When Good Mothers Go Bad: Genre and Gender in *The Babadook*

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**David Ehrlich:** There are a number of films about grief, but part of what makes *The Babadook* so interesting is that the horror genre allows it to have this element of audience interaction. I wonder if you’re attracted to the horror genre because of how palpable it encourages you to make a story?

**Jennifer Kent:** I think so. Can you imagine this story as a domestic drama? It would be so melodramatic and stupid. I like films where I’m forced to feel something.

—Interview with Jennifer Kent, December 2014

For a film that has been described as ‘startlingly original’ and widely celebrated for its ‘emotional realism’, Jennifer Kent’s *The Babadook* (2014) is in many ways very generic. While this might seem like a shortcoming, on the contrary, the film’s restaging of familiar generic tropes facilitates a highly effective cinematic experience. This article considers the ways in which *The Babadook* repurposes the horror film to produce a moving exploration of maternal ambivalence, mobilising elements of the maternal melodrama and female gothic in the process. In so doing, the film foregrounds issues of genre and gender that inhere and overlap in these categories. In particular, the film’s focus on the protagonist’s conflicted experience of motherhood explores what Molly Haskell identifies as the great unspoken of the ‘woman’s film’, namely, women’s guilt for their ‘inadmissible feelings’ about motherhood. Considering the film in this light draws on Sue Thornham’s reading of *We Need To Talk About Kevin* (dir. by Lynne Ramsay, 2011), in relation to both feminist counter-cinema and maternal melodrama, as a critique of the postfeminist model of over-invested motherhood currently idealised in popular culture. Similarly, I argue that the ways

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in which *The Babadook* recalibrates existing generic conventions challenges deeply embedded social and cinematic expectations around the maternal relationship.

The film tells the story of Amelia (Essie Davis), a widow who is still grief stricken seven years after the death of her husband, and her young son, Samuel (Noah Wiseman), who is very troubled. After reading a storybook called *Mister Babadook* together, strange things start to happen in their house. Events escalate and the Babadook, the monster of the storybook, appears and begins to terrorise Amelia, who in turn becomes increasingly violent towards her son. Finally, Amelia is able to confront the Babadook, and a kind of peace is restored. The film invites an association between the emergence of the Babadook and Amelia’s grief at the death of her husband and rage towards her son. As such, virtually all of the critics and reviewers of the film have read the Babadook as embodying the ‘return of the repressed’ — that is, as the uncanny manifestation of Amelia’s repressed emotions.

However, while Kent herself has stated that she’s ‘quite bemused […] by the need to place it in a box’, there has been some disagreement about how best to position *The Babadook* in a generic context. Peter Bradshaw, for instance, promotes the film as ‘a superbly acted, chilling Freudian thriller’ and compares it to Roman Polanski’s *Repulsion* (1965) or *The Tenant* (1976). Briony Kidd, on the other hand, imagines that ‘[a]ficionados [of the horror film] may be unimpressed […] with the efforts of the domestic distributor, Umbrella Entertainment, to market the film as a “psychological thriller”’. According to Kidd, ‘[m]inimising *The Babadook*’s place within the context of horror is odd’, given its explicit references to key examples of the genre, such as *Le Cake-Walk Infernal* (dir. by Georges Méliès, 1903) and *Black Sabbath* (dir. by Mario Bava, 1963).

Trying to identify the film solely with one of these categories is not particularly productive, however. As has been well established in film studies, the delineation of these genres is more often based on popular perception and/or critical bias than on any clearly defined generic boundaries. For instance, through an analysis of film reviews published during the 1930s and 1940s, Mark Jancovich argues that the psychological thrillers he calls ‘Gothic (or paranoid) woman’s films’ were clearly understood as ‘women’s horror films’ at the time of their release. Jancovich locates these films within a cycle that departs from the

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5 Kent, quoted in Sélavy.
8 Jancovich coins the composite term ‘Gothic (or paranoid) woman’s films’ to embrace that group of films variously described as the Gothic film, the Gothic woman’s film, the paranoid woman’s film, the female Gothic,
monsters of the Universal Studios and instead focuses on unsettling both protagonists and
viewers psychologically. However, despite the contemporaneous evidence establishing the
horror credentials of such films, accounts of the horror film since the 1960s have tended to
exclude them. This, Jancovich argues, is often based on a distinction being made between
the horror film as ‘masculine’ and the ‘Gothic (or paranoid) woman’s film’ as ‘feminine’. He
sees a similar tendency as operating in feminist film criticism, which, he contends, has rarely
properly acknowledged these films’ relationship to the horror genre.

If Jancovich identifies the horror in women’s films, David Greven finds the woman’s
film ‘concealed’ in the horror genre. Greven returns to Jeanine Basinger’s definition of the
woman’s film as ‘a movie that places at the center of its universe a female who is trying to
deal with emotional, social, and psychological problems that are specifically connected to the
fact that she is a woman’. Consequently, according to Basinger, it is a mistake to limit the
woman’s film to the melodrama, as the category is elastic enough to encompass comedies,
biographies, westerns, and so on. Following Mary Ann Doane, who argues that ‘the woman’s
film is frequently combined with other genres — the film noir and the gothic or horror film,
even the musical’, Greven stresses the ‘cross-fertilization’ of the woman’s film with the
horror film. Like Robin Wood, he situates the birth of modern horror in 1960 with
Hitchcock’s Psycho, and the concomitant transition from an externalised threat or clearly
identifiable monster, as occurs in classical horror, to a focus on ‘the family and its attendant
terrors’. Greven further refines this model, however, to argue that ‘the woman’s film, a
classical Hollywood genre seemingly defunct by the 1960s, takes on a new, albeit hidden, life
in the modern horror film, insofar as it concerns anxieties within gender, sexuality, and the
family and focuses on female desire’. Many significant horror films from Psycho on, he

etc. Mark Jancovich, ‘Bluebeard’s Wives: Horror, Quality and the Gothic (or Paranoid) Woman’s Film in the
10 Jancovich, p. 21.
11 Ibid.
12 David Greven, Representations of Femininity in American Genre Cinema: The Woman’s Film, Film Noir, and
13 Jeanine Basinger, A Woman’s View: How Hollywood Spoke to Women, 1930-1960 (Hanover, CT: Wesleyan
14 Mary Ann Doane, The Desire to Desire: The Woman’s Film of the 1940s (Bloomington: Indiana University
15 In Wood’s frequently quoted formulation, ‘since Psycho, the Hollywood cinema has recognised Horror as
both American and familial’. See Robin Wood, Hollywood From Vietnam to Reagan ... and Beyond (New
16 Greven, p. 36.
Sarah Arnold, for her part, more precisely identifies the key point of intersection between the horror and melodrama in representations of the mother. Drawing on psychoanalytic film theory, she posits that what she calls ‘maternal horror cinema’ ‘perpetuates an [unstable] ideology of idealised motherhood’ drawn from cinema history, most notably the maternal melodrama. Arnold argues that, following *Psycho* and the focus on family horror in Western cinema, the mother has become a prominent feature of horror cinema. All horror mothers are not the same, however, and Arnold differentiates between the ‘Good Mother’ and the ‘Bad Mother’. The ‘Good Mother’ refers to ‘a particular and popular discourse of motherhood that valorises self-sacrifice, selflessness and nurturance’. The ‘Bad Mother’, on the other hand, is ‘a multifaceted and contradictory construct’, manifesting as either a rejection of the traditional expectation of self-sacrifice and devotion to her children, or its inverse, ‘the mother’s fanatical conformity to the institution of motherhood’. According to Arnold, both models of motherhood are evident throughout the horror genre and the melodrama, although the level of complicity and/or resistance to these models within individual texts is a complex field of interrogation.

Thus, the boundaries between the woman’s film, the psychological thriller, and horror could be said to be especially permeable, more like membranes if you will, permitting certain elements to pass through while restricting others, depending on the particular permutation of the film’s articulation, production, and reception. Mining *The Babadook*’s generic makeup means attending to the ways in which aspects of the woman’s film — ambivalence around motherhood and the Oedipal model in which it participates, in particular — are exposed in all their ‘horror’. Broadly speaking, the first half of the film draws on key tropes of the maternal melodrama, articulated in terms of the female gothic, inverting and intensifying these tropes in the process. The second half segues into more overt horror territory, bringing those elements that are repressed in the first half of the film, and in the categories it draws on, violently to the surface.

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17 Ibid. Greven considers Brian de Palma’s *Carrie* (1976) and the *Alien* films (1979-97) in this context.
19 Arnold, p. 4.
20 Arnold, p. 37.
21 Ibid.
22 Arnold, p. 68.
If self-sacrifice is the privileged theme of the woman’s film (Haskell describes it as ‘the mainstay and oceanic force, high tide and low ebb of the woman’s film’), in the maternal variant, the woman must sacrifice her own welfare for that of her children.\(^{24}\) When we first meet Amelia, just before Samuel’s seventh birthday, she is in precisely this position, having to sacrifice her own needs for those of her son. Samuel is troubled, suffering from nightmares and seeing monsters. His relationship with other children is problematic and he is prone to aggressive outbursts. He is demanding, seeking constant attention and reassurance. As a result, apart from working in a care home for elderly people, Amelia’s life is limited to looking after him. Her only other significant relationships are with her elderly neighbour, to whom she is kind and caring (taking out her refuse, and so on), and with her sister, Claire (Hayley McElhinney), who is critical of Amelia and hostile to Samuel.

While the maternal melodrama typically struggles with reconciling the woman’s maternal and sexual identities — the good mother will reject romantic relationships for the sake of her child — in this instance, it seems that Amelia has had literally to sacrifice her husband Oskar (Benjamin Winspear) for her son, as Oskar was killed in a car accident while driving Amelia to the hospital to give birth to Samuel.\(^{25}\) Despite her apparent longing for a relationship (watching romantic films on TV, wistfully observing a couple kissing, and so on), Amelia is so exhausted caring for others, and for Samuel in particular, that she seems oblivious to her colleague’s (Daniel Henshall) gentle overtures. Thus, Samuel seems to have supplanted the father’s place in his mother’s life, with all the Oedipal associations that implies, as discussed below. Rather than surrender herself to this situation, however, Amelia’s repressed grief and anger at the loss of her husband is the source of her ‘monstrous’ rage and resentment towards Samuel. Thus, the tradition of female self-abnegation within the woman’s film in general, and the maternal melodrama in particular, is undercut by the ‘horror’ it conceals from the outset.

The film begins by bringing us straight into Amelia’s nightmare. We see a close-up of Amelia’s face, her breathing laboured, illuminated by the intermittent flash of a bright, white light. Shards of broken glass spray across her cheek and she is thrown from side to side, all in slow motion. We hear discordant sounds like muffled roars and metal scraping, at the edges


\(^{25}\) For instance, in *Stella Dallas*, Stella (Barbara Stanwyck) gives up her interest in a romantic or social life to focus exclusively on her daughter, Laurel (Anne Shirley).
of which a child’s voice can be heard, calling ‘Mum!, Mum!’ What we now assume to be a
car stops suddenly and we cut to a side view of Amelia who looks in our direction. A point-
of-view shot from Amelia’s perspective shows us a man slumped in the driving seat. We cut
back to a close-up of Amelia, in the glare of a bright, white light. We hear what sounds like
the rush of an oncoming car in slow-motion as the child’s voice grows more insistent: ‘Mum!
Mum!’ Amelia turns her head sharply and a bright, white light explodes on the screen.

This scene, achieved in-camera, is disorientating — temporally, spatially, and
emotionally. Samuel’s voice, increasing in volume, brings Amelia (and us) back to her
current context: lonely, widowed, grieving, and caring for an emotionally damaged little boy
in a dark, foreboding house. Soon after, a series of close shots shows parts of a sleeping
Samuel, his leg flung over his mother, his hand kneading her neck, the abrasive sound of his
grinding teeth heightened on the soundtrack. Amelia’s sense of physical and emotional
entrapment is palpable. She disentangles herself from him and a symmetrically composed
overhead shot shows them lying on opposite sides of the bed, Amelia’s back to her son, the
distance she has put between them foreshadowing her increasingly violent desire to escape
her child as the film progresses.

It is clear that Amelia is struggling not only with other people’s reactions to Samuel,
but also with her own ambivalence towards her son. It takes her sister, Claire, to express the
feelings about Samuel that Amelia cannot bring herself to articulate, saying, ‘I can’t stand
being around your son. You can’t stand being around him yourself.’ Initially, Amelia’s
ambivalence towards Samuel manifests as actual suspicion of his behaviour (suspecting him
of defacing a photograph of herself and Oskar, for instance, or of putting shards of glass in
her soup), but even as events escalate and her suspicion shifts from Samuel to the possibility
of an unknown stalker, Amelia’s ambivalence towards Samuel remains and indeed gains
force, transforming from barely suppressed irritation to a violent rage towards her child,
embracing the full ‘horror’ of this taboo in the process. Thus, Amelia’s ambivalence towards
her son circles back to the ‘horror’ of maternal ambivalence that, as Haskell argues, is
repressed in mainstream maternal melodrama.\textsuperscript{26}

Kent is explicit in her desire to foreground this issue, which she believes is under-
represented, both cinematically and socio-culturally. She states,

Apart from \textit{We Need To Talk About Kevin}, I can’t easily think of other
eamples [that address maternal ambivalence] and it’s the great unspoken

\textsuperscript{26} Haskell, pp. 168-72.
thing. We’re all, as women, educated and conditioned to think that motherhood is an easy thing that just happens. But it’s not always the case.27

Referencing We Need To Talk About Kevin links The Babadook not only to the maternal melodrama but to its inverse — films that unpick the pervasive idealisation of maternal self-sacrifice in popular culture. Thornham situates Ramsay’s film within the twin histories of feminist counter-cinema and maternal melodrama, and reads it as a critique of so-called ‘new momism’, the idealisation of motherhood that gathered momentum in the 1990s as part of a backlash against the gains of second-wave feminism. The crucial difference between ‘new momism’ and the idealised representations of domesticated femininity that dominated 1950s American culture is that intensive mothering is now positioned within a postfeminist framework as a liberated choice. Thornham quotes Susan J. Douglas and Meredith W. Michaels as they articulate the supporting logic:

Feminism won; you can have it all; of course you want children; mothers are better at raising children than fathers; of course your children come first; ... today’s children need constant attention and cultivation, or they’ll become failures and hate you forever ...; and whoops — here we are in 1954.28

As Thornham outlines, the consequence of this is to replace subservience to a husband with subservience to a child, and the key strategy is to depict that subservience to the child as the woman’s often challenging but freely made (albeit inevitable) choice.29 Thornham cites as evidence of this the recent explosion of so-called ‘mommy memoirs’ — ‘first person narratives cataloguing the difficulties and disappointments but ultimately the redemptive power of motherhood’.30

In other words, Thornham argues that ‘new momism’ is the postfeminist version of overinvested mothering that, according to Haskell, conceals the hatred lurking beneath the surface of classical women’s films:

Children are an obsession in American movies ... The sacrifice of and for children — two sides of the same coin — is a disease passing for a national virtue ... Both of these transactions represent beautifully masked wish fulfillments, suggesting that the myth of obsession — the love lavished, the

29 Thornham, p. 3.
30 Thornham, p. 8.
attention paid to children … — is compensation for women’s guilt, for the deep inadmissible feelings of not wanting children, or not wanting them unreservedly, in the first place. 

According to Thornham, ‘such hatred is also the subject of […] We Need to Talk about Kevin’. Eva (Tilda Swinton) struggles to love her son Kevin and to relinquish control of her body and her life in the ways that are expected of her, first as a pregnant woman and then as a mother. Her relationship with her son is fraught from infancy and as he grows older his disturbing behavior becomes increasingly violent, culminating in his murder of his father and sister, and massacre of his fellow high-school students.

From a generic perspective, Thornham identifies Kevin, ‘with his violence, mockery of parental authority and unreadable self-possession’, as the obvious ‘successor to both the monstrous children of 1970s horror and, in an ironic gesture, to the wise innocents that succeeded them’. Thornham traces Vivian Sobchack’s history of the male child in horror and family melodrama since the 1970s in terms of his role in shoring up patriarchal power structures against the pressures exerted by second-wave feminism. According to Sobchack, the political and socio-cultural upheavals of the 1970s produced, in popular horror films such as The Other (dir. by Robert Mulligan, 1972), The Exorcist (dir. by William Friedkin, 1973), and The Omen (dir. by Richard Donner, 1976), portrayals of children as ‘uncivilized, hostile, and powerful Others’ who threatened the family and social institutions. By the end of the decade, however, this picture has changed. The impact of feminism is such that the former conflation of patriarchy (understood as a political and economic power structure) and paternity (understood as a personal and subjective relation) has been undermined. Consequently, in mainstream cinema, the ‘terror and rage of patriarchy in decline’ dramatised by the 1970s horror film morphs into the family melodrama’s ‘sweetly problematic paternity in ascendance’. Sobchack identifies Kramer vs. Kramer (dir. by Robert Benton, 1979) as a key film in this transition. As the father cedes to the loss of

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31 Haskell, pp. 168-70. Quoted in Thornham, p. 3, ellipses in original. Haskell cites That Certain Woman (dir. by Edmund Goulding, 1937), The Old Maid (dir. by Edmund Goulding, 1939), Penny Serenade (dir. by George Stevens, 1941), Mildred Pierce (dir. by Michael Curtiz, 1945), and all three versions of Madame X (dir. by Lionel Barrymore, 1929; Sam Wood, 1937; and David Lowell Rich, 1966), as examples of films that disguise the taboo of maternal hatred as maternal love. See Haskell, p. 169.

32 Thornham, p. 3.

33 Infant Kevin played by Rocky Duer; young Kevin played by Jasper Newell; teenage Kevin played by Ezra Miller.

34 Thornham, p. 7.


36 Sobchack, p. 183, emphasis in original.
patriarchal authority and comes to accept the paternal role (albeit with a charming ineptitude), the previously destructive power of the horror-film child transforms into a kind of special insight, and the child of the family melodrama becomes both markedly precocious and particularly vulnerable to the threat that is posed to the family unit by the cold, selfish (in other words, feminist) mother.\textsuperscript{37} As Thornham emphasises, it is now ‘the (male) child who “has the power to authorize the family, […] who denies or legitimates the particular family’s existence as a viable structure”’.\textsuperscript{38}

As Thornham argues, the shift from second-wave feminism to postfeminism has altered the terms of reference once again. While motherhood is now framed as a choice, the caveat is that the woman must choose to give herself over to the child entirely if the child is to succeed. For Thornham, therefore, an essential aspect of We Need to Talk About Kevin’s critique of this model is its emphasis on the mother’s, rather than the child’s, subjectivity. Thornham notes that, while the films that Sobchack discusses are primarily concerned with repairing the father-son relationship and the patriarchal structure that this represents, ‘[t]hirty years later, the elements that Sobchack sees as expressions of bourgeois America’s “political unconscious” have become the subject matter of Ramsay’s film, but it is the mother’s subjectivity through which they are explored’.\textsuperscript{39}

Thus, Thornham argues, Ramsay’s restaging of the (bad) mother-child relationship from Eva’s point of view reflects on the difficulty of reconciling the concept of a mobile, fluid, female selfhood (the ‘girl’ of postfeminist discourse) with the fixed, selfless, socio-cultural ideal of motherhood, framed as the woman’s natural and inevitable choice.\textsuperscript{40} Similarly, Arnold suggests that ‘the [horror] genre is increasingly being used to explore maternal desires and conflicts rather than infantile ones’.\textsuperscript{41} Arnold considers horror films such as Alejandro Amenábar’s The Others (2001), which increase our access to the ‘Bad Mother’s’ perspective and, in so doing, question the subordination of the mother within patriarchy.\textsuperscript{42} In short, according to Arnold, rather than simply presenting her as the most significant threat to the successful patriarchal family unit, exploring the subjectivity of ‘the Bad Mother can point to dissatisfaction and disillusionment with the psychosocial structures of the family’.\textsuperscript{43}

\textsuperscript{37} Thornham, p. 6.
\textsuperscript{38} Ibid., quoting from Sobchack, p. 183.
\textsuperscript{39} Thornham, p. 6.
\textsuperscript{40} Thornham, p. 10.
\textsuperscript{41} Arnold, p. 70.
\textsuperscript{42} Arnold, pp. 70-71.
\textsuperscript{43} Arnold, p. 69.
Likewise, for Kent, aligning the spectator with Amelia’s perspective was pivotal to the film’s effect. She says,

Even when she goes to some really dark places, I still tried to keep it within her point of view as much as possible, so that people would not sit back with their arms folded and judge her, but they’d actually travel through that experience with her.\[44\]

In other words, to borrow Thornham’s description of Eva in *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, in *The Babadook*, ‘it is [Amelia’s] fractured subjectivity, hate, and sense of guilt that we inhabit’.\[45\] Privileging Amelia’s ‘fractured subjectivity’ via the framing, composition, and temporal articulation of the film allows us to witness the ‘horror’ of a mother’s hatred of her own child break through the mask of maternal self-sacrifice, while avoiding her vilification.

As outlined above, the film opens with a close-up of Amelia’s face and it continues to make frequent use of similar tight framings throughout the film. From the close-ups of Amelia’s shocked and frightened face during what is revealed to be the car crash that killed her husband, through close-ups revealing her increasing panic and anxiety as the Babadook makes its presence felt in her home, to close-ups of her radically transformed face as she tries to strangle her son, this visual strategy creates a kind of facial topography of Amelia’s psychic dissolution. Additionally, scenes rarely include establishing shots and often begin with de-contextualised close-ups. For instance, when Amelia visits Samuel’s school following reports of his disruptive behaviour, we cut directly from a shot of Amelia walking with an elderly resident in the care home to a close-up of Samuel’s homemade trebuchet being placed on a table. Dispensing with conventional spatial and temporal cues exacerbates our sense of Amelia’s psychological dislocation, as does the film’s tendency towards a fixed, frontal framing in dialogue scenes.

This is reinforced by the fact that we are often restricted to Amelia’s perspective. For instance, when she comes to, having been tied down in the basement, the scene begins with a blurred shot of a bright, white light against a black background, which slowly comes into focus. This recalls the bright, white light of the opening scene and reinforces our sense of Amelia being stuck in that nightmare scenario. These tight framings are alternated with long shots of Amelia that create a sense of her being cut adrift from her surroundings and from ‘normal life’. For example, when Amelia visits a shopping mall, instead of rushing home to care for Samuel, we see her sitting alone on a sofa eating ice cream, surrounded by empty

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\[44\] Kent, quoted in Sélavy.
\[45\] Thornham, p. 27.
space, as people pass in front of her. The lack of ambient noise on the soundtrack, replaced by non-diegetic music, increases our sense of her isolation.

As Amelia unravels, the sense of time, too, becomes more disordered, drawn out or compressed around Amelia’s intensified experience. An obvious instance of this is the way in which the film eschews the horror convention of limiting the terror to the night-time. At the beginning, night is a particularly frightening time, but as the film progresses, the horror invades the daylight hours until there are no clear temporal markers to separate night from day. More specifically, certain scenes are condensed or extended in order to produce a temporally disorientating affect. As already discussed, time is extended in slow motion in the opening nightmare scene. Later in the film, by contrast, when Amelia finds the Mister Babadook storybook on her doorstep after she had torn it up and burnt it, accelerated footage speeds up her walk back into the house, as if the horror of its return concentrates her experience of time.

In terms of the film’s composition, as Kent puts it, ‘[i]t starts very centered […] and as the film goes on, people’s heads start to drift to other sides of the frames, and things start to become more discordant visually’. Most of the shots in the early part of film are symmetrical, with Amelia’s and Samuel’s position in the frame organised around central points (often furniture or doorways), or occupying opposite sides of the frame (for instance, at either end of the kitchen table). As their encounters grow more violent, however, the composition is frequently off-kilter. For instance, when Amelia clambers up the door to Samuel’s bedroom, the angle is slightly tilted, as Amelia has lost her bearings and has, it seems, descended into the full ‘horror’ of her repressed grief and rage towards her child.

Privileging Amelia’s ‘fractured subjectivity’ in these ways aligns us with her as she transitions from what we might call ‘basically good but seriously struggling mother’ to what Arnold describes as the ‘Bad Mother’ in her guise as the ‘monster or the villain’. Like Sobchack’s model, which positions mainstream cinema as responding to second-wave feminism by denigrating the mother and idealising the (male) child, Amelia’s ambivalence towards her son seems to turn her into a ‘monster’, while Samuel plays a pivotal role in the family’s survival. He begins to prepare weapons to defend himself and his mother well in advance of the Babadook’s first appearance to Amelia and, as Amelia herself becomes more ‘horrific’, he manages to withstand her violence, apparently tying her down at one point in order to protect them both. It is Samuel who assures Amelia, ‘I just want you to be happy’.

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46 Kent, quoted in Ehrlich.
47 Arnold, p. 68.
when she articulates her murderous feelings towards him, and Samuel who intuits her possession as repression and tells her, ‘[y]ou have to get it out’. Thus, while Samuel begins the film suggesting the generically familiar possibility of the monstrous or possessed child of 1970s horror cinema (screaming fits, seeing things, an apparent propensity for violence, and so on), he corresponds more closely to the subsequent iteration of the child as ‘wise innocent’ the more Amelia turns into a ‘monster’.48

At one level, therefore, Samuel’s transformation seems to resonate with Sobchack’s model as described above. However, the film privileges Amelia’s, rather than Samuel’s, perspective and does not resolve by aligning Samuel with a viable father figure and eliminating or punishing Amelia. As such, the film refuses the condemnation of the mother and affirmation of the son characteristic of the films Sobchack discusses. Instead, the film focuses on Amelia’s ultimate acknowledgement and integration of her own ‘monstrous’ feelings about motherhood, allowing us to sympathise with Amelia as an exhausted, grieving widow struggling with the demands of motherhood, as well as with Samuel as a vulnerable little boy. This process is facilitated by having Amelia inhabit in turn the role of mother-as-victim, mother-as-monster, and, finally, mother-as-saviour. In so doing, the film subverts the dichotomous representation of the mother as either good or bad that, as Arnold argues, has sustained earlier iterations of both the maternal melodrama and the horror genre.

Initially, Amelia is a wan, worn-out but essentially ‘good’ mother who, though suffering terrible grief, acts in the interests of her son. She is suspicious, even scared, of Samuel but defends him to her sister and to the authorities. At this stage, Amelia’s suspicion of Samuel — as she effectively asks herself ‘is he good or is he bad? Do I love him or do I hate him?’ — increasingly played out within the confines of their dark, oppressive house, is articulated in terms of the female gothic. In *The Babadook*, as in the gothic tradition generally, the house itself is crucial to this dynamic. The palette is mainly limited to cool colours, notably black, white, and deep blue, creating a dark, intense space. As Kent puts it ‘[i]t felt right for the world to feel quite cold. It was deliberate, and it creates […] a fugue state, a dream state.’49 The set built for the interiors, fashioned after a Victorian terrace-style house, reinforces the atemporal quality that intensifies over the course of Amelia’s

49 Kent, quoted in Sévavy.
deterioration, in that its design is ‘grounded in reality but [it does] not look modern’. 50

The heroine’s relationship to the house is of course a crucial aspect of the gothic scenario. The house maps her fears and anxieties; her relationship to its forbidden spaces arguably literalises her own relationship to those aspects of herself that are similarly hidden from consciousness. As Steven Jacobs puts it,

In Gothic romance films, the forbidden room is a metaphor for the repressed experience. The heroine attempts to disclose and visualize the secrets and mysteries, just like the psychoanalyst opens up the mysterious depths of the soul. Opening up the forbidden room is […] the cathartic moment in the story.51

This idea is echoed by Kent when she says, ‘[g]radually the film becomes just the house. But the house is alive, it’s a reflection, an extension of what’s going on for Amelia — and for Sam, but mostly for Amelia’.52 For instance, at one point, Amelia sees cockroaches pour out of a hole in the kitchen wall. In the next scene, however, the hole has disappeared, suggesting the image of an invasion of insects is an eruption of Amelia’s anxiety. Thus, Amelia’s relationship to the house and, particularly (as is the convention if not the cliché), to the basement, dramatises her relationship to those aspects of herself and her history that she cannot articulate. Her most violent confrontations — with Samuel, with her dead husband, and with the Babadook — take place there, and ultimately the basement becomes ‘home’ to the uncanny manifestation of those fears and anxieties that she must confront in order to save herself and Samuel.

If the house, and particularly the basement, constitutes a spatialisation of Amelia’s fears and anxieties in particular, as in the gothic tradition, it also has a specific relationship to time. The basement is where Amelia stores her memories of Oskar, in the form of his clothes and belongings, and thus it speaks to what John Fletcher calls ‘the Gothic realm of a past preserved and suspended and awaiting reanimation’.53 When the Babadook emerges from the basement, he does so, as many critics have noted, as an uncanny embodiment of the arrangement of Oskar’s clothes that Amelia keeps there.54 Thus, the basement is a place

50 Kent, quoted in Sélavy.
52 Kent, quoted in Sélavy.
54 In Freud’s famous formulation, ‘the uncanny proceeds from something familiar which has been repressed’, and an uncanny effect is ‘often easily produced by effacing the distinction between imagination and reality, such as when something that we have hitherto regarded as imaginary appears before us in reality’. Sigmund Freud,
where time is suspended in space, a frozen past that Amelia must incorporate into her personal narrative if she is to ‘move on’.

As such, the psychic mapping of the house in *The Babadook* corresponds closely to that of its gothic predecessors. Although the cycle of Hollywood films from the 1940s frequently referred to as ‘female gothic’ is quite diverse, most of these films ‘involve a woman who feels threatened or tortured by a seemingly sadistic male authority figure, who is usually her husband’. Replacing the wife’s suspicion of her husband with the mother’s suspicion of her son reorganises the relationship around an implicitly Oedipal model. Like *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, which, in Thornham’s words, ‘replays the Oedipal story — the son’s usurpation and murder of the father, the disturbingly sexual overtones in the relationship between son and mother, […] from the mother’s perspective’, *The Babadook* stages the Oedipal overtones of Samuel’s relationship with his mother from Amelia’s point of view. According to Bradshaw,

Kent shows that as Samuel gets older, he starts to intuit ever more clearly his father’s absence and his own quasi-conjugal relationship with his mother. He is always clambering over her and heedlessly touching her in ways he doesn’t understand.

From Amelia’s perspective, however, their physical intimacy is shown to be deeply intrusive, eroding her sense of herself as a separate subject with her own needs and desires. These Oedipal overtones are unmissable in the scene where Samuel disturbs his mother masturbating, a scene that ironically recalls the maternal melodrama’s insistence that the good mother surrender her sexual identity for the sake of her child.

As the film progresses, these gothic elements gain momentum and erupt in ‘monstrous’ form. As Amelia’s mask of maternal self-sacrifice begins to slip, the conventions of the horror genre provide a vocabulary capable of articulating the ‘real’ feelings beneath Amelia’s façade. Amelia becomes wildly abusive and violent. She kills the family dog and is driven by a desire to kill Samuel, who is forced to defend himself against her. She is


Jancovich, p. 21. Key examples include Hitchcock’s *Rebecca* (1940) and *Suspicion* (1941), and George Cukor’s *Gaslight* (1944).

Thornham, p. 23.

Bradshaw, ‘*The Babadook Review*’.
dramatically altered physically, acquiring a deep voice and an agility that is markedly at odds with her earlier incarnation. When she clammers quickly up the door to Samuel’s bedroom, the action is speeded up so as to make her seem non-human and thus somehow repulsive. Her pale, fragile features framed by wispy blond hair twist into a hard mask of horror and she becomes virtually unrecognisable.

Hazel Cills notes that usually, when a child is in danger in the horror film, it is incumbent upon the child’s family, and specifically the mother, to save the child.58 She argues that whether it is against a supernatural force (like Diane Freeling in Poltergeist (1982)), or against a demonic husband (like Wendy Torrance in The Shining (1980)), the mother’s role is as protector.59 As Cills puts it, ‘[j]ust as slashers have their sainted final girls, home invasion and possession films have their final mothers’.60 The key difference, as Cills sees it, between a film like The Exorcist (1973) and The Babadook, both films featuring hard-working single mothers with children threatened by evil forces, ‘is that in the latter film, Amelia is the one who becomes possessed’.61 Thus, Amelia’s possession seems to turn her into the ‘Bad Mother’, who must be eliminated in order for the child to survive. However, as Cills argues, while the horror genre has more than its fair share of evil mothers (Mrs Bates in Psycho, Margaret White in Carrie (1976), Mrs Voorhees in Friday the 13th (1980), and so on), ‘what makes Amelia compelling is how she literally embodies both roles — the unstable villain and the resilient child-saver’.62

Thus, over the course of the film, Amelia transforms from gothic victim, to ‘monstrous mother’, to ‘final mother’, in Cills’s terms. As Amelia descends into ‘madness’, Samuel is forced to defend himself against her. As mentioned above, he recognises that his mother is at the mercy of the Babadook, saying ‘[y]ou have to get it out’. Following this, Amelia does indeed ‘get it out’, vomiting a black, viscous substance and shaking violently after Samuel strokes her face while she tries to strangle him. From this point on, Amelia’s fury is turned upon its proper object — the Babadook — and she confronts it, screaming, ‘[i]f you touch my son again I’ll fucking kill you!’ The Babadook falls to the ground, light and insubstantial. When she touches it, it roars at her but she withstands its rage, her terrified face in tight close-up, lit once again by a bright, white light. Visually, this recalls the opening

59 Poltergeist (dir. by Tobe Hooper, 1982); and The Shining (dir. by Stanley Kubrick, 1980).
60 Cills, para. 2 of 10.
61 The Exorcist (dir. by William Friedkin, 1973); Cills, para. 4 of 10.
62 Carrie (dir. by Brian de Palma, 1976); Friday the 13th (dir. by Sean S. Cunningham, 1980); and Cills, para. 6 of 10.
nightmare scene; however, as Amelia can now confront this horror, the Babadook retreats to its generic home — the basement.

At this stage, in resisting the Babadook and saving her son, Amelia appears to conform to the ‘Good Mother’ model of both horror film and maternal melodrama, putting her child’s welfare before her own at considerable risk to herself. As Arnold puts it, ‘[i]n maternal melodrama, maternal sacrifice enables the social or personal promotion of the child. In the horror film, it enables the survival of the child.’\(^6\) This, however, is complicated by the question of the ‘Good Mother’s’ relationship to the paternal function in the horror genre. Arnold argues that, in the post-classical maternal horror film,

the Good Mother is more often than not over-shadowed by a more powerful agent: the father, who either threatens or secures the family. The Good Mother retains certain core elements such as selflessness and sacrifice, yet she is always determined in relation to a paternal figure. Her ability to nurture is dependent upon the third term of the father. The Good Mother is rarely, therefore, a powerful agent within the patriarchal family and the maternal horror film struggles to find an alternative position from which she can speak.\(^7\)

Nonetheless, while Amelia is haunted by the loss of her husband, the emphasis is not on reinstating a patriarchal family structure, but on giving full, ‘monstrous’ articulation to Amelia’s inadmissible feelings about motherhood. In fact, though she longs to be reunited with her dead husband, the patriarchal imperative to reconcile father and son that would bring this about is figured as deadly — when Oskar appears to Amelia in the basement, he tells her, ‘[w]e can be together, you just need to bring me the boy’ — and, importantly, no alternative father figure is mooted. Amelia finally comes to terms with the loss of her husband, literally putting it into language, stating, ‘[m]y husband died the day that Sam was born’, and a healthier mother-son relationship is signalled in the final scene. As such, when Samuel says, ‘[i]t’s getting much better Mum’, this can be understood as an allusion both to the bruise on his neck where Amelia tried to strangle him and to their relationship.

Thus, Amelia reconciles with her son and with herself as a mother by recognising and accommodating, rather than repudiating, the ‘horror’ of her unexpressed grief and rage towards her child. In this sense, the Babadook practically begs to be read as ‘the return of the repressed’, the Freudian scenario (which Wood argues is central to the horror genre) whereby material that has been ‘sunk into’ the id manifests in conscious formations, often in greatly

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\(^6\) Arnold, p. 44.
\(^7\) Arnold, p. 37.
distorted or disguised form.\textsuperscript{65} Indeed, the possibility that Amelia may be the author of \textit{The Babadook} storybook — and thus the origin of the Babadook itself — is suggested by the fact that Amelia says she used to write ‘kids’ stuff’ in a conversation with her sister and her sister’s friends. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen elaborates on the idea of the monster as originating in the self in his thesis that ‘the fear of the monster is also a kind of desire’.\textsuperscript{66} In other words, the figure of the monster permits forbidden fantasies of aggression and domination to be safely expressed in a clearly defined, liminal space. As Cohen argues, ‘[w]hen contained by geographic, generic, or epistemic marginalization, the monster can function as an alter ego, as an alluring projection of (an Other) self’.\textsuperscript{67} In this case, then, shifting generic registers from gothic terror (that is, from a threat that is figured as primarily psychological), to the conventions of classical horror (whereby the threat posed emanates from an externalised, recognisable monster), allows the Babadook, understood as the projection of Amelia’s ‘Other’ self, to take shape, as it were, and become an acknowledged part of Amelia’s and Samuel’s shared reality.

Indeed, the monster that Samuel fears is given a palpable presence well before it appears as the Babadook and well before we have rationalised its existence as emerging from Amelia’s unconscious. One way in which this is achieved is by assigning it a point of view. For instance, when Amelia and Samuel look for monsters in Samuel’s bedroom in a series of quick shots following the opening nightmare scene, it is the imagined monster’s point of view that is privileged, looking back at Amelia and Samuel as they peer beneath the bed and open the wardrobe. Thus, \textit{there is something there}. Likewise, the Babadook’s voice is possibly one of the most effective and/or affective aspects of the film. For instance, when Amelia answers the telephone and hears the Babadook’s voice, it is as if it is breathing into our ear, producing, in this viewer at least, the cold shiver one expects from a successful horror film. The voice itself has an eerie aspect, sounding simultaneously human and non-human, its delivery protracted, with an incantatory quality to its insistent repetition of certain sounds or phrases (‘baba-dook-dook-DOOK!’).

Cohen suggests that the answer to the question ‘[d]o monsters really exist?’ can only be ‘[s]urely they must, for if they did not, how could we?’\textsuperscript{68} In other words, monsters exist insofar as their creation constitutes a crucial component of how we map our social and

\textsuperscript{66} Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, ‘Monster Culture (Seven Theses)’, in \textit{Monster Theory: Reading Culture}, ed. by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), pp. 3-25 (p. 16).
\textsuperscript{67} Cohen, p. 17.
\textsuperscript{68} Cohen, p. 20.
psychic universe and, however much we might try to exclude them, their inevitable return brings with it a fuller knowledge of our selves. Similarly, the return of the Babadook as the ‘monstrous’ manifestation of Amelia’s repressed feelings about motherhood brings with it the opportunity to reconsider the maternal role in ways that can accommodate ambivalence. According to Thornham, the ending of We Need to Talk About Kevin ‘points us beyond the twin fantasies of postfeminist maternal masochism and unproblematic feminist agency’.69 The Babadook similarly avoids a simple reversal or straightforward endorsement of maternal sacrifice. While at one level the ending can be seen as conforming to the discourse of ‘essential motherhood’ as defined by Patrice DiQuinzio and discussed by Arnold (motherhood as nurturing, caring, and natural), this is undermined by the mise-en-scène.70

The bare tree outside their house has flowered, but its green leaves and pink flowers seem hyper-real, saturated. While the final scene takes place in the garden, we arrive there by coming up through the earth, accompanied by a distant, roaring sound. Spatially and temporally disorientated, it feels like we have returned to the earlier horror, until we emerge in the garden, in daylight, to witness a happier scene between mother and son. The normality presented in this scene is nevertheless infused with an uncanny quality that undermines any easy reading of the mother-child relationship as fully resolved in terms of the reconciliation of the ‘Good Mother’ with her ‘wise innocent’ son. Samuel’s earlier ‘strangeness’ has not disappeared, but has been embraced in a more joyful spirit as part of their new reality. As such, unlike his unsuccessful attempts to impress Amelia with magic tricks at the beginning of the film, in the final scene Samuel really can do magic, producing a dove out of a serving dish to the delight of his mother.

Crucially, the Babadook has not been eliminated, but is still with them, if somewhat subdued. One of the final close-ups in the film is of a bowl of worms that Amelia and Samuel collect in order to feed the Babadook. In its revelation of the ugly underside of superficial, suburban normality, this image evokes a Lynchian sensibility that speaks to a subtly revised model of motherhood.71 Amelia’s acknowledgement and acceptance of the Babadook (that is, as the ‘monstrous’ manifestation of her inadmissible feelings about motherhood as a result of their repression, and (thus) as a very real threat to her and Samuel’s survival as a family) is integral to her revised relationship not only to her son, but also to herself as a mother.

69 Thornham, p. 27.
71 This shot is reminiscent of the famous image of writhing insects that ends the first scene of David Lynch’s Blue Velvet (1986).
According to Cohen, ‘[m]onsters are our children’. 72 Amelia’s recovery implies a recognition of this as, ultimately, she assumes a quasi-maternal role towards the Babadook itself, giving it a home (in the basement), soothing it during its (epic) tantrums, and feeding it (worms). Amelia’s process of repression, return and, finally, recognition can be read as analogous to the process of generic incorporation at work in the film, whereby the ‘horror’ of maternal ambivalence, barely concealed beneath a veneer of maternal self-sacrifice, erupts in ‘monstrous’ form and is finally assimilated into the body of the text. In short, *The Babadook* intensifies and inverts of aspects of the woman’s film from Amelia’s ‘fractured perspective’, via the affective potential of the horror genre whereby we are ‘forced to feel something’. In so doing, the film reflects on the maternal melodrama’s investment in ‘the spectacle of a mother owned by her children’ in ways that illuminate what is normally hidden from view. 73

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72 Cohen, p. 20.
73 Kent, quoted in Ehrlich; Haskell, p. 169.