faced, 'did I do it right Billy?'. He replies 'yes dear', with a ghastly rictus smile. The scene ends and the credits begin to roll.

In *Maternal Horror: Melodrama and Motherhood*, Sarah Arnold examines maternal representations in American horror films from the 1960s onwards. She argues that horror and melodrama intersect in the representation of the mother, and that 'the concept of maternal self-sacrifice... informs the foundations of this book' (2013, 25). While her choice of films, including *Psycho* and *Demon Seed* (1977, Donald Cammell) certainly play to the self-sacrificing mother figure, I'm unconvinced that self-sacrifice is necessarily central to the convergence of these two genres. Self-sacrifice and motherhood emerge from melodrama: in

her work on *Stella Dallas* (1937, King Vidor), Linda Williams points out that ‘the device of devaluing and debasing the actual figure of the mother while sanctifying the institution of motherhood is typical of “the woman’s film” in general and the sub-genre of the maternal melodrama in particular’ (1987, 300). Yet if we think about this sentiment in relation to *Séance on a Wet Afternoon*, its true origins as a horror film become apparent. Here, sacrifice and possession have very different meanings. There is a loss of motherhood, but the sacrificial element is not simply Myra’s mental health. The story reveals upon the sacrifice of another mother, a loss unwillingly given. Myra is not interested in forfeiting anything else, she wants more, for in her own eyes she has already lost so much. So she takes possession of other children to serve her own needs. And in this sense, she really is a monster.

The promotional material for *Séance on a Wet Afternoon* suggests that the film has ‘feminine appeal’ but in the seventeen pages of pressbook, it never reveals why. Arguably, the attraction of this horror film is that it is about women, for women, where the séances function as a space for women to explore emotion. Similarly, films such as *Bunny Lake is Missing*, *The Innocents* and *Night of the Eagle* explore cruel feelings and bad behaviour enacted by and experienced by women. – including bad, ambivalent, murderous feelings. These emotions are then frequently linked with motherhood, paralleling Lucy Fischer’s analysis on the end of *Rosemary’s Baby* where she argues ‘in accepting her loathsome progeny, Rosemary acknowledges her own demons – the fears of motherhood that society wants hushed’ (1992, 13). As noted earlier by Snelson, horror film in particular is associated with male address, and much academic scholarship has carved British horror film history through a presumed male audience and male pleasures. This article has sought to not only identify a cycle of horror films with an intended female audience, but also, through *Séance on a Wet Afternoon*, to illuminate how the textual address functions (particularly what makes the film frightening in a specifically female capacity). Drawing on Doane and feminist theory, I have explored how the origins of the text can be found in woman’s film (particularly maternal melodrama), and, using historical reception analysis, how the address was received by the critics (which complicates generic and gendered categorisation). By doing this kind of work, it hoped that this article could begin a reappraisal of how we write our film histories. And not least, how we include the horror films for the girls.

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