DOI: 10.32001/sinecine.537794 • Araştırma Makalesi | Research Article

THE GHOSTS OF FEMALE GOTHIC

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Abstract

This article explores the representation of woman as a ghost or at least a ghostly figure in two films, *What Lies Beneath* (Robert Zemeckis, 2000) and *La Cara Oculta* (*The Hidden Face*, Andres Baiz, 2011), both of which, it is argued, are situated in the female Gothic tradition. Ghosts and haunting, i.e., activity associated with ghosts, are widely used metaphors in female Gothic works of art, a sub-genre of Gothic that addresses the themes of gender oppression and domestic entrapment, both of which are emblematic of women's experience in a patriarchy. This article argues that *What Lies Beneath* and *The Hidden Face* depict the haunting of a woman by another woman who is either dead or, if still alive, dead to the world, in ways that articulate feminist concerns and draw attention to gender oppression. While *What Lies Beneath* makes use of a ghost to address female victimization and male violence against women, *The Hidden Face* deals with the "ghosting," or erasure, of women within patriarchal, phallocentric power structures that negate her existence. In both films, the figure of the ghostly woman serves to highlight the ways in which women are oppressed, victimized, disempowered – in short, rendered ghostly – in phallocentric, patriarchal culture.

Keywords: Female Gothic, ghost, haunting, patriarchy, gender oppression, Symbolic order.

Kadın Gotiğinin Hayaletleri

Öz

Bu makale, kadın Gotiğinin çağdaş örnekleri arasında sayılabilecek Robert Zemeckis'in *What Lies Beneath* (*Gizli Gerçek*, 2000) ve Andres Baiz'in *La Cara Oculta* (*Gizli Oda*, 2011) filmlerinde kadının hayalet ve hayaletimsi bir figür olarak temsilini incelemektedir. İlk olarak, gerek hayaletin gerekse hayaletlerle ilintili bir kavram olan "musallat olma"nın, Gotiğin bir alttürü olan ve cinsiyetçi tahakküm, eve hapsolma gibi kadının ataerkil toplumda maruz kaldığı baskıları mesele edinen kadın Gotiğinde sıkça karşımıza çıkan metaforlar olduğu vurgulanacaktır. Bu makalede *What Lies Beneath* ve *La Cara Oculta* filmlerinin, ölü (veya dış dünyanın gözünde ölüden farksız) bir kadının başka bir kadına musallat olması temasını merkeze alarak cinsiyetçi tahakküme dikkat çektiği ve böylece feminist meseleleri dile getirdiği savunulacaktır. *What Lies Beneath* cinayet kurbanı bir kadının hayaleti vasıtasıyla cinsiyetçi tahakküme ve kadına yönelik şiddete dikkat çekerken, *La Cara Oculta* ise ataerkil, fallomerkezci kültürde kadınların hayalet konumuna indirgendiğini göstermektedir. Sonuç olarak bu makale, her iki filmde de kadının hayaletimsi bir figür olarak temsilinin, onu adeta bir hayalet konumuna indirgeyen fallomerkezci, ataerkil kültürde kadının maruz kaldığı tahakkümü, baskıyı, eril şiddeti anlatmanın vasıtası olduğunu gösterecektir.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Kadın Gotiği, hayalet, musallat olma, ataerki, cinsiyetçi tahakküm, Sembolik düzen.

Bu çalışma 29 Mayıs 2016 tarihinde sinecine dergisine ulaşmış, 14 Temmuz 2016 tarihinde kabul almıştır.
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Introduction: The Haunting Idea[1]

Female Gothic is a sub-genre of the Gothic, which is a flexible and historically mutable mode whose origins date back to Gothic literature that evolved in eighteenth-century Europe and told chilling tales set in decaying, haunted castles equipped with countless trap doors, secret passages, subterranean dungeons where persecuted heroines flee from Gothic villains. Characterized by extravagant imagination, natural wildness, savage passions, the early Gothic novels teemed with supernatural occurrences, perversity, violence, dark secrets usually involving heinous crimes like murder, rape, incest. As Botting (1999) notes, rather than a clearly defined genre, the Gothic might better be conceptualized as "a mode that exceeds genre and categories" (p. 14), or to put it another way, the Gothic "has proven to be a set of transportable features" including "certain settings, symbols, situations, psychological states, and emotional effects on readers or audiences" (Hogle, 2006, p. xiii). The past few centuries have witnessed the diffusion of the Gothic across different genres and media like television and cinema so that contemporary horror fiction, film, television shows, etc. that make use of traditional Gothic themes, motifs and styles such as ghosts, haunted houses, vampires, doubles, abnormal psychological states, dark and gloomy atmospheres, mysterious and uncanny events, can all be subsumed under the rubric of Gothic.

The term female Gothic was originally coined by the feminist literary critic Ellen Moers in her book *Literary Women* (1976) to refer to "the work that women writers have done in the literary mode that, since the eighteenth century, we have called the Gothic" (as cited in Wallace & Smith, 2009, p. 1). The first examples of the female Gothic were written by Ann Radcliffe, whose Gothic novels such as *A Sicilian Romance* (1790) and *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794) center on a heroine persecuted by a threatening male figure, the Gothic villain, and confronted with a number of ordeals, ranging from being forced to marry someone she does not love to being caught in the grip of supernatural terrors[2] before finally emerging unscathed and triumphant from all these ordeals. So, "[i]t is Radcliffe's novels with their heroines in flight from male tyrants across fantastical landscapes and in search of lost

[1] This article is partially based on a sub-chapter of my doctoral thesis entitled "Metaphor of Spectrality, Psychoanalysis and Culture" submitted to the Graduate School of Social Sciences of Bahçeşehir University for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Cinema and Media Research in 2016.

[2] Radcliffe's novels belong to the category of Gothic fiction dubbed "the supernatural explained" where the supernatural elements are revealed to have rational explanations.

mothers entombed in womb-like dungeons beneath patriarchal castles which we now tend to characterise as the beginnings of 'Female Gothic'" (Wallace & Smith, 2009, p. 2). In time, the term female Gothic has aquired a more nuanced meaning independent of the author's gender as it was acknowledged that it was possible for male authors to write female Gothic and female authors to write male Gothic. It is generally held that the difference between male and female Gothic lies primarily in their manner of representing the plight of the heroine, for while male Gothic also focuses on female suffering, it does so in a way that "position[s] the audience as voyeurs who […] may take pleasure in female victimization" (Williams, 1995, p. 104). In contrast, through its portrayal of the persecution and imprisonment of a heroine by a male figure who embodies patriarchal power, female Gothic presents a more effective critique of the oppression of women under patriarchy as well as a more radical questioning of gender roles. The female Gothic heroine is threatened by both worldly and otherworldly dangers, whereafter she becomes stronger and wiser, experiencing a kind of rebirth and gaining power in the patriarchal world. So, despite the fact that Moers's theorization of the female Gothic on the basis of the biological sex of the author has been challenged, her recognition of the importance of gender in the Gothic has proved highly influential, sparking off much critical debate as to what exactly constitutes female Gothic. Although the term remains contentious up to this day, it is generally accepted that female Gothic is predominantly concerned with gender and family issues with a particular focus on the heroine who, more often than not, is portrayed as trapped in a domestic space, such as a castle or a house that functions as a symbol of imprisoning patriarchal structures. Simply put, "most of these books are about women who just can't seem to get out of the house" (DeLamotte, 1990, p. 10). On the whole, the defining characteristic of the female Gothic is that

> it centres its lens on a young woman's rite of passage into womanhood and her ambivalent relationship to contemporary domestic ideology, especially the joint institutions of marriage and motherhood. The image of the imprisoned woman is pre-eminent in this carceral Gothic fiction. [...] Female Gothic writers deploy the supernatural for psychological and political ends to advance a gender-aware commentary on women's roles and the dreaded husbands, guardians and institutions that threaten to control them (Davison, 2009, pp. 223-224).

Thus, at the heart of the female Gothic lie issues related to the subjection of women to patriarchal authority such as women's subordination in the home, domestic entrapment, sexual oppression, vulnerability to male violence, stifling domestic bonds that stand in the way of self determination, etc., all of which are emblematic of women's experience under patriarchy.

Undoubtedly, "all these issues can be found portrayed in non-Gothic fiction – but arguably Gothic fiction, in its traffic with fear, sharpens our sense of how women might be more vulnerable – physically, politically, socially and emotionally – in certain situations than men" (Horner & Zlosnik, 2009, p. 117). Hence, there exists a widespread tendency among feminist critics to view the female Gothic as "a politically subversive genre articulating women's dissatisfactions with patriarchal structures and offering a coded expression of their fears of entrapment within the domestic and the female body" (Wallace & Smith, 2009, p. 2).[3] In effect, the nightmarish world of the female Gothic, where the persecuted heroine strives to escape from confinement in a castle or house usually in flight from a threatening male, presents a metaphorical rendering of the ordinary domestic reality experienced by women in Western patriarchal culture. As such, the threat to the heroine posed by the Gothic villain and his supernatural machinations is actually reflective of the menace originating from the vast, ubiquitous social forces which oppress women and the social, political, legal institutions that dominate their life, which appear so invincible and beyond their control that they seem to be endowed with supernatural powers. As Eugenie DeLamotte (1990) puts it, "women's Gothic shows women suffering from institutions they feel to be profoundly alien to them and their concerns," including "the patriarchal family, the patriarchal marriage and a patriarchal class, legal, educational and economic system" (p. 152).

Foremost among the metaphors employed in the female Gothic to represent the oppression of women under patriarchy are ghosts and haunting as evident from the sheer number of ghost stories written by female authors in the nineteenth century and beyond. As Barbara Patrick (2000) notes: "Again and again, women writers found in the supernatural tale metaphors for the unredressed wrongs women have suffered, for the invisibility of women's work, and for women's emotional, social and political oppression" (p. 74). Indeed, the ghost's liminal status as a figure suspended between life and death, presence and absence, visibility and invisibility, materiality and immateriality renders it a fitting metaphor for representing the plight of women who are silenced, marginalized, disempowered, hence virtually rendered invisible in patriarchal culture. That is why, in the female Gothic, the ghost recurrently

[3] Some critics challenge the idea that the female Gothic is a politically subversive genre because of its depiction of the heroine as a passive, helpless victim, which "textually positions a female spectator in the same victimised position" (Hanson, 2007, p. 50). Indeed, according to some critics, "the subversiveness of the female gothic is often compromised by the heroine's masochistic desire for a lover who dominates her" (Chapman, 1998, p. 184).

emerges as a metaphor for "touch[ing] upon more basic questions of identity, of expression, of place, of what it means to be that which Simone de Beauvoir has called 'the second sex'" (Dickerson, 1996, pp. 5-6). In fact, this recurrent image of the "ghostly woman" that has kept haunting female Gothic texts throughout centuries is aptly dubbed by Mary Beard as "the haunting idea":

> In *Woman as Force in History* (1946) Mary R. Beard identifies "one obtruding idea that haunts thousands of printed pages" dealing with women: "It is the image of woman throughout long ages of the past as a being always and everywhere subject to male man or as a ghostly creature too shadowy to be even that real." This is what Beard calls "the haunting idea," a phrase which has two suggestive meanings. In the first place, she is arguing that this is an idea that "haunts" writing about women, in the sense that it is a notion to which such writing repeatedly, indeed, uncannily, returns. In the second, she is pointing to the way in which woman has been depicted as "ghostly," haunting in the sense that she is disembodied/disempowered through being subjected to "male man." [...] What she does here is to draw attention to what has been one of the most powerful metaphors in feminist theory, the idea of woman as "dead" or "buried (alive)" within male power structures which render her "ghostly." This is, of course, the metaphor which is played out again and again at the heart of Female Gothic fiction (Wallace, 2009, p. 26).

Although the Gothic was transferred to the cinema screen as early as the 1910s with silent film adaptations of canonic Gothic novels,[4] cinematic versions of the female Gothic did not appear until the 1940s. Hitchcock's *Rebecca* (1940), where the heroine is haunted by a dead woman whose presence is much more real and dominant compared to her own, is credited with being the first female Gothic film. Adapted from Daphne du Maurier's 1938 novel of the same title, *Rebecca* tells the story of Maxim de Winter's young second wife who goes to live with him on his ancestral estate, Manderley, which is haunted by the overwhelming presence of Maxim's late first wife Rebecca. "Introduced by Hitchcock's [...] *Rebecca* – a story about a nameless new wife who struggles with the powerfully mythic presence of the former wife, now mysteriously dead – the female Gothic involves the haunting of a woman by another woman (usually a rival, a Doppelganger or a mother) and/or her own projected sexual fears" (Kavka, 2002, p. 219). In such female Gothic films as *The Uninvited* (Lewis Allen, 1944) and *The Haunting* (Robert Wise, 1963), where the heroine is not just figuratively but literally haunted by ghosts within a haunted house setting, the haunting turns out to be somehow linked

[4] It is generally held that the first Gothic novel to be adapted to film was R. L. Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886), which was filmed in 1908, 1909, 1912 and twice in 1913 (Kaye, 2012, p. 240).

to the heroine's dead mother. This article offers female Gothic readings of two contemporary films, namely *What Lies Beneath* (Robert Zemeckis, 2000) and *La Cara Oculta* (*The Hidden Face*, Andres Baiz, 2011), both of which involve the haunting of a woman by another woman who is, in the case of the latter film, not a ghost that has returned from the dead, but a woman entrapped, or buried alive, within a domestic setting. It is asserted that while the former film makes use of the ghost of a murdered woman to address gender oppression and male violence against women, the latter film deals with the "ghosting," or erasure, of women within patriarchal, phallocentric power structures that render her ghostly. Hence, this article undertakes to show that in both films, the figure of the ghostly woman serves to highlight the ways in which women are oppressed, victimized, disempowered within the phallocentric, patriarchal Western culture.

The Wives of Bluebeard: Marriage Haunted by Murder in *What Lies Beneath*

Robert Zemeckis's *What Lies Beneath*, which uses the standard conventions of ghost films to draw atention to female victimization, can be regarded as a contemporary reworking of the female Gothic formula that involves the haunting of a woman by another woman. The film centers on Claire, a middle-aged woman happily married, or so it seems, to Norman Spencer, a brilliant and ambitious genetic scientist working at the University of Vermont. After her only child, Caitlin, leaves for college, Claire begins experiencing strange phenomena in their beautiful lakeside home which used to belong to Norman's late father: a particular picture keeps falling to the floor, the front door keeps opening by itself, the stereo is suddenly turned on, the bathtub fills with steaming water of its own accord, and Claire hears strange, unearthly whispers when she is alone at home. Claire is convinced that the source of the disturbances is a ghost that is haunting the house, and she initially assumes that it is the ghost of her neighbour Mary Feur, whom she mistakenly believes to have been murdered by her husband Warren Feur since she has witnessed the couple arguing on more occasions than one. When it turns out that Mary is alive and well, Claire's attention is drawn to a newspaper clipping about a missing girl called Madison, who used to be a postgraduate student at the same university where Norman works, though, when questioned, Norman denies knowing her. Claire goes to Madison's house to speak to the girl's mother and steals a braid of Madison's hair, which, she believes, will help establish contact with Madison's ghost. Indeed, the braid allows Madison's ghost to possess Claire, who thus remembers an unpleasant memory that she has been repressing: One year ago, Claire actually saw Norman and Madison

making love in Norman's study, whereafter in a state of shock and devastation, she left the scene unobserved by the lovers. Subsequently, Norman is obliged to confess his affair with Madison, claiming that when he tried to break the relationship off, Madison became unstable and threatened to kill herself. Claire assumes that Madison committed suicide and that her restless spirit is haunting their house out of pure vengeance. However, she soon discovers this is only half the truth, for Madison's ghost leads her to the lake adjacent to their house, from where Claire retrieves a box containing Madison's personal belongings, which she unlocks with a key that she has recently found between the floorboards in Norman's study. She, then, confronts Norman, who still denies having killed Madison, but instead claims that Madison committed suicide in their house in order to ruin him and he had no other choice but to cover up her death to protect his reputation as well as their marriage. When Claire insists that the dead girl's body be salvaged, she herself becomes the target of the murderous intentions of her husband who, it turns out, murdered Madison by drowning her in the tub and disposed of her body in the nearby lake. In the end, with the help of the dead woman's ghost, Claire barely escapes being drowned in the same lake where Madison's decaying body lies.

Set in modern-day American suburbia, *What Lies Beneath* "draws on a classic Gothic repertoire – isolated houses, enclosed or suffocating spaces, obscure depths, the returning dead [...] and the disturbance of the domestic sphere" (Brewster, 2008, p. 113). The film reworks the traditional elements of the female Gothic, such as the haunted house, the persecuted heroine and the threatening, tyrannical Gothic villain so as to address the themes of domestic entrapment, violence against women and female agency in marriage, or the lack thereof. The haunted patriarchal house, i.e. the luxurious suburban family home that Norman has inherited from his father, whose fame as a prominent mathematician towers above the aggressively ambitious Norman, becomes the site where domestic dynamics are played out under the guise of a ghost story. So, in *What Lies Beneath*, as in the majority of female Gothic narratives, the Gothic domestic space is the ancestral home of the heroine's husband (like, for instance, Mr. Rochester's estate Thornfield in Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*, and Maxim de Winter's estate Manderley in Hitchcock's *Rebecca*), which emerges as a symbol of patriarchal socio-cultural structures. Initially, the elegant, lakeside estate seems as a perfect home to Claire, who has a seemingly "happy" marriage to a "loving" husband. However, even before the dark secrets buried beneath Claire's seemingly perfect marriage begin to surface, it is intimated that the haunted patriarchal house is actually a place of entrapment for Claire, whose subordinate status within marriage is manifested in the fact that, from the outset, "Claire is presented as an immature figure who

is very much in her husband's shadow" (Short, 2007, p. 136). One indication of Claire's subordinate status in marriage lies in the way she is confined to the private sphere of home and family whereas her husband Norman, an aspiring, brilliant scientist, takes active part in the public sphere of business, career and social success. Throughout the film, Claire is depicted mostly within the confines of the home, engaged in domestic tasks in the house or the garden, deprived of any means of fulfilment outside the domestic sphere as well as access to social power. Thus, *What Lies Beneath* presents insights into the ways in which women are constrained by traditional gender roles, which confine women "to a separate 'sphere' bounded by the duties of home and [...] limit the exercise of [their] physical, intellectual and emotional faculties" (DeLamotte, 1990, p. 150). The traditional domestic ideology requires women to live up to the roles of perfect wife and mother, i.e. "to attend to the physical, moral and spiritual needs of the family as the angel in the house" (Dickerson, 1996, p. 49). In the course of the film, it is revealed that upon her marriage to Norman, Claire gave up her promising career as a concert cellist to devote her time and energy to the home in order to be a perfect wife and mother. At the beginning of the film, Claire tries to convince Norman (and herself) that she is looking forward to the day her daughter Caitlin will go off to college, saying: "I'm gonna get my life back – have some time for myself." However, the truth is, after Caitlin's departure, Claire feels at a loss "now that her only child has moved out and her role as mother is no longer central – a rationale she describes as going through 'an empty nest syndrome'" (Short, 2007, p. 135). The ghost, which begins haunting her marital home immediately after her daughter flies the nest, actually becomes the conduit for the surfacing of Claire's buried resentments, her thwarted ambitions, her forsaken career, her frustration over her own wasted life, in short "what lies beneath" her seemingly happy marriage. In other words, "[w]hat lies beneath their marriage, as the narrative unfolds, are a host of insecurities and resentments" (Short, 2007, p. 137). Upon discovering Norman's affair with Madison, Claire exclaims: "I gave up eveything. My life, my music." Claire's words imply that her marriage to Norman "effectively put a stop to her life as she attempted to become the perfect wife he wanted. [...] However, she only admits this fact when she realises that Norman had an affair" (Short, 2007, p. 137).

What Lies Beneath is one among many ghost films where the ghost of a wronged, victimized woman returns from the dead in order to bring the crime committed against her to light and to seek justice.[5] Such films, which highlight

5 The unfinished business scenario where the ghost returns from the dead to redress a wrong, reveal a crime or help convict a criminal is perhaps the most common scenario in ghost films and has literary antecedents dating back to Shakespeare's

male violence and female victimization with recourse to the conventions of a ghost film, include, among others, *Stir of Echoes* (David Koepp, 1999), *The Gift* (Sam Raimi, 2000), *Shutter* (Masayuki Ochiai, 2008), *Gothika* (Mathieu Kassovitz, 2003), etc. As a general rule, such films portray a (usually female) protagonist contacted by the ghost of a murdered or otherwise wronged woman, who is invariably a victim of male violence. In the end, uncovering the truth about the ghost most often leads to the revelation of a truth about the protagonist's own life, and in cases where the protagonist is female, a truth regarding her own husband or lover. These films, which "portray being visited by the dead as having a benign purpose, one that expressly warns against the threat of male violence" (Short, 2007, p. 40), have literary antecedents dating back to the nineteenth century, one of the most notable examples being the American writer Charlotte Perkins Gilman's short story "The Giant Wistaria" (1891). A female Gothic story set in a house haunted by the ghost of a young woman who was killed by her merciless father as punishment for having an illegitimate child, Gilman's story traces the discovery of the remains of the young mother and her baby a hundred years later by the new inhabitants of the house. Deploying the ghost as a metaphor to shed light on the repressed history of male domination that teems with violent crimes against women, "The Giant Wistaria" and similar stories reveal the dark underside of domestic life within the patriarchal home. As Barbara Patrick notes:

> Especially significant in women's ghost stories is their depiction of the home. Far from being a safe haven, the home is a place of stultification, exhaustion, treachery and terror. In ghost stories, women Gothicists portrayed a range of horrors attendant upon women's confinement to domestic pursuits. In such stories the presence of the supernatural is an obvious source of terror, but the true menace arises from the oppression of and violence against women, as well as the withholding of knowledge and power from women (2000, p. 75).

At the beginning of *What Lies Beneath*, Claire seems to be content with her home and her husband, whom Claire once describes as "a wonderful husband and father" until this illusion of contentment begins to crumble away as she becomes subject to a haunting, which signals that something is very much wrong with her life. Given that "[h]aunting […] always registers the harm inflicted or the loss sustained by a social violence done in the past or in the present" (Gordon, 2008, p. xvi), the haunting of Claire by Madison's ghost functions both as a sign of past violence and a warning against violence to

Hamlet, even much earlier. Furthermore, a great many of these ghosts are gendered male. However, my focus here is on the sexual politics of films which feature the ghost of a woman who was a victim of male violence.

come. Claire at first mistakenly assumes that it is her neighbour Mary Feur who is the victim of male violence, particularly following her brief conversation with Mary after she hears Mary weeping in the neighbouring garden from behind the wooden fence. In reply to Claire's inquiry as to why she is weeping, Mary says: "I can't breathe, I'm afraid. One day I'll just disappear". Claire misinterprets Mary's words, which express psychological anguish, mistaking Mary's fear of obliteration of self in marriage as fear of physical violence, which leads Claire to the conclusion that Mary is in mortal danger from her husband. Indeed, Claire "correctly identifies Mary's marital unhappiness because it mirrors her own, and when they do meet, Mary confesses to being overwhelmed in her marriage. Claire's mistake is that she has imaginatively extended the unhappiness and distress to its expression in violence and murder" (Hanson, 2007, p. 194). Although the episode about Mary Feur may, at first glance, seem like a misleading digression, it nevertheless serves an important function by accentuating the theme of male violence and foreshadowing what is in store for Claire: She discovers, almost too late, that it is, indeed, her own huband that is the murderer and her own life that is in peril.

The murderous spouse is a recurrent theme in the female Gothic that can be traced back to an archetypal narrative, i.e. the European folktale "Bluebeard," popularized by the French author Charles Perrault in 1697. The tale concerns Bluebeard, a wealthy aristocrat, and his new bride, who has agreed to marry him despite his dubious reputation: Although Bluebeard is known to have been married several times, nobody knows what became of his previous wives. When Bluebeard departs on a journey, he gives his new wife the keys to every room in his huge castle, forbidding her to use one specific key. Bluebeard's wife, however, is overcome with curiosity and uses the key to enter the forbidden room, which, to her horror, contains the dead bodies of Bluebeard's former wives. Upon his return, Bluebeard realises that his wife has disobeyed him and is about to kill her too, but she manages to avoid the fate of Bluebeard's former wives when her brothers arrive in time to save her. The tale has been subjected to constant reworkings mostly by women writers, one of whom is Angela Carter, whose story "The Bloody Chamber" (1979) is a contemporary retelling of the tale with a feminist twist where the narrator is Bluebeard's wife herself and it is not her brothers but her mother that ultimately comes to her rescue and dispatches the monstrous Bluebeard. There also exist numerous cinematic retellings of the tale, the latest being Catherine Breillat's 2010 film *Bluebeard*, where the tale about Bluebeard set in 1697 is situated within a frame narrative about two young sisters reading the tale in France in the 1950s. Indeed, reworkings of "Bluebeard" are so common that "the murderous spouse in 'Bluebeard' reappears in [...] narratives in which

women dare to investigate their husbands more closely" (Short, 2007, p. 16). The "Bluebeard" scenario is played out in a range of films that Helen Hanson (2007, p. 40), following Mary Ann Doane (1987), refers to as the female Gothic cycle in the 1940s cinema, which was initiated by Hitchcock's *Rebecca* (1940), followed by Hitchcock's *Suspicion* (1941), *Jane Eyre* (Robert Stevenson, 1944), *Dark Waters* (Andre de Toth, 1944), *Experiment Perilous* (Jacques Tourneur, 1944), *Gaslight* (George Cukor, 1944), *The Spiral Staircase* (Robert Siodmak, 1946), *The Two Mrs. Carrolls* (Peter Godfrey, 1947), *Secret Beyond the Door* (Fritz Lang, 1948) and *Caught* (Max Ophuls, 1949). According to Doane (1987), this cycle of female Gothic films, which she labels as "paranoid woman's films," involve "the formulaic repetition of a scenario in which the wife invariably fears that her husband is planning to kill her – the institution of marriage is haunted by murder" (p. 123). Evidently, *What Lies Beneath*, where Claire's marriage is not just metaphorically, but literally haunted by murder, has much in common with the films of the 1940s female Gothic cycle, all of which, more or less, follow the same plot structure: a young woman gets married to a Gothic male and upon her arrival at his ancestral mansion, she begins to experience strange and uncanny events that lead her to suspect that her husband may be a murderer. So, "The Bluebeard narrative is played out through the heroine's investigation into her new husband's past," which "leads her to find evidence that he has murdered his previous wife or wives: Prince Charming may turn out to be really Bluebeard, the ogre" (Hanson, 2007, p. 68). Hanson claims that these narratives, where the heroine adopts the role of an investigator, "pass through several stages, which are: romance, suspicion, investigation/discovery, confrontation or confession, and resolution" (2007, p. 56). Confrontation or confession involves the heroine's discovery of her husband's true character, whereafter the narrative is resolved in one of two ways: either "the heroine and the Gothic male overcome the past and are united against a common enemy" or "the heroine's suspicions are confirmed and the Gothic male is revealed as a threatening murderer from whom she must escape" (Hanson, 2007, p. 57). The same scenario is played out in more recent female Gothic films such as *Jagged Edge* (Richard Marquand, 1985), *The Stepfather* (Joseph Ruben, 1987), *Dead Again* (Kenneth Branagh, 1991), *Sleeping with the Enemy* (Joseph Ruben, 1991), *Deceived* (Damian Harris, 1991), which "feature a central female protagonist located in a domestic environment and in an unhappy or dysfunctional heterosexual relationship" who gradually "begins to suspect that her husband or lover has a terrible secret relating to a woman in his past and as she tries to uncover that secret [...] she begins to fear that he is trying to kill her" (Hanson, 2007, pp. 175–176).

Apart from the inclusion of the figure of a ghost, *What Lies Beneath* neatly fits into the typical female Gothic plot outlined by Hanson, which is modeled on the "Bluebeard" tale. The seemingly kind and caring Norman turns out to be the murderous spouse and the keeper of a horrible secret, which the unsuspecting Claire gradually unearths, thus becoming the next target of her husband's murderous intentions. Another striking similarity between the film and the tale is that, as in "Bluebeard," it is curiosity that drives Claire to seek out the center of the mystery despite her husband's repeated warnings to give up probing into the matter. What is more, that Claire ultimately discovers her husband's murderous secret by means of a key which she uses to unlock the box containing the murdered woman's belongings has obvious shades of "Bluebeard," where the wife uses the key to the forbidden room to discover "the bloody bodies of murdered wives that represent the truth around which patriarchy is organised" (Williams, 1995, pp. 43-44). In effect, both Norman's secret and Bluebeard's secret are actually one and the same, for in the last analysis, both represent patriarchy's secret, i.e. "the unquestioned reality of the male power that makes such murder possible" (Williams, 1995, p. 46). So, like "Bluebeard," *What Lies Beneath* is concerned primarily with the issues of power and control within the family, presenting insights into the way in which gender relations are governed by the patriarchal power dynamic based on male dominance and female oppression. In the same way as Bluebeard, who kills his wives as punishment for disobeying him, Norman rationalises the murder of Madison and Claire as a well-deserved punishment for their failing to comply with his wishes, especially when his reputation and social position are at stake. It is the women themselves, he thinks, who brought it on themselves – Madison by threatening to expose their affair and Claire by not heeding his warning to stop pursuing the matter: "She gave me no choice," Norman tells Claire as he is waiting for her to drown in the tub slowly filling with water, "and neither have you." Hence, on the whole, *What Lies Beneath*, which casts the husband into the role of the murderer, can be regarded as a retelling of the "Bluebeard" tale albeit in the form of a ghost story. As such, Madison's corpse that lies at the bottom of the lake, like the dead bodies of the murdered women in Bluebeard's bloody chamber, represents the horrors of patriarchy that lie beneath the veneer of ordinary domestic life.

The Locked Room: The Ghosting of Woman in *The Hidden Face*

The Colombian director Andres Baiz's second feature film *The Hidden Face* can be interpreted as an interesting reworking of the female Gothic formula about the haunting of a woman by another woman who, surprisingly,

turns out to be alive. At the beginning of the film we see Adrian, a Spanish orchestra conductor currently working in Colombia, drink himself to distraction after the disappearance of his girlfriend Belen, who has left a message saying that she is leaving him. Before long, Adrian starts a relationship with another woman, Fabiana, who moves into the huge, luxurious country house where Adrian used to live with Belen. In time, Fabiana begins to experience strange phenomena inside the house, such as eerie sounds coming from the water pipes and inexplicable disturbances in the water inside the sink and the bathtub. Consequently, Fabiana comes to believe that the house is haunted by a ghost that is trying to contact her. Meanwhile, the police who investigate Belen's disappearance consider the possibility that she is murdered and regard Adrian as the chief suspect. At this point, the film abruptly cuts to a long flashback sequence depicting the events leading up to Belen's disappearance, beginning with Belen's agreeing to move with Adrian from Spain to Colombia where Adrian has been offered a good job. Their happy days together last until Belen begins to suspect Adrian of having an affair with a violinist in the orchestra called Veronica. When Belen learns of the existence of a secret, soundproof room from where one can secretly observe everything going on inside the house through one way mirrors, she decides to put Adrian's fidelity to test by staging a disappearance. However, her plan goes awry and Belen gets trapped inside the soundproof room with no means of contacting the outside world. For days on end, she watches Adrian and Fabiana from behind the mirrors as she desperately seeks for a way to contact them until she realises that by pounding on the water pipes she can create ripples in the water inside the tub and the sink. Eventually she manages to attract Fabiana's attention and alert her to the fact that she is trapped inside the house. However, Fabiana refuses to help Belen for fear that Adrian will desert her once Belen reappears. Fabiana changes her mind, however, after realizing that Adrian is flirting with the violinist called Veronica and decides to rescue Belen after all. However, Fabiana is in for a shock, for once inside the secret room, she is attacked by Belen, who knocks her unconscious before locking her inside. Having placed the key to the secret room on the bed for Adrian to find, Belen departs, leaving us to wonder whether Fabiana will ever manage to get out.

The Hidden Face starts out as a typical ghost film with the arrival of a female character into an imposing house in which she experiences what appears to be supernatural phenomena that lead her to the conclusion that the house is haunted. "I think there is a ghost," Fabiana tells Adrian after getting a terrible scare when the lights suddenly go out while she is alone at home, but Adrian merely scoffs at her fears. From the outset, the film plays with traditional Gothic elements, such as the haunted house, the Gothic heroine

and a male figure that is initially presented as a suspect character who may be concealing a dark secret behind his impenetratable countenance. "Do they think I've got her buried in the garden," Adrian jokingly tells Fabiana when the police suddenly show up at the house to look for clues that can shed light on Belen's disappearance. Naturally, Fabiana, who hears about Belen's disappearance for the first time since Adrian has never mentioned Belen before, is utterly bewildered, if not slightly suspicious, asking Adrian whether he does not in the least worry about what has become of Belen. In *The Hidden Face*, as in Ann Radcliffe's foundational female Gothic novels, what initially appear to be supernatural occurrences are revealed to have rational explanations when it turns out that Fabiana is not haunted by a ghost that has returned from the dead, but by Belen who is still alive albeit dead to the world. At this point, the narrative focus shifts from Fabiana to Belen and her desperate struggle to escape from the secret room in which she is trapped.

The theme of domestic entrapment, woman's confinement within a domestic space such as a medieval castle or an ancestral house, is central to the female Gothic formula which can be briefly summed up as "the image of woman-plus-habitation" (as cited in Doane, 1987, p. 124). In female Gothic texts, ranging from Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, where the heroine is imprisoned in the Castle of Udolpho for a prolonged period of time, to Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*, where Jane's employer, Mr. Rochester, keeps his mad wife locked up in the attic, again and again the home becomes a prisonhouse for the female characters, usually through the machinations of a male tyrant. In *The Hidden Face*, Adrian is indirectly, if not directly, responsible for Belen's imprisonment, for even though Belen accidentally gets trapped inside the secret room because of her own carelessness, it is Adrian's involvement with another woman that leads Belen to attempt to stage a disappearance in the first place. It is worth noting that both the house and the room were built by a former Nazi officer as a secret hideout, which brings into play the atrocious history of the Holocaust, thus establishing a link between the atrocities perpetrated against the Jews by the Nazis and the oppression of women under patriarchy. It is worth noting that, in time, Belen's physical condition rapidly deteriorates to the extent that she ultimately comes to resemble a concentration camp prisoner, haggard and emaciated due to prolonged emotional strain and deprivation from wholesome food, clean water, sunlight and fresh air.

Inside the utterly soundproof, hermetically sealed room, Belen is virtually buried alive, which is another way of saying that her existence is temporarily suspended, she might as well be dead. Better still, she is like a ghost that can observe everything going on inside the house, even though she

herself cannot be seen, and hear every spoken word even though she cannot make herself heard no matter how loudly she screams for help. The only means of communication at her disposal is banging on water pipes to create ripples in the water inside the sink and the bathtub, which, to tell the truth, resembles the way ghosts communicate through hauntings. Lacking in agency, robbed of her voice and her capacity to impact the outside world, denied of the means for self expression, Belen is reduced to the state of a ghost, which can be interpreted as a metaphorical expression of the "ghosting," or social erasure of women in patriarchal culture. Thus, Belen can be regarded a perfect example of the invisible, ghostly woman imprisoned within male power structures that negate her existence and condemn her to social death. In fact, the "threat of obliteration of the female self – whether through psychological abuse, physical incarceration, or actual murder – is something which informs all works we might describe as Female Gothic and is a particular dimension of the fear we recognize as Gothic in its origins" (Horner & Zlosnik, 2006, p. 114). A great many female Gothic texts make use of the figure of the ghostly woman to underline the threat of the obliteration of the self and the effacement of identity confronting women in patriarchal culture. Indeed, since its inception in the eighteenth century, female Gothic fiction has been populated with ghostly women like Belen who are, if not literally dead, dead to the world, as in Ann Radcliffe's *A Sicilian Romance* (1790), where the heroine discovers that her long "dead" mother is indeed alive and imprisoned by her father in the very house in which she lives, or in Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* (1847), where the source of the mysterious sounds that the heroine, Jane, hears at night is actually Bertha Mason, the mad first wife of her employer, Mr. Rochester, who keeps the madwoman locked up in the attic, or in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's story "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892), where the heroine, who is forced to stay home and rest in bed all day by her physician-husband, is haunted by the figure of a ghostly woman trapped in the wallpaper with whom she eventually conflates herself. Thus, an overwhelming majority of female Gothic texts, in much the same way as *The Hidden Face*, are haunted by the spectral presence of an "undead" woman, "tell[ing] again and again this story of the woman hidden from the world as if she were dead, her long suffering unknown to those outside – or sometimes even inside" the house (DeLamotte, 1990, p. 153).

In fact, the representation of the woman as imprisoned, or buried alive within patriarchal power structures can be traced back to Sophocles's tragedy *Antigone* (circa 441 BC), where the protagonist, Antigone, is punished by being walled up in a hole in the rock for defying the authority of her uncle King Creon, who leaves a little food to keep her alive so that he shall not be

directly responsible for her death. Antigone is deemed by the Lacan-inspired French feminist Luce Irigaray as a symbolic figure that personifies women's subjugation under patriarchy: "Antigone is silenced in her action. Locked up – paralyzed, on the edge of the city" (Irigaray, 1993a, p. 119). Silenced, paralysed and imprisoned by patriarchal power, Antigone epitomizes the condition of women in patriarchal society, which deprives women of the right to act, to speak, to behave in the way they believe is right and to have an identity and life of their own. According to Irigaray, the repression of women's subjectivity does not merely stem from the prevalent sexism inherent in patriarchal institutions that serve to perpetuate male dominance and female subordination, for the roots of women's oppression reach much deeper. Taking her cue from Jacques Lacan, Irigaray argues that women lack identity and autonomy because they are deprived of the means to affirm their subjectivity within the phallic structures of language and culture, i.e. within what Lacan calls the Symbolic order. In other words, women are excluded from the Symbolic order, which is, by definition, gendered masculine since it is structured around the signifier of the phallus and governed by patriarchal law, hence allowing only for the constitution of a male subjectivity. Consequently, "the feminine [...] is practically assimilated to the non-masculine. Being a woman is equated with not being a man" (Irigaray, 1993b, p. 71). Hence, the gendered structures of thought and language are inadequate for conceptualizing and articulating female identity, subjectivity and sexuality as distinct from male identity, subjectivity and sexuality. Thus, "[w]omen in patriarchal discourse, according to Irigaray, do not have the tools with which to conceive of themselves or to be conceived of by others" (Bolton, 2011, p. 2), a situation that Irigaray refers to as "women's exile from the Symbolic".

> The constitution of becoming a female subject can therefore be compared to a going in exile or to a becoming homeless in the symbolic order. In "Women's Exile", Luce Irigaray describes this exile of women as a state of being "shut up in their bodies, in their silence and their home" because women lack language as a medium of expression (Mulder, 2006, p. 95).

Like the writers of the female Gothic, Irigaray resorts to the metaphor of the ghost to describe women's condition in the phallocentric, patriarchal society, where because they lack symbolisation, women exist in a state of "dereliction": they "are nowhere, touching everything, but never in touch with each other, lost in the air, like ghosts" (Irigaray as cited in Wallace, 2009, p. 37). Thus, Irigaray implies that, within the phallic structures of the Symbolic order, women are "ghosted" in that they are deprived of subjectivity, agency and a language of their own. Since there is no way to represent the female within the gendered systems of representation in Western phallocentric culture, women

can only be represented as lack, hence Lacan's remark "woman does not exist" (Lacan, 1998, p. 7). Lacan's controversial remark is actually based on the idea that since women lack (and thus in a way resist) symbolisation within language and culture, there is no singular, fixed, all-compassing essence of womanhood. Given that there is no such thing as woman-in-itself or woman-for-itself, women are always defined in terms of their relations to men and thus deprived of a female identity other than the ones imposed on them by men, like that of wife, mother, or lover. "Socially speaking, Lacan's assertion that there is no signifier of/for Woman is, no doubt, related to the fact that a woman's position in our culture is either automatically defined by the man she adopts as partner or is defined only with great difficulty" (Fink, 1995, p. 116).

The Hidden Face can be said to offer a metaphorical rendering of woman's precarious position within the Symbolic order by dramatizing what Irigaray calls "women's exile from the Symbolic". In effect, Belen's vanishing without a trace, i.e. her inexplicable disappearance that remains a mystery throughout the first half of the film, can be interpreted as presenting a coded expression of Lacan's statement that "woman does not exist". As a matter of fact, Belen's plight demonstrates not only that woman has no stable place in the Symbolic order but also that she is "ghosted" within the phallic structures of thought and language which negate her existence. That woman is denied a subjectivity of her own within phallocentric culture is manifested in Belen's failure to achieve an identity independent of her partner, Adrian, one indication of which is Belen's readily agreeing to leave behind her life in Spain to follow Adrian to Colombia. Belen seems to compensate for her precarious, insecure hold on the Symbolic by trying to assure herself that she has a firm, stable, secure place in Adrian's life. "If I come with you do you promise to take care of me? You won't leave me alone?" Belen keeps asking Adrian before they set out for Colombia, as if trying to reassure herself that she is indispensible for Adrian, which is reflective of Belen's attempt to define her position in the Symbolic order in relation to a man. It is this nagging doubt as to her own place in Adrian's life, and by implication in the Symbolic order, that drives Belen to test Adrian's fidelity by observing his reaction to her disappearance. To her dismay, Belen sees that it does not take Adrian very long to find another woman to fill her place: it is now Fabiana who occupies the subject position of Adrian's lover and who will accompany Adrian back to Spain in place of Belen. Fabiana is so content with this arrangement that she is willing to let Belen die in the locked room rather than rescue her and run the risk of losing Adrian. However, Fabiana's place in Adrian's life is as precarious as her predecessor's, for it is not long before Adrian starts flirting with Veronica, the very same woman who triggered Belen's jealousy in the first place. Upon

realizing that eliminating Belen can never guarantee her place in Adrian's life, Fabiana changes her mind and rushes to Belen's rescue, whereafter she ends up locked in the secret room instead of Belen. The film's ending seems to imply that woman's subjection to man, i.e. her attempt to define her position in the Symbolic order in relation to a man, invariably results in woman's imprisonment, loss of agency, the obliteration of her identity, in short her relegation to the status of a ghost.

Conclusion

Again and again, we see the same scenario played out in female Gothic texts, a scenario that centers on a heroine who is married or in a heterosexual relationship with a man that may or may not be concealing a dark secret. This scenario, which can be traced back to the "Bluebeard" tale, deploys such motifs as a Gothic locale, usually a haunted house, a dark secret, a locked room, a key that is used to unlock the room or the box harbouring the secret, which invariably involves murder, or death or the risk thereof. This scenario, which furnishes the blueprint for the female Gothic experience, serves to expose the dark underside of heterosexual relationships and reveal the violence at the heart of patriarchal culture. On the whole, the female Gothic experience can be said to present a coded expression of the dangers that women face within the patriarchal institution of marriage and the heterosexual relationship, which include domestic entrapment, the represssion of subjectivity, the obliteration of the self, physical violence, even murder.

Ghosts and hauntings are key motifs in the female Gothic not least because the ghost's invisibility, insubstantiality and lack of full presence renders it a fitting metaphor for representing women's social invisibility, disempowerment and lack of agency in the phallocentric, patriarchal culture. Female Gothic texts, more often than not, depict the haunting of a woman by another woman who, in both *What Lies Beneath* and *The Hidden Face*, turns out to be a (former) rival. In both films, haunting becomes a means of communication between the two women, while the male characters in both films, Norman and Adrian respectively, remain literally deaf and blind to the haunting. Furthermore, in both films, we see a growing identification between the woman who is haunted and the woman who is doing the haunting, which points to the similarity between the two women in terms of their oppressed, victimized condition in the patriarchal world. In *What Lies Beneath*, Madison, the dead woman that used to be Claire's rival, turns into an ally who helps her escape from the clutches of Norman, and the final scene depicts Claire laying a red rose on Madison's grave in order to express her gratefulness. Thus, the ending serves to affirm female kinship, solidarity and the sisterhood between

the two women, thereby reinforcing the film's feminist agenda and highlighting the fact that the film is "emphatically female-centered and overtly feminist" (Hanson, 2007, p. 197). Unlike *What Lies Beneath*, where the two former rivals, Claire and Madison's ghost, side together against a common enemy, i.e. Norman, who is revealed to be a murderer, in *The Hidden Face* there is no solidarity or sisterhood between the two central female characters, namely Fabiana and Belen. At first glance, this may seem to run counter to a feminist agenda; nevertheless, the film's depiction of heterosexual relationship as a threatening, imprisoning structure for women serves to decipher the workings of patriarchy and present valuable insights into the ghosting of woman in the phallocentric Symbolic order.

To conclude, in both *What Lies Beneath* and *The Hidden Face*, as in the majority of female Gothic texts, ghosts and hauntings become the means whereby the repressed horrors that lie at the heart of patriarchy make themselves known. While in *What Lies Beneath* the ghost of a murdered woman returns from the dead to warn the heroine against the threat of male violence and murder, in *The Hidden Face*, the figure of the ghostly woman serves to highlight the ways in which women are rendered invisible or ghostly in the sense that they are denied agency, self expression, subjectivity and an identity of their own in a society which is organised around patriarchal power relations. In short, an exploration into the sexual politics of these two female Gothic films suffices to lay bare the fact that the representation of the woman as a ghost or a ghostly figure serves to offer an effective critique of gender relations.

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