

**‘I can’t leave her’: Maternal Gothic/Horror in *Hereditary* (Ari Aster, 2018), *Relic* (Natalie Erika James, 2020), and *You Are Not My Mother* (Kate Dolan, 2021)**

Paula Quigley

Orcid id: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2912-2485>

## Introduction

If it is the case that Mrs Bates gave birth to the modern American horror film, then her successors continue to disrupt family dynamics in ways that speak to contemporary Western cultural anxieties around the maternal role and its reach. In *Relic* (Natalie Erika James, 2020), *You Are Not My Mother* (Kate Dolan, 2021), and *Hereditary* (Ari Aster, 2018), issues of grief, trauma and mental illness are portrayed as matrilinear as well as intergenerational, and the repressed anxieties that structure the maternal relationship erupt with full force, exposing the often violent contradictions at its root. However, as distinct from films such as *The Hole in the Ground* (Lee Cronin, 2019) and *The Babadook* (Jennifer Kent, 2014), which explore maternal ambivalence through the prism of the mother’s suspicion of her male child, these films privilege the daughter’s perspective. Exploring this via the Female Gothic trope of ‘woman plus habitation’<sup>1</sup> allows for a visceral interrogation of her conflicted attachment to the corporeal reality of the (ageing) maternal body and her thematically intertwined relationship to the domestic space. Indeed, that these films share this focus, albeit worked through in different ways across a range of national and production contexts, is indicative of the ongoing investment in the mother as one of Western horror cinema’s most enduring – and ‘monstrous’ – of figures.

*Relic*, *You Are Not My Mother* and *Hereditary* all involve three generations of women – daughter, mother, grandmother – whose physical and psychic situation in depressing and ultimately dangerous domestic spaces defines their relationships with the (m)other and with themselves. In *Relic*, Kay (Emily Mortimer), returns to her family home in Creswick, a small town in Australia, with her adult daughter, Sam (Bella Heathcote), after receiving reports that her mother, Edna (Robyn Nevin), has gone missing. Edna’s return precipitates a horrific confrontation with the mother as a nightmarish reflection of the self. In *You Are Not My Mother*, teenager Char (Hazel Doupe), tries to unravel the reason for *her* mother’s disappearance on a bleak housing estate in North Dublin, Ireland, under the sharp gaze of her superstitious grandmother, Rita (Ingrid Craigie). When her mother, Angela (Carolyn Bracken) returns, her increasingly erratic behaviour forces Char to violently separate herself from her in an act of

detachment that risks the destruction of both mother and daughter. *Hereditary*, set in an unspecified, affluent North American suburb, opens with an obituary for Annie's (Toni Collette) mother, with whom she had a destructive relationship. Annie's blank affect following her mother's funeral is shattered by the death by decapitation of her daughter, Charlie (Molly Shapiro), when her own barely suppressed maternal ambivalence explodes to searing effect.

In all three films, Gothic aesthetics and Female Gothic motifs – particularly those associated with the Freudian uncanny that have become embedded in the Western popular cultural vocabulary – offer an iconography and themes with which to investigate the 'horror' of the maternal legacy and the related issue of woman's place within the home. In *Relic*, this manifests as a specific anxiety around the mother as representing the fact of female ageing and the reversal of roles that this entails. In *You Are Not My Mother*, the elderly woman is eliminated in order to restore the mother-daughter equilibrium. As I will argue, in these two films, repurposing the 'archaic mother' motif allows for a more empathetic approach to, or at least acknowledgement of, the daughter's conflicted relationship with this iteration of what Barbara Creed calls the 'monstrous-feminine.'<sup>2</sup> In *Hereditary*, however, the initial investment in the complexities of the mother-daughter nexus is replaced by a focus on male fear of the maternal body itself. This is resolved by the restitution of patriarchal order, structured in terms of a gendered split between (male) head and (female) body. That the three films explore similar terrain only to arrive at starkly different positions – veering between the depiction of the (archaic) mother as beloved, the mother as 'black hole', and the mother as meat – speaks to both the flexibility of the Western horror and Female Gothic aesthetics and tropes that they mobilise, as well as the deep-seated ambivalence toward the mother figure in Western popular culture.

### Maternal Gothic/Horror

As Xavier Aldana Reyes points out, disentangling the horror genre from the Gothic mode is not easy as, in addition to being transhistorical and transnational, both 'are based in darkness and negative affect.'<sup>3</sup> However, as Aldana Reyes argues, while horror can take place virtually anywhere, Gothic fiction has a specific 'look' and location, which is closely linked to concepts of time and its passing.<sup>4</sup> Certain landscapes (sombre, forbidding, *sublime*) and specific kinds of structures (dark castles, cellars, and so on), especially when set in the past, are essential to its topography.<sup>5</sup> The terrible weight of (usually family) history, captured in – indeed articulated by – oppressive architectural spaces, is what the protagonist sets out to investigate.<sup>6</sup> As such,

PRE-PRINT, final version published in Deirdre Flynn & Susan Liddy (eds.), *Routledge Companion to Motherhood on Screen*, 2024.

the Gothic is best understood as an ‘aesthetic mode’, whose ‘main recognisable traits, remain visual and iconographic and, by association, thematic.’<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, this does not preclude it from doing the cultural work of probing – however covertly – ideological cracks or fissures, a project which feminist scholarship has argued is central to so-called Female Gothic, that strand of fiction which explores women’s experiences as literally and/or figuratively imprisoned in the roles of daughters, wives and mothers.

According to Ellen Moers, who coined the term in the 1970s, English author Ann Radcliffe established the central conventions of Female Gothic in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>8</sup> Radcliffe’s Gothic romances feature a young, motherless, female protagonist – ‘simultaneously persecuted victim and courageous heroine’<sup>9</sup> – incarcerated by a male tyrant in a dark castle or great house, whose involute spaces she must navigate in order to find the freedom and happiness she deserves. In 1818, according to Moers, Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* – ‘a phantasmagoria of the nursery’<sup>10</sup> – added a specific anxiety around motherhood. As discussed below, this model of the Female Gothic as having a morbid fear of marriage and/or motherhood running through its heart has been further nuanced by psychoanalytic theorisations that summon the un/familiar spectre of the mother herself. The Freudian reading of the mother figure as uncanny is intimately connected with her natural habitat – the home, or more properly, the un/homely, or *unheimlich*: the dark, confined spaces that constitute the Gothic mise-en-scène.

For Freud, the uncanny or *unheimlich* is what was once familiar made unfamiliar by a process of repression, and what was once *heimisch*, or familiar, is ‘the former *Heim* [home] of all human beings’; in other words, the womb.<sup>11</sup> According to Creed, rooms, cellars and other enclosed spaces that hold (again, usually family) secrets symbolise the womb in the horror film; the quest to unlock these secrets is also the quest for the protagonist’s own origins. As well as identifying the spectral presence of the maternal figure haunting the space of the horror film, Creed draws on the work of Julia Kristeva to establish a link between its images of corporeal femininity and abjection. As Kristeva argues, abjection is first experienced as the process of separation whereby the child establishes fragile boundaries between itself and the mother figure. Thus, abjection is the revolt against the initial conditions of our existence, and the abject is experienced as something that must be separated from the self, if ‘I’ am to exist. This revulsion reasserts itself whenever we are confronted with objects and experiences that traverse (especially bodily) borders; for instance, excrement, blood, vomit, and, most traumatising of all, the corpse. As the mutable maternal body resists clear boundaries, it threatens the notion of the self as whole, unified and separate. Creed stresses Kristeva’s point

that in the process of abjection the mother becomes a site of conflicting desires; that is, the simultaneous desire to break free from and be engulfed by the maternal figure.

For Creed, Kristeva's theory of abjection provides a framework for investigating the many faces of what she calls the 'monstrous-feminine', the female monsters with their roots in male fears of the female reproductive body (for example, the witch, the 'monstrous mother', the 'monstrous womb', and so on), that stalk mainstream filmmaking. Though first formulated to investigate horror and science-fiction films of the 1970s and 1980s, Creed makes a case for the continued relevance of the concept, particularly in contemporary art works created by women. Whereas earlier iterations such as *Alien* (Ridley Scott, 1979) and *The Brood* (David Cronenberg, 1979) express male anxieties around the female body as abject, films such as Ana Lily Amirpour's *A Girl Walks Home Alone At Night* (2014) and Julia Ducournau's *Titane* (2021),<sup>12</sup> she argues, embrace 'the journey into abjection' in order to subvert patriarchal systems of representation.

The archaic mother – a particularly pervasive manifestation of the monstrous-feminine in Western culture – is the woman as the source of all life: 'the mother as originating womb.'<sup>13</sup> In Western horror film, she is a negative figure, 'the all-incorporating black hole which threatens to reabsorb what it once birthed.'<sup>14</sup> Similarly, in Female Gothic, the female protagonist's quest for identity is simultaneously the quest for separation from the (archaic) mother, a process that is more complex for her than for her male counterpart. As Claire Kahane argues in relation to Gothic literary fiction originating with Radcliffe, while the male child's separation from the uncanny figure of the mother is supported by the fact of his physical difference, the similarity that the female child perceives between herself and her mother makes a sense of her own autonomy more difficult to achieve. Thus, 'the heroine's active exploration of the Gothic house in which she is trapped is also an exploration of her relation to the maternal body that she shares.'<sup>15</sup> As Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar contend, over the course of these investigations she may encounter one of Gothic fiction's most arresting figures: 'the madwoman in the attic'. That is, the literal and/or figurative incarceration of mad, bad, or otherwise unacceptable manifestations of femininity within patriarchal culture, which must be split off from the protagonist in a process of uncanny doubling if she is to succeed.<sup>16</sup>

In film, Hitchcock's *Rebecca* (1940) and *Suspicion* (1941) are usually credited with initiating the highly successful cycle of Female Gothic films in the 1940s, which included *Gaslight* (George Cukor, 1944), *The Spiral Staircase* (Robert Siodmak, 1946) and *Secret Behind the Door* (Fritz Lang, 1947). As Tamar Jeffers McDonald argues, Gothic aesthetics, tropes and themes continue to set the scene for 'women-in-jeopardy' stories in settings ranging

from early 20<sup>th</sup> century ancestral castles to modernist mansions in the near future.<sup>17</sup> In a similar vein, scholars such as Ginette Carpenter highlight the extent to which Gothic texts such as *Prometheus* (Ridley Scott, 2012) and *We Need to Talk About Kevin* (Lynne Ramsay, 2011) – albeit in different ways – ‘are still invested in the process of Othering the mother.’<sup>18</sup> Likewise, horror’s obsession with the monstrous-feminine, particularly in her maternal manifestations, shows no signs of waning. According to Christopher Sharrett, for instance, ‘New Horror’, a category in which he includes *Hereditary*, along with *The Witch* (Robert Eggers, 2015) and *Mother!* (Darren Aronofsky, 2019), among other recent releases, ‘brings the focus back to women and the family [...]. Today, the genre seems to believe the family is as horrific as ever, with women still miserably trapped by men and the household.’<sup>19</sup> Thus, for Sharrett, while the designation ‘New Horror’ highlights the genre’s elevation in terms of intellectual complexity and sophistication, a central problem remains: its focus on ‘the female as source of disarray and madness.’<sup>20</sup> It is certainly the case that the ongoing conflation of women with madness in horror cinema and beyond is deeply problematic. It is also the case that many of the films Sharrett discusses and those that are of interest here draw on images of female domestic entrapment familiar from the Gothic tradition. Nevertheless, important distinctions need to be made between *Relic* and *You Are Not My Mother* on one hand, and *Hereditary* on the other, in terms of their articulation of gendered power structures and the related navigation of the domestic space.

Kahane traces a significant development in modern Gothic fiction from the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century onwards,<sup>21</sup> whereby the ghostly mother figure of the older Gothic tradition materialises and replaces the male tyrant as principal antagonist. ‘With that shift’, she argues, ‘the heroine is imprisoned not in a house but in the female body, which is itself the maternal legacy. The problematics of femininity is thus reduced to the problematics of the female body, perceived as antagonistic to the sense of self, as therefore freakish.’<sup>22</sup> Similarly, in both *Relic* and *You Are Not My Mother* male characters are marginal at most. Instead, it is primarily the women’s relationship to the physical and psychic contours of the uncanny domestic space that animates their ambivalent confrontation with the ‘freakish’ maternal body and, by extension, with themselves. In *Hereditary*, by contrast, the initial investigation of complex mother-daughter dynamics in a domestic space reimagined by Annie as female artist is eschewed in favour of the abjection of the mother figure, cast (off) as the ‘madwoman in the attic’, and the reinstatement of the male heir as ‘head’ of the patriarchal unit.

*Relic* (Natalie Erika James, 2020)

PRE-PRINT, final version published in Deirdre Flynn & Susan Liddy (eds.), *Routledge Companion to Motherhood on Screen*, 2024.

Director and co-writer James frequently references the Gothic as a source of inspiration for *Relic* (2020).<sup>23</sup> This is clear in the film's interest in the weight of the past on the present and related questions of time, memory, and loss, played out in a dilapidated house whose labyrinthine spaces and dead ends literalise the often unbearable experience of time as both finite and cyclical. Indeed, a sense of time as palimpsestic is particularly resonant here, as James identifies witnessing her grandmother's decline due to Alzheimer's disease as a key motivation for the story.<sup>24</sup> As poignant as Edna's mental decline is, however, her physical decline is as much, if not more, of a focus. Luke Buckmaster describes the film as 'sticky': 'Not just sticky as in something that clings to you emotionally, but sticky in the way horror movies offer gross literal things you could reach out and touch.'<sup>25</sup> This 'stickiness' extends to both Edna's house and body, as the two are visually and thematically entwined throughout.

When Kay and Sam return to the remote family home, travelling through dense green landscape to get there, they are unnerved by Edna's altered appearance and strange behaviour and they experience the house itself as uncanny. They hear noises in its walls and everyday objects, such as the candles Edna makes, take on an eerie aspect. As Edna unravels, so too does her house. As James puts it, the aim is to make the audience 'feel the heartbreak, not only [...] in Edna's deterioration, but also in the state of the house too.'<sup>26</sup> In a literal sense, then, *Relic* takes its title from a stained-glass window that is the source of the black mould that spreads throughout the mother's house and body. In a figurative sense, 'relic' can also refer to the ageing female body itself, a long-standing source of cultural and cinematic horror. This is emphasised from the opening shot: a slow push-in on Edna's naked body from the back accompanied by an unsettling soundtrack. As Katie McCabe notes in relation to *You Are Not My Mother*, but which applies to *Relic* (and *Hereditary*) as well, the daughter, mother and grandmother structure is similar to the pagan idea of the triple goddess: maiden, mother and crone.<sup>27</sup> And, as Creed points out, the witch in myth and folklore is 'invariably represented as an old, ugly crone who is capable of monstrous acts'.<sup>28</sup> From the outset, Edna's association with the crone is emphasised by her long, grey hair. Flowing down her naked back during the ominous opening scene, neatly pinned up when she's acting 'normal', and half-up half-down in the liminal outdoor setting between the house and the woods where she and Kay are briefly reconciled, Edna's hair provides a visual shorthand for her relative proximity to the woman-as-witch trope at any given moment.<sup>29</sup>

According to Aldana Reyes, '[h]orror film can be seen as a form of corporeal fiction that filters the gothic mode through a visceral register, or which brings to the foreground the

viscerality that is intrinsic to it.<sup>30</sup> Ultimately, *Relic* foregrounds the visceral corporeality of the (ageing) maternal body and the intimation of mortality it represents to the female protagonist. Edna/the house as black hole is all-consuming and threatens the border between the self and (m)other. With echoes of her conflicted relationship with Edna herself, Kay experiences the house as unclean, abject, and her relationship to it is repressive; she cleans and tidies, restoring items to their proper place. Sam, on the other hand, in her guise as intrepid young Gothic heroine, embarks on a form of domestic travel, (the only kind available to her literary antecedents, according to Moers),<sup>31</sup> slipping into her grandmother's old cardigan and exploring the house's hidden spaces. When she and Kay first arrive, she enters the house through the cat flap, foreshadowing her subsequent desperate crawl through its hidden passages. In true Gothic style, locked doors are no deterrent; indeed, like Bluebeard's wife, Sam is intrigued by what they might lead to. Here, the locked room of the Gothic tradition houses the domestic detritus of a long life – its 'deep history'<sup>32</sup> of discarded lamps, furniture, ornaments, linens – heaped haphazardly in such a way as to render the components of the family home *unheimlich*. The looping, intra-uterine passageways of the labyrinth it leads to promote an experience of time as cyclical. As Sam is drawn deeper into its space, the labyrinth loops like a Möbius strip, returning her again and again to the horror of the room/womb from which she struggles to escape. Kay, too, becomes lost in the black hole. Finally, they push themselves through its rotting, leaking walls, as in a grotesque kind of labour. In this process of abjection, Edna transforms into something akin to a crawling corpse and a final confrontation between archaic mother and daughter(s) ensues. Rather than abandon the maternal realm, however, Sam and Kay choose to stay with Edna as she dies and an overhead shot shows the three women curled around each other in a foetal formation. The peace is disturbed when Sam sees a small black spot on her mother's back. The inference is clear: it will be Kay's turn next.

The mould on Kay's back is a visceral reminder of her imprisonment in the female body and its immanent decay. Yet *Relic* includes an oddly moving moment. As she nears death, Edna sees one of the many notes to herself scattered around the house. It reads: 'I am loved'. Discussing examples of what she calls the 'grannies gone bad' subcategory of horror, such as *The Visit* (M. Night Shyamalan, 2015) and *The Taking of Deborah Logan* (Adam Robitel, 2014), Maddi McGillvray argues that the old women in them start as 'sympathetic victims who cannot control their decaying minds and bodies. By the end of each film, however, it is revealed that something more sinister may be responsible for their strange behaviours and changing bodies.'<sup>33</sup> *Relic* is unusual in reversing this trajectory. The initial display of Edna's ageing body is designed to shock<sup>34</sup> and changes to her personality are depicted as potentially malign. By the

end of the film, however, Edna appears deeply vulnerable, almost embryonic, and the revulsion that is encouraged toward her physical and mental degeneration is tempered by empathy. Ultimately, Kay tends to her with kindness – an attitude not normally associated with the horror film – and an acceptance of Edna’s, and possibly her own, imperfect mothering.

Reconsidering Creed’s concept of the monstrous-feminine in the context of recent media representations, E. Ann Kaplan argues that ‘pervasive images unconsciously continue to render women ‘monstrous’ only now in relation to age.’<sup>35</sup> Past their (re)productive years and no longer fodder for sexual fantasy, older women are abjected, she argues, for economic, political, and social reasons. In particular, representations of older people (especially women) with Alzheimer’s disease give rise to what Kaplan calls the ‘demented monstrous-feminine trope’,<sup>36</sup> central to which is the idea that women with dementia no longer have a subjectivity or ‘self’. To counter this, Kaplan explores Dana Walrath’s memoir, *Aliceheimer’s: Alzheimer’s Through the Looking Glass*, which details Walrath’s changing relationship with her elderly mother who had Alzheimer’s disease. For Kaplan, Walrath’s work prompts the question of what happens to the mother-daughter relationship when the mother relinquishes her ‘maternal authority’ as a result of dementia and the daughter assumes the role of carer. The answer, she proposes, is that ‘positions *are* reversed, but long-held psychic patterns *remain*.’<sup>37</sup> As the mother loses her authority, the daughter ‘is gradually able to let go of hostility, ambivalence, and aggression from inevitable childhood conflicts, and come to love her ‘new’ mother.’<sup>38</sup> In *Relic*, the ‘journey into abjection’ that precipitates Edna’s return to an elemental phase of existence allows Kay to assume the maternal role towards her that she hitherto resisted. The mother-daughter dynamic is reversed, and the fear of the archaic mother as black hole is briefly replaced by the desire to sink into the comfort of the dyadic relationship, however impossible that may be.

*You Are Not My Mother* (Kate Dolan, 2021)

Like *Relic*, *You Are Not My Mother* explores anxiety around the maternal legacy as it relates to issues of mental illness and dysfunctional mother-daughter relationships, and the film encourages a certain compassion towards the mother as ‘madwoman’ and her related failures as a caregiver. That said, in this case the mother-daughter reparation requires a scapegoat – the elderly woman or crone – whose dispatch is treated with significantly less sentiment. This is enacted on *Samhain* (Halloween), the pagan Irish festival when the border between living and

PRE-PRINT, final version published in Deirdre Flynn & Susan Liddy (eds.), *Routledge Companion to Motherhood on Screen*, 2024.

the dead is believed to be at its most permeable, in oppressive domestic environs where time is experienced as layered rather than linear. The opening scene shows a limping, older woman (Rita) push a baby (Char) into dark woods and place her within a ring of fire, ignoring her cries. Teenage Char's eyes snap open and we feel the gravitational pull of the past on the present. Char's dreary, semi-detached home is similarly stuck in a rut; decorated, as film critic Cath Clarke puts it, 'in the late-70s style you only now ever see in horror movies.'<sup>39</sup> Its rooms hold memories of earlier, happy Halloweens as well as Char's frightening premonitions of the future. Often shot through doorways, the narrow passages are emphasised by static shots that isolate mother and daughter in dark bedrooms whose locked doors are a recurring motif. Scenes of Char hovering at the threshold of her mother's room in fear of the 'madwoman' within are set against the bright office space of her schoolteacher whose 'door is always open'. At home, tight shots keep Char confined in small spaces: alone in the kitchen, sleepless in bed, or separated from her grandmother in single shots in a living room that feels anything but. Throughout, mirrors fracture faces and offer multiple perspectives of the house's weighted spaces and its troubled and doubled inhabitants.

When Angela returns after her sudden disappearance, she is different, *uncanny*. Close ups of Char's confused face as she watches her uncharacteristically brightly dressed mother sing and dance around the kitchen emphasise the strangeness of her performance of maternal duties within the family home. The notion of the loss of subjectivity associated with (female) mental illness, thematised via the idea of changelings from Irish folklore – Angela 'is not herself' – once more manifests primarily as a monstrous physicality. In the kitchen, Angela dances playfully to the pop hit, 'You're Such a Good-Looking Woman.' The next time she dances along to this song, this is clearly no longer the case. Angela's body has become freakish, capable of uncanny contortion. The deeper she descends into madness the more monstrous she becomes; limping, bloodied, and losing clumps of hair, the ironic juxtaposition with the lyrics could not be clearer. Fully inhabiting the role of the archaic mother as black hole, Angela submerges herself in the river and tries to pull Char into its uterine depths with her.

Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik contend that in Gothic fiction, 'the figure of the old woman may function as a symbol of a burdensome historical legacy.'<sup>40</sup> Rita's sensitivity to Angela's 'down days' suggests that Angela's mental illness may be inherited from her and the limp Angela acquires establishes a corporeal link between the two. Ultimately, however, Angela's descent into the role of 'mother-as-abyss'<sup>41</sup> is averted by the removal of Rita as crone; her elimination is essential to the survival of mother and maiden. Dawn Keetley discusses horror films such as *It Follows* (David Robert Mitchell, 2015), 'where the shock of aging [sic]

is externalized as the young protagonist is shadowed by her uncanny elderly double.’<sup>42</sup> ‘Fears about aging,’ she writes, ‘are thus displaced from the young protagonists themselves onto the old woman.’<sup>43</sup> *You Are Not My Mother* performs a similar operation. Though the final confrontation involves Char and Angela, Rita’s sudden, unexplained death (it is implied that Angela is responsible) relieves mother and daughter of their ‘uncanny elderly double’ and facilitates their reconciliation. With Rita as scapegoat and Angela cleansed by fire, the border between the self and the abject is redrawn. In the final scene, the future is bright for mother and daughter, literally and metaphorically. This can only ever be a partial resolution, however, depending as it does on the occlusion of the abject elderly woman and what she represents. The final scene briefly acknowledges this, along with the potential power of assuming the role of the monstrous-feminine in her guise of woman-as-witch: Char, sitting on Rita’s bed, assumes the role of crone by giving her mother a talisman to keep her safe.

*Hereditary* (Ari Aster, 2018)

If the castle or great house of Gothic fiction contracts to suburban proportions in *You Are Not My Mother*, the diminution of the domestic space to dollhouse dimensions in *Hereditary* offers a different take on the woman plus habitation motif. This time, madness is figured as inherent to the hysterical female body, which must be confined to the attic and severed from the (male) head of the patriarchal unit. Annie is a miniatures artist who creates dioramas of scenes from her family history. When her mother, Ellen, dies, her daughter Charlie’s behaviour becomes increasingly anti-social and unnerving (this includes a particularly unsettling – what Kristeva might call pre-symbolic and hence belonging to the maternal realm – tongue-click). Annie’s own unprocessed emotions in the wake of her secretive mother’s passing distance her from her husband, Steve (Gabriel Byrne), and her son, Peter (Alex Wolff). Charlie, we are told, is allergic to nuts and this is the indirect cause of her demise. Brought to a teenage party by a reluctant Peter at Annie’s insistence, Charlie eats contaminated cake and goes into anaphylactic shock. As Peter frantically drives her to hospital, she sticks her head out of the window gasping for air and is swiftly – shockingly – decapitated by a telegraph pole. Charlie’s death is Annie’s undoing and her desire to communicate with her daughter leads her into the world of seances and spiritualism and, from there, to discovering the satanic cult of which her mother was Queen. The final act relies on the revelation of demonic possession for its resolution, played out in terms of the elevation of (male) head over (female) body.

Throughout, Annie's relationship to the uncanny domestic space and, by extension, to her dead mother and daughter, (and to herself as a mother and daughter), is of central importance. According to writer and director Aster, 'It was definitely a goal from the beginning to make the house this uncanny thing, which begins as a home but gradually [gets] more and more un-homelike.'<sup>44</sup> Arguably, the home as *unheimlich* is signalled from the start. Decorated in dark greens and moody blues, the family home is a fashionable take on the Gothic mansion. The first shot is of a treehouse (to which we return for the finale) seen through a window before a pan around a room resembling an artist's studio reveals a dollhouse on a table. As we advance into one of its bedrooms it segues into being an actual bedroom (via VFX), in which Peter is sleeping. The uncanny effect generated by this seamless transition presages the slight air of artificiality that pervades the house as a whole. For Aster, the motif of the dollhouse functions as 'a solid metaphor for the family's situation [...]. They are like dolls in a dollhouse, being manipulated by these outside forces.'<sup>45</sup> The dollhouse effect produced by the set design is mirrored in Annie's art. Annie's magnifying glasses facilitate the painstaking miniature model making that enables her to contain the maternal presence: she creates models of her mother, Ellen, dying in her hospice bed, appearing in Annie's bedroom doorway in a white nightgown, or in her most explicit incarnation as archaic mother, looming over Annie as she nurses Charlie, offering her own bare breast. The detached perspective her miniature making affords Annie is evinced most clearly in her description of the diorama of Charlie's decapitation as 'a neutral view of the accident'. Interestingly, there is a similar motif in *Relic* when we see Kay's eye in close-up, held open by an eyelash curler, just before she goes to see a care home with ocean views for her mother. The act of looking, depending as it does on distance or, in Annie's case at least, on a distance that is carefully manufactured and maintained, is linked in both cases to the attempt to separate oneself from the overwhelming mother figure. Annie's miniatures freeze the scenes of her past traumas in time and shrink their coordinates to a manageable size. She stores houses within houses in a process of emotional encapsulation essential to her psychic survival.

The box labelled 'Mom's things' in Annie's studio holds Ellen's memories in a photo album of the same name, and her spectre seems to haunt the recesses of Annie's workshop, the house itself, and, by implication, Annie's unconscious. When the door of Ellen's former bedroom is mysteriously left open, Steve (another Bluebeard) locks it as Annie, in Gothic victim mode, apologises for being irrational. Studying her mother's memories leads her to the attic, where the spectre of her dead mother materialises in the form of a rotting, headless corpse. Thus, Annie's intuitions unlock the house's secrets, while Steve, a psychiatrist, remains

entrenched in the position of rational male sceptic. Although paternal, Steve is depicted as a failed patriarch and his destruction is simultaneous with Annie's transformation into the 'madwoman in the attic', whose blank stare belies the loss of subjectivity this entails. In an inversion of the imperilled Gothic heroine versus male villain, Peter is locked in the attic with Annie as she performs her own decapitation. His expulsion from this uncanny domestic space leads to his rebirth and the film ends as the 'first, female body' (that is, Charlie) has been 'corrected' into 'a healthy, male host'. Peter ascends as a god into the treehouse: the external alternative to the dark, uterine space that holds the horrific remains of the mother(s)' bodies. Thus, the film begins and ends with Peter and he is identified as the head of a cult whose principal members comprise the decapitated bodies of his mother, sister and grandmother. According to Anne Williams, Bluebeard's secret is 'patriarchy's secret founding "truth" about the female: women as mortal, expendable matter/*mater*.'<sup>46</sup> Emptied of its operatic grief and rage, Annie's body is static and supplicant, on display, not dissimilar to the models she created to contain the psychic violence unleashed by her own mother and visited upon her daughter in turn. Bloodied and lifeless, the maternal line is reduced to meat.

## Conclusion

Ostensibly, all three films engage with themes of mental illness or deterioration, grief, and trauma, handed down through the maternal line. The protagonists literally and/or figuratively lose their heads, and it is upon the maternal body that related or latent anxieties are most violently enacted. In *Relic*, this reflects on the cultural revulsion toward the abject (ageing) female body. Embracing 'the journey into abjection', however, allows for a reversal of the mother-daughter roles, which brings with it an opportunity for reparation, however brief. In *You Are Not My Mother*, the separation of the categories of 'woman' and 'madness' is achieved via the elimination of the elderly woman or crone, though the fact that this solution can only ever be short-lived is acknowledged at the film's conclusion, as is the potential for empowerment in actively assuming one of the many faces of the monstrous-feminine: the woman-as-witch. In *Hereditary*, however, the spectral presence of the absent mother that haunts Gothic fiction materialises in the spectacle of the mother (and daughter(s)) as mutilated flesh, a fate which could be read as retribution for Annie's at times extreme rejection of the nurturing maternal role. Aster describes the film as 'a family tragedy that curdles into a nightmare.'<sup>47</sup> This is apt, insofar as the initial interest in the nuances of attraction-revulsion that constitute the mother-daughter dyad, situated in a reimagined domestic space, is abandoned in

favour of the construction of the maternal figure as abject within a patriarchal system of signification.

## Bibliography

- Aldana Reyes, Xavier. *Body Gothic: Corporeal Transgression in Contemporary Literature and Horror Film*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2014.
- Aldana Reyes, Xavier. *Gothic Cinema*. New York & London: Routledge, 2020.
- Amirpour, Lily Ana. *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night*. Logan Pictures/Spectre Vision, 2014.
- Aronofsky, Darren. *Mother!* Paramount Pictures, 2017.
- Aster, Ari. *Hereditary*. A24, 2018.
- Bell, James. “‘There’s heartbreak in someone losing themselves’: *Relic* director Natalie Erika James on her love of Gothic and Asian horror.” 28 October 2020. <https://www.bfi.org.uk/sight-and-sound/interviews/natalie-erika-james-relic-influences-Gothic-asian-hr>.
- Buckmaster, Luke. “*Relic* Review – a film that gorges on the terror of forgetting in a feast of dread.” 9 July 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2020/jul/10/relic-review-a-film-that-gorges-on-the-terror-of-forgetting-in-a-feast-of-dread>.
- Carpenter, Ginette. “Mothers and Others.” In *Women and the Gothic: An Edinburgh Companion*, edited by Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik, 46-59. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016.
- Clarke, Cath. “*You Are Not My Mother* review – winningly icky lo-fi Irish Horror.” 28 March 2022. <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2022/feb/28/you-are-not-my-mother-review-irish-horror-kate-dolan>.
- Cronenberg, David. *The Brood*. New World Pictures, 1979.
- Cronin, Lee. *The Hole in the Ground*. A24/Vertigo Films, 2019.
- Creed, Barbara. *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*. London and New York: Routledge, 1993.
- Cukor, George. *Gaslight*. MGM, 1944.
- Dolan, Kate. *You Are Not My Mother*. Magnolia Pictures/Bankside Films, 2021.
- Ducournau, Julia. *Titane*. Kazak Productions/Frakas Productions/Arte France Cinéma/VOO/BeTv, 2021.
- Eggers, Robert. *The Witch*. A24/Elevation Pictures, 2015.
- Freud, Sigmund. “The Uncanny.” [1919] In *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, edited by Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan, 592-614. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2017.
- Gilbert, Sandra and Susan Gubar. *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, [1979] 1984.
- Horner, Avril and Sue Zlosnik, “No Country for Old Women: Gender, Age and the Gothic.” In *Women and the Gothic: An Edinburgh Companion*, edited by Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik, 184-198. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016.
- Holland, Norman N. and Leona F. Sherman. “Gothic Possibilities.” *New Literary History* 8, no. 2 (Winter 1977): 279-94.
- James, Natalie Erika. *Relic*. Stan/IFC Midnight, 2020.

Jeffers McDonald, Tamar. "Blueprints from Bluebeard: charting the Gothic in contemporary film." In *Gothic Heroines on Screen: Representation: Interpretation, and Feminist Enquiry*, edited by Tamar Jeffers McDonald and Frances A. Kamm, 41-54. London: Routledge, 2019.

Kahane, Claire. "The Gothic Mirror." In *The (M)Other Tongue: Essays in Feminist Psychoanalytic Interpretation*, edited by Shirley Nelson Garner, Claire Kahane and Madelon Sprengnether, 334-351. New York: Ithaca, 1985.

Kaplan, E. Ann. "'The Monstrous-Feminine': Dementia, Psychoanalysis, and Mother-Daughter Relations in Dana Walrath's *Aliceheimer's*." In *Re-reading the Monstrous-Feminine: Art, Film, Feminism and Psychoanalysis*, edited by Nicholas Chare, Jeanette Hoorn and Audrey Yue. New York: Routledge, 2019. UK eLD e-books.

Keetley, Dawn. "The Shock of (Aging) Women in Horror Film." In *Elder Horror: Essays on Film's Frightening Images of Aging*, edited by Cynthia J. Miller and A. Bowdoin Van Riper, 67-78. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2019.

Kent, Jennifer. *The Babadook*. Umbrella Entertainment, 2014.

Kiang, Jessica. "'Relic: Film Review.'" 6 February 2020. <https://variety.com/2020/film/reviews/relic-review-1203473969/>

Language, Fritz. *Secret Behind the Door*. Universal, 1947.

Martin, Rebecca. "Natalie Erika James infuses horror and a beautiful darkness in her female-led debut 'Relic'." 9 July 2020. <https://cinemafemme.com/2020/07/09/natalie-erika-james-infuses-horror-and-a-beautiful-darkness-in-her-female-led-debut-relic/>

Mitchell, David Robert. *It Follows*. The Weinstein Company, 2015.

McCabe, Katie. "*You Are Not My Mother*: An unsettling slice of horror set in the Dublin Suburbs." 7 April 2022. <https://www.bfi.org.uk/sight-and-sound/reviews/you-are-not-my-mother-unsettling-slice-folk-horror-set-dublin-suburbs>.

McGillvray, Maddi. "'To Grandmother's house we go': Documenting the Horror of the Aging Woman in Found Footage Films." In *Elder Horror: Essays on Film's Frightening Images of Aging*, edited by Cynthia J. Miller and A. Bowdoin Van Riper, 79-89. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2019.

Moers, Ellen. *Literary Women*. London: The Women's Press, 1978.

Newland, Christina. "Grief, Trauma, and Horror: Ari Aster discusses 'Hereditary.'" 15 June 2018. <https://mubi.com/notebook/posts/grief-trauma-and-horror-ari-aster-discusses-hereditary>.

Ramsay, Lynne. *We Need to Talk About Kevin*. Oscilloscope Laboratories et al., 2011.

Roberts, Joe. "Ari Aster thinks *Hereditary's* Dollhouse Perfectly Set Up The Film." 10 February 2023. <https://www.slashfilm.com/1195540/ari-aster-thinks-hereditarys-dollhouse-perfectly-set-up-the-film/> slashfilm.com.

Robitel, Adam. *The Taking of Deborah Logan*. Alchemy, 2014.

Scott, Ridley. *Prometheus*. Twentieth Century Studios, 2012.

Scott, Ridley. *Alien*. 20<sup>th</sup> Century Studios, 1979.

Sharratt, Christopher. "New Horror Cinema and the Return of Politics," *Cineaste: A Special Focus on Contemporary Horror Cinema* vol. XLVI, no. 2 (Spring 2021): 27-31.

Shyamalan, M. Night. *The Visit*. Universal Pictures, 2015.

Siodmak, Robert. *The Spiral Staircase*. RKO Pictures, 1946.

Williams, Anne. *Art of Darkness A Poetics of Gothic*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1995.

Walrath, Dana. *Aliceheimer's: Alzheimer's Through the Looking Glass*. Yerevan: Harvest Publishers, 2013.

Wilson, Sean. "Exclusive Interview – Relic director Natalie Erika James talks ghosts and compassionate horror." 26 October 2020.

<https://www.flickeringmyth.com/2020/10/interview-relic-director-natalie-erika-james-talks-ghosts-and-compassionate-horror/>

Wollstonecraft Shelley, Mary. *Frankenstein, or, The Modern Prometheus*. New York: Knopf, 1992.

Yu, Mallory. "Director Ari Aster says *Hereditary* is a Family Drama at its Core." 11 July 2018. <https://www.npr.org/2018/06/11/618975688/director-ari-aster-says-hereditary-is-a-family-drama-at-its-core>

---

<sup>1</sup> Norman N. Holland and Leona F. Sherman, "Gothic Possibilities," *New Literary History* 8, no. 2 (Winter 1977): 279.

<sup>2</sup> Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993).

<sup>3</sup> Xavier Aldana Reyes, *Gothic Cinema* (London & New York: Routledge, 2020), 7.

<sup>4</sup> Aldana Reyes, *Gothic Cinema*, 13.

<sup>5</sup> Aldana Reyes, *Gothic Cinema*, 17.

<sup>6</sup> Aldana Reyes, *Gothic Cinema*, 19.

<sup>7</sup> Aldana Reyes, *Gothic Cinema*, 16.

<sup>8</sup> Ellen Moers, *Literary Women* (London: The Women's Press, 1978).

<sup>9</sup> Moers, *Literary Women*, 91.

<sup>10</sup> Moers, *Literary Women*, 99.

<sup>11</sup> Sigmund Freud, 245/606.

<sup>12</sup> Creed, *Return of the Monstrous-Feminine: Feminist New Wave Cinema* (London and New York: Routledge, 2022), 22.

<sup>13</sup> Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine*, 26.

<sup>14</sup> Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine*, 27.

<sup>15</sup> Claire Kahane, "The Gothic Mirror," in *The (M)Other Tongue: Essays in Feminist Psychoanalytic Interpretation*, ed. Shirley Nelson Garner et al. (New York: Ithaca, 1985), 338.

<sup>16</sup> See Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, [1979] 1984).

<sup>17</sup> Tamar Jeffers McDonald, "Blueprints from Bluebeard: charting the Gothic in contemporary film," in *Gothic Heroines on Screen: Representation, Interpretation, and Feminist Enquiry*, eds. Tamar Jeffers McDonald and Frances A. Kamm (London: Routledge, 2019), 41.

<sup>18</sup> Ginette Carpenter, "Mothers and Others," in *Women and the Gothic: An Edinburgh Companion*, eds. Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 47.

<sup>19</sup> Christopher Sharratt, "New Horror Cinema and the Return of Politics," *Cineaste: A Special Focus on Contemporary Horror Cinema* vol. XLVI, no. 2 (Spring 2021): 31.

<sup>20</sup> Christopher Sharrett, "New Horror Cinema," 27.

<sup>21</sup> Kahane considers the work of Flannery O'Connor in this context.

<sup>22</sup> Kahane, "The Gothic Mirror," 343.

<sup>23</sup> See for instance James Bell, "'There's heartbreak in someone losing themselves': Relic director Natalie Erika James on her love of Gothic and Asian horror," 28 October 2020. <https://www.bfi.org.uk/sight-and-sound/interviews/natalie-erika-james-relic-influences-gothic-asian-horror>

<sup>24</sup> Sean Wilson, "Exclusive Interview – Relic director Natalie Erika James talks ghosts and compassionate horror," 26 October 2020. <https://www.flickeringmyth.com/2020/10/interview-relic-director-natalie-erika-james-talks-ghosts-and-compassionate-horror/>

- 
- <sup>25</sup> Luke Buckmaster, “*Relic* Review – a film that gorges on the fear of forgetting in a feast of dread,” 10 July 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2020/jul/10/relic-review-a-film-that-gorges-on-the-terror-of-forgetting-in-a-feast-of-dread>.
- <sup>26</sup> Natalie Erika James quoted in Rebecca Martin, “Natalie Erika James infuses horror and a beautiful darkness in her female-led debut “*Relic*,”” 9 July 2020. <https://cinemafemme.com/2020/07/09/natalie-erika-james-infuses-horror-and-a-beautiful-darkness-in-her-female-led-debut-relic/>
- <sup>27</sup> Katie McCabe, “*You Are Not My Mother*: An unsettling slice of horror set in the Dublin Suburbs,” 7 April 2022. <https://www.bfi.org.uk/sight-and-sound/reviews/you-are-not-my-mother-unsettling-slice-folk-horror-set-dublin-suburbs>
- <sup>28</sup> Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine*, 2.
- <sup>29</sup> Jessica Kiang makes a similar point about Edna’s hair in her review of *Relic* for *Variety* magazine. Jessica Kiang, ““*Relic*: Film Review”, 6 February 2020. <https://variety.com/2020/film/reviews/relic-review-1203473969/>
- <sup>30</sup> Aldana Reyes, *Body Gothic: Corporeal Transgression in Contemporary Literature and Horror Film* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2014), 9.
- <sup>31</sup> Moers, *Literary Women*, 126;129.
- <sup>32</sup> Martin, “Natalie Erika James infuses horror and a beautiful darkness in her female-led debut “*Relic*.””
- <sup>33</sup> Maddi McGillvray, ““To Grandmother’s house we go: Documenting the Horror of the Aging Woman in Found Footage Films,” in *Elder Horror: Essays on Film’s Frightening Images of Aging*, ed. Cynthia J. Miller and A. Bowdoin Van Riper (Jefferson, NC: MacFarland, 2019), 80.
- <sup>34</sup> See Dawn Keetley, “The Shock of (Aging) Women in Horror Film,” in *Elder Horror: Essays on Film’s Frightening Images of Aging*.
- <sup>35</sup> E. Ann Kaplan, ““The Monstrous-Feminine’: Dementia, Psychoanalysis, and Mother-Daughter Relations in Dana Walrath’s *Aliceheimer’s*,” in *Re-reading the Monstrous-Feminine: Art, Film, Feminism and Psychoanalysis*, ed. Nicholas Chare, Jeanette Hoorn and Audrey Yue (New York: Routledge, 2019), 536. UK eLD e-books.
- <sup>36</sup> Kaplan, ““The Monstrous-Feminine’, 543.8.
- <sup>37</sup> Kaplan, ““The Monstrous-Feminine’, 548.6.
- <sup>38</sup> Kaplan, ““The Monstrous-Feminine’, 563.4.
- <sup>39</sup> Cath Clarke, ‘*You Are Not My Mother* review – winningly icky lo-fi Irish Horror.’ *The Guardian* 28 March 2022. <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2022/feb/28/you-are-not-my-mother-review-irish-horror-kate-dolan> accessed 02 April 2023.
- <sup>40</sup> Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik, “No Country for Old Women: Gender, Age and the Gothic,” in *Women and the Gothic: An Edinburgh Companion*, ed. Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 187.
- <sup>41</sup> Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine*, 25.
- <sup>42</sup> Keetley, “The Shock of (Aging) Women in Horror Film”, 72.
- <sup>43</sup> Keetley, “The Shock of (Aging) Women in Horror Film”, 73.
- <sup>44</sup> Christina Newland, “Grief, Trauma, and Horror: Ari Aster discusses “Hereditary,” 15 June 2018. <https://mubi.com/notebook/posts/grief-trauma-and-horror-ari-aster-discusses-hereditary>
- <sup>45</sup> Joe Roberts, “Ari Aster thinks *Hereditary*’s Dollhouse Perfectly Set Up The Film,” 10 February 2023. <https://www.slashfilm.com/1195540/ari-aster-thinks-hereditarys-dollhouse-perfectly-set-up-the-film/slashfilm.com>.
- <sup>46</sup> Anne Williams, *Art of Darkness: A Poetics of Gothic* (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press), 23.
- <sup>47</sup> Mallory Yu, “Director Ari Aster says *Hereditary* is a Family Drama at its Core,” 11 July 2018. <https://www.npr.org/2018/06/11/618975688/director-ari-aster-says-hereditary-is-a-family-drama-at-its-core>.