

Crack-Up: Psychological Realism, Generic Transformation and the Demise of the Paranoid Woman's Film

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There is now a considerable body of work on what has become known as the paranoid woman's film of the 1940s (Doane(a); Doane(b); Fischer; Haskell; Hollinger; Modleski; Rosen; Waldman; Walsh(a); and Walsh(b)), a cycle that, as I have argued elsewhere was largely understood as a horror cycle during the period (Jancovich (a)). Like most examples of the woman's film, these films are claimed to be focused on a female lead but they are seen as paranoid due to the pervading sense of threat that these women experience, usually from a husband or lover. This focus on the feelings of terror experienced by the female protagonists, and on their persecution by men, often leads to these films being read as psychological narratives in which the perceptions of the central female are put under investigation. Narratively the woman herself is often uncertain whether to trust her own perceptions or not, and therefore often fears that she is going mad.

Many feminist critics have therefore taken issue with these films, which, it is claimed, not only place their female protagonists in the role of victim, but turn the problem back onto these female characters, so that it is *their* psychology that is pathological, whether or not their 'husbands are systematically trying to drive them insane.'(1) According to Doane, the 'violence associated with the attribution of a desire to see to the woman reaches its culmination in Gothic paranoid films, where the cinematic apparatus itself seems mobilized against the female spectator, disabling her gaze.'(2) In these films, she is driven to the brink of madness, it is argued, less by the diabolical behaviour of others than by her own psychological inferiority: she is 'revealed as impotent in terms of the actual ability to uncover the secret or attain the knowledge which she desires.'(3) Psychologically incapable of making sense of the world around her, and unable to trust her own perceptions, the heroine of these films, it is claimed, is unable to resolve her own problems, and can only be saved when a man 'comes to the rescue' and corrects or 'corroborates the heroine's experience.'(4)

Furthermore, given that her problems are largely psychological, it is often claimed that these films subject their female protagonist not simply to a controlling male gaze, but a medical gaze:

In the 'woman's film', the erotic gaze becomes the medical gaze. The female body is located not so much as spectacle but as an element in the discourse of medicine, a manuscript to be read for symptoms which betray her story, her identity. Hence the need, in these films, for the figure of the doctor as reader and interpreter, as the site of a knowledge which dominates and controls female subjectivity...(5)

For example, according to Janet Walker, a film such as *Whirlpool* overtly asks not so much "who killed Terry Randolph?" – the traditional enigma of a film noir-melodrama like *Mildred Pierce* – but "what is wrong with Ann Sutton?"(6) The mystery within the film is less about the identity of the killer than the psychological problems of its central female protagonist, a mystery that is eventually solved by her husband, who uses his skills as a psychoanalyst to correct his wife's mental state.

There are numerous problems with these claims, and while some films certainly do feature an authenticating male figure, who exists to prove or disprove the heroine's perceptions, many films lack such a figure or make him a marginal character who simply acts as a figure of support and encouragement. Furthermore, while reviews at the time overtly identified many of these films as 'psychological efforts' (7), this was almost always due to the character of the threat, which was usually identified as the product of male psychological pathology. While many reviewers acknowledged that these narratives often concerned women who were being driven mad by fiendish plots, they rarely, if ever, suggested that the problem lay with the woman, but almost always saw the psychological angle as being concerned with the motivations of the villain. Most importantly, in the present context, the films in which a medical gaze is directed at the female psyche are almost always from the late 1940s, after the phenomenal critical success of *The Lost Weekend* in 1945, a tale of alcoholism that was praised for its investigation of male psychological pathology.

This is significant for a number of reasons. Not only does it demonstrate that women were not singled out as the exclusive objects for psychological investigation, but it also suggests that our understandings of the historical nature of the paranoid woman's film needs some nuance and revision. The paranoid woman's film is often associated with the period of post-war reconstruction in which men issued a 'plea for the return of the passive, "pleasantly pliable and even appealingly incompetent" female', a figure who had existed 'carefully camouflaged on screen by tuneful period musicals and suspense shockers.' (8) If Rosen viewed these films as part of a wartime recidivism that proved conducive to postwar conditions, Walsh sees the cycle as directly tied to postwar conditions, and notes that it 'reached its peak in 1944-48' (9), a period in which the 'dominant culture supported female demobilization by stressing the importance of traditional femininity.' (10) She therefore suggests that these portraits of 'women in jeopardy' would have 'clashed with popular images of a competent and resourceful Rosie the Riveter', even if they also 'expressed strong (and often confirmed) feelings of suspicion and distrust towards men.' (11)

However, not only does the cycle start even before the war, with *Rebecca* in 1940, but it actually went into decline after the war due to changes in the reception context. As I have argued elsewhere, *The Lost Weekend* was not only understood as a horror film within the period but also consolidated a shift in the critical agenda. (12) Up until *The Lost Weekend*, psychological themes had been largely associated with fantasy but, after *The Lost Weekend*, they increasingly became associated with realism. In other words, while the psychological themes of earlier films had been associated with 'escapist' entertainment, or 'artistic' imagination, the psychological concerns of *The Lost Weekend* were understood as a brave and frank confrontation with pressing social problems. As a result, the paranoid woman's film began to shift from an association with a Gothic fantasy world of literature and history and towards a contemporary world and a suggestion of tough social commentary. The following article will therefore examine these transformations in both the genre and its reception context during the post-war period through an analysis of film reviews published within the period.

As a result, the first section examines the medicalization of women's psychology within the period, which was less the result of a demonization of female psychology than a shift in the meaning of psychology within the period from an association with Gothic fantasy to an association with realism and contemporary social commentary. The next section then moves on to examine the shifting generic definitions used in relation to the paranoid woman's film, while the third section details the general dismissal of those paranoid woman's films with a period setting, a setting that had once implied a sense of

quality but now came to signify an archaic or outmoded ‘melodrama’ rather than a contemporary realism.(13) Finally, the last section examines those films which tried to modernise the setting for the paranoid woman’s film, films that were usually more highly regarded than the period dramas, but which also demonstrate that the shift in cultural tastes had led to a loss of interest in this type of film, and that these films were increasingly disassociating themselves from notions of Gothic horror and identifying themselves with hardboiled crime fiction. (14)

Psychological Realism: Melodrama, Social Criticism and Questions of Seriousness

This shift is clearly acknowledged in a review of *Smash-Up: The Story of A Woman* (1947), in which the *New York Times* claimed that there ‘isn’t much doubt that [it] will be tagged as “the ‘Lost Week-end’ of a lady,” since it has so fortuitously to do with a female alcoholic.’(15) However, despite the association with the previous film, the review was hardly complementary about *Smash-Up*, and the audience was warned not to ‘let this flattering parallel fool you’. If *The Lost Weekend* was ‘the best film of 1945’, it was also ‘a hard and plausible binge, while the current booze drama ... is soggy and full of (figurative) corn.’ Even the narrative, in which a female singer turns to the bottle as her husband’s radio career ‘skyrockets’, which might make ‘for a drama of a genuinely touching sort, as it did in that memorable picture of success and drunkenness, “A Star is Born”’, is ultimately wrecked so that its central ‘tension has been so weakly and unconvincingly drawn that the reasons for the ladies dipsomania seem completely arbitrary and contrived.’ Worse still, the story is so ‘muddled ... with motherlove’ that it ‘becomes a wallow less in liqueur than in mawkish sentiment.’ The end result is an unconvincing narrative in which the mother ‘saves the child from a burning house’, which not only saves her marriage but ‘apparently cures her of her passion for booze.’

Despite its clear attempts to shift the psychological tortured heroine of the paranoid woman’s film into the setting of contemporary social realism, the film is ultimately accused of being ‘Artificial and hackneyed’ rather than ‘realistic and modern’, and ends up being described as ‘little more than any old-fashioned barroom tear-jerker’. It is even claimed to ‘assume the qualities of a radio daytime serial with the injection of several soapy songs.’ However, as the reference to *A Star is Born* makes clear, the problem here is precisely the film’s pretensions. The review seems to value entertainments like *A Star is Born*, but distinguishes *Smash-Up* from this kind of project exactly for lacking the honesty of the earlier film. For example, Susan Haywood performance as the alcoholic is attacked precisely for its ‘solemn fastidiousness’ and, in taking itself too seriously, it is claimed that the film ends up being ridiculous: it is her ‘solemn fastidiousness which turns most of her scenes of drunken fumbling and heebie-jeebies into off-key burlesque.’

If *Smash-Up* was seen as a failed example of this shift, *The Snake Pit* (1947) was seen as the great success. It not only made the cover of *Time*, but it was even the subject of a whole article, rather than a simple review. Furthermore, this article was given the title, ‘Shocker’, which both associated the film with the ‘psychological thrillers’ that had come before it and also presented the film as a brave and important piece of social commentary.(16) It also received a glowing endorsement in the *New York Times*, which acknowledged that the ‘powerful novel’ on which the film was based ‘is hardly one which Hollywood might have been expected to choose for transcription to the screen’ (17), but claimed that it is ‘to the credit of Anatole Litvak and Twentieth Century-Fox (in the person of Darryl F. Zanuck) that they saw the special merit in this book and they had the imagination and temerity to buy and prepare it for the screen.’

The film is therefore seen as ‘trenchant revelation of a crying need for better facilities for mental care’ which has real social significance – ‘this subject is dynamite’.

Furthermore, rather than a simple case of artless propaganda, it is also claimed that the filmmakers had ‘approached this extraordinary job with the sense of responsibility to treat fairly a most delicate theme.’ However, if the theme is a delicate one, their bravery as filmmakers is that they are claimed to have told the story ‘fully and frankly’, while ‘shunning the temptation to melodramatize insanity.’ The result is a film that is distinguished by ‘fidelity’ and ‘faithful realism’, even if this made for a film that was ‘hard to take’ and ‘frankly quite disturbing’. However, while these features meant that the film was not for children (who would be ‘baffled’ or ‘terrifically disturbed’ by it), it was recommended as a ‘mature emotional drama on a rare and pregnant theme’ that will ‘enlighten our lucid minds’, and featured a ‘brilliant, heart-rending’ performance by its star, Olivia De Havilland.

Possessed (1947) is also discussed as one of these films, although it is not treated with the same seriousness as *The Snake Pit*. Certainly, this ‘tale of an unbalanced woman – a schizophrenic, as they point out – who develops a persecution complex when her lover refuses to marry her’ is not treated with contempt, but neither is it taken very seriously.⁽¹⁸⁾ Not only is it claimed that its female lead (Joan Crawford) ‘goes completely batty’ but it is seen as a virtual remake of *Humoresque* (1946) (also starring Joan Crawford) that is only distinguished by its psychological pretensions: ‘the basic conflict in the story is so similar to “Humoresque” that the ghost aspect of the characterization seems almost studiously contrived.’ However, if the film is not taken very seriously, it is spared the ridicule directed at *Smash-Up* on the grounds that it took its psychological themes slightly more seriously: the woman’s ‘crack-up is fairly documented, within the frame of a primarily fictional film, and the efficiency and dispassion of science are suggested in a rather credible way.’

However, this ‘seriousness’ is also one of the film’s problems. If *The Snake Pit* was a serious social commentary on psychological issues, *Possessed* is implied to be a rather pretentious film that uses its psychological themes to imply quality, rather than from any deep commitment to their social implications: ‘it is wholly obvious that the writers and Director Curt Bernhardt were told to concentrate on the torments of Miss Crawford, Hollywood’s current Great Sufferer, Academy style.’ The film, it is claimed, is a bid for recognition at the Academy Awards, not a serious engagement with psychological issues. A similar criticism was also implied by *Time*, which noted the care and skill of most of those involved, but suggested that the film was ‘not quite top grade’ due to performance of its star: while Crawford is claimed to be ‘generally excellent’ in the role, she is also claimed to act ‘with the passion and intelligence of an actress who is not content with just one oscar’ (19), a comment that can be read as a very backhanded compliment. This tension between the star and the subject matter is also a feature of the *Variety* review, which claims: ‘Despite its overall superiority, *Possessed* is somewhat marred by an ambiguous approach in Curtis Bernhardt’s direction. Film vacillates between a cold clinical analysis of a mental crackup and a highly supercharged melodramatic vehicle for Crawford’s histrionics.’ (20)

Paranoid Women, Generic Classification and the Shift from Gothic Fantasy

If these films began to shift the psychologically troubled heroine of the paranoid woman's film away from Gothic fantasy and into a more 'realist' context, films such as *Caught* (1949), *In A Lonely Place* (1950) and *Whirlpool* (1950) featured heroines who are seduced by men that may or may not be trying to destroy her, but also registered a similar shift from Gothic fantasy to contemporary social reality. However, each of these films were judged differently, and identified with different genres. *Caught* is dismissed as 'a silly film', in which a young woman (Barbara Bel Geddes) has 'the horrible misfortune of marrying a nasty millionaire.'⁽²¹⁾ Distanced from an association with classic literature, its feminine concerns placed it in opposition to the more masculine values of tough, hard-hitting realism, and lead to its association with 'very low-grade dime-store romance' in which its production values are not associated with quality but rather an 'expensively rendered' gloss, in which the film's male hero 'is right out of the shiny magazine'.

While the male stars of the film are praised as actors, they are also seen as too good for this kind of film, so that it is James Mason's 'misfortune to be tangled in such a silly film', particularly given that the film is 'his Hollywood debut', and Robert Ryan, who plays the psychologically disturbed husband 'is dynamic as her arrogant, neurotic spouse' but 'cannot make this isolated character believable in his gauzy realms.' Again, however, the final insult is that the film takes itself far too seriously, and while it might have been acceptable as glossy romance, it is claimed that its director, Max Opuls, has taken its 'artificial elements' and 'whipped them up as though he were really working with a romance of death-less quality.'

If this film is generically identified as romance rather than horror, despite its debts to the paranoid woman's film, *In A Lonely Place* is presented as a realist crime drama rather than horror. The review even describes the story from the perspective of the menacing male rather than his victimized lover. Unlike his presence in an earlier paranoid woman's film, *The Two Mrs. Carrolls* (1947)⁽²²⁾, the film's male lead, Humphrey Bogart is claimed to be 'in top form' in the film, which is described as 'a superior cut of melodrama' ⁽²³⁾, in which he plays Dixon Steele, 'a violent, quick-tempered Hollywood movie writer suspected of murder' by the police, who begins 'a hectic romance' with a young woman, Laurel Gray, played by Gloria Grahame. Bogart's character is described as 'an enigma, an explosive, contradictory force at loose ends when the film ends as when it starts', and given that 'the high-strung Steele' is given to 'flying into rages', his behaviour begins to 'frighten Laurel and lead her to believe that the police may not be so far wrong after all.' The film is praised for its rejection of Hollywood convention, particularly its script's refusal to 'fabricate a happy ending' and it is claimed that 'the climax packs both surprise and a punch.' Bogart is also argued to play 'the role for all its worth giving a maniacal fury to his rages and a hard edge to his expressions of sympathy.' It is therefore described as 'a dandy film', which is applauded for making 'no attempt to psychoanalyse' Dixon; for its 'realistic' refusal of Hollywood conventions and glamour; and for its general lack of 'compromise'.

However, although generic categories were changing, the woman's film, crime drama and horror film were still not seen as mutually exclusive categories. As a result, although it is often seen as either a classic woman's film or as a film noir thriller today, *Whirlpool* was explicitly identified as a 'Mystery-Horror Picture' by the *New York Times* in 1950.⁽²⁴⁾ As I have argued elsewhere, the term 'mystery' was already heavily associated with horror in the period ⁽²⁵⁾, but it is also the case that the review places the emphasis on horror rather than mystery. For example, the review not only complains that the film makes no sense but also that it is 'so burdened with standard horrorisms that it wouldn't be gripping even if it did make

sense.’ As a result, the association with horror is not simply an arbitrary or marginal one, but the review criticises *Whirlpool* for being a conventional horror film, a film that conforms too closely to the horror conventions of the period.

Again the film features a ‘beautiful lady’ (Gene Tierney) who is suffering from a psychological condition – she is ‘a kleptomaniac’ – and ‘falls under the spell of a quack doctor who discovers her secret shame.’ Once ‘under his evil spell’, the quack then ‘hypnotizes her into performing certain acts which make her look like a murderer’, and it is up to her husband – ‘a famed psychiatrist’ – and a grizzled detective to clear her name. The film is also clearly presented as a ‘fancy production’ with ‘an accomplished cast’, featuring Jose Ferrer, ‘the Broadway champion’, as ‘the smooth and piercing villain of the piece who mouths Mr Hecht’s silken phrases with acid savor and burns folks with his eyes.’ However, despite the ‘handsome production’, its Ben Hecht script, and an impressive cast, all of whom ‘labor to cast a spell’, the film is ultimately dismissed as a fairly preposterous affair, in which the psychological themes are tied to fantasy rather than realism so that the whole narrative is dismissed as preposterous and unbelievable: ‘you don’t catch this fairly rational corner believing for one minute the hocus-pocus that goes on’.

As a result, the film is seen as an ‘obvious attempt to pull the wool over the eyes of an unsuspecting audience’, through techniques such as ‘the sloppy police practices that have been slipped into this mystery-horror picture in order to make the story jell.’ Rather than realism the film is therefore seen as not simply fantasy but an outright fake. It is described as a ‘thoroughly fabricated tale’ and despite the quality of those involved in the production it is claimed that ‘their efforts are bleakly artificial.’

Museum Pieces: The Problem of Period Drama

The Gothic fantasy did not entirely disappear during this period, but it did undergo a major critical re-evaluation, so that films of this type were generally dismissed as outmoded and archaic. It was largely those films Gothic fantasies that assumed a lighter tone that proved critical successes. The *New York Times* was therefore generally enthusiastic about *The Ghost and Mrs Muir* (1947) in which a young widow played by Gene Tierney, the star of numerous horror films of the period (26), is haunted by the ghost of a sea captain. Rather than a menace, this captain is described as ‘a most engaging spirit’, and the film as a whole is described as ‘a jolly caper.’(27) Although the captain initially tries to scare the widow from his house, he learns to respect her independence and the two fall in love.

The film is therefore not identified as a horror film but as ‘a romantic fantasy’, which provides ‘sparkling good entertainment’, at least up until the captain’s immateriality proves a barrier to their relationship and the heroine chooses a weak man of flesh and blood over the more challenging but rewarding relationship with the captain. At this point, it is claimed, the film ‘falls to pieces’ and the audience is presented with ‘the insipid, maddeningly sentimental account of a lonely, aging lady and her last, empty days’. However, despite the critic’s distaste at this section of the film, the film is generally praised, and Rex Harrison, who plays the ghostly captain, is claimed to have ‘an ingratiating personality’ that makes up for deficiencies elsewhere so that *The Ghost and Mrs. Muir* ‘remains a pleasurable film’ with ‘some saucy dialogue’. The *New Republic* also liked the film, and claimed it was ‘a happy exception’ to ‘Hollywood’s resistance to the idea’ that ‘characters can stay sympathetic and still be cross and difficult and talk like people.’(28)

If the Gothic was valued in the guise of ‘romantic fantasy’, it was viewed as outmoded in the form of Gothic horror. As a result, *The Woman in White* (1948) was claimed to be ‘as counter to evolution as William Jennings Bryan.’(29) A film version of Wilkie Collins’ literary classic, this ‘hearts-and-horrors tale’ was claimed to have caused ‘a great deal of excitements among the early Victorian “thriller” fans’, but a ‘vast lot of horror fiction has gone over the dam since then and some notable evolutions in melodramatic style have occurred.’ The story is described as one in which ‘a suave Italian con-man’ tries to ‘fleece’ his female victims ‘by driving them mad’. The reviewer therefore claims that while ‘hissing by villains has become obsolete’, Sidney Greenstreet, who plays the Italian may not ‘actually hiss through his teeth’ but ‘he definitely hisses with his eyes’. Similarly, Eleanor Parker who plays a dual role as his victims is claimed to be ‘old fashioned, too, going crazy and hearing the birdies singing in about as quaint a way as our grandmothers would allow.’ As a result, there is a failure in ‘the mood of horror and anxiety that the film presumably intends’, and it is a failure that is due to the fact that such Gothic horrors were now seen as antiquated.

Even Alfred Hitchcock and Ingrid Bergman were not immune from this change in the critical climate, and *Under Capricorn* (1949) did not fare well with critics. The film is described as a ‘melodramatic tale’, in which a ‘wronged and wretched lady’, whose spouse is ‘hugely gruff and sullen’, is gradually being driven into madness and alcoholism by some fiendish plot.(30) It also claimed to display many of the hallmarks of a quality production with its ‘capable and richly costumed cast’, which are ‘beautifully filmed in Technicolor’. However, these marks of quality are at odds with the film, which maybe filmed in Technicolor ‘but [is] pointed in glaring blacks and whites.’ It is therefore material that is not ‘any better than penny-dreadful substance’ and it is dismissed as ‘superficial’. As a result, while this is material to which ‘Alfred Hitchcock has chosen to put his hand’, given that it is a project made for his own production company, Transatlantic, and one that ‘Ingrid Bergman has purposely chosen to play’, it is claimed that ‘neither artist has chosen exceedingly well.’(31) While the teaming of director and star was clearly supposed to invoke memories of their two great collaborations in the mid 1940s, *Spellbound* (1945) and *Notorious* (1946), both of which had made Crowther’s list of the top ten films of their year, the film is seen as inferior material which is both old fashioned and predictable. Not only is this implied by the reference to the penny-dreadfuls, but also through the complaints about the predictability of the plot, particularly the film’s ‘easily perceived villainess.’ For the director, it is therefore claimed to provide little ‘with which to stoke up steam’ and, for its star, the ‘stuff for a solid characterization is simply not put her way.’

The only paranoid woman’s film with a period setting that did receive strong critical reviews from the *New York Times* in the late 1940s was *The Heiress* (1949) and, even then, the paper acknowledges its surprise at its response to the film. In this film the conflict is ‘between a timid daughter and her wilful father’, rather than between a wife and husband, and the father is ‘not quite the sadist that he was – nor as nebulously psychopathic – on the stage’, and is therefore not so ‘diabolic’, while his daughter is ‘less shatterable by shock.’(32) None the less, the film is presented as a distinguished quality production that features a ‘rich and sleek performance’ from Ralph Richardson, while Olivia de Havilland’s ‘portrayal of the poor girl has dignity and strength.’ The quality of the production, however, comes as quite a surprise to its reviewer, who claims that its director, William Wyler, ‘has taken this drama, which is essentially of the drawing-room and of an era of stilted manners and rigid attitudes, and has made it into a motion picture that crackles with allusive life and fire in its telling of an extraordinarily characterful tale.’ In other words, the period details, which had been associated with quality in the early and mid 1940s, were now

seen as unlikely material for a successful drama, and *Variety* went so far as to dismiss the film as a 'museum piece'.(33)

However, others were more positive. While the *New York Times* praised Wyler for his ability to inspire this material with 'crackles' and 'fire' (34), the *New Republic* described the film as 'sensationally good' (35), even though it complains that the film is not an authentic adaptation of Henry James's *Washington Square*, but only an excellent adaptation of 'a dubious [Broadway] adaptation'. For the *New Republic*, the fault of the Broadway play was precisely its conversion of the story into a paranoid woman's narrative: 'Emotional violence was introduced to provide action, and the characters, particularly Catherine Sloper, were forced into implausible gestures to provide good curtains.' As a result, while the film is described as 'superior entertainment', it is also reproached for being 'an imitation of an approximation of an acknowledged work of art'.

Qualified Success: Paranoia, Modernity and the Last Gasps of the Quality Woman's Horror Film

Interestingly, the films that gain critical acceptance, despite looking very much like the earlier Gothic fantasies, were those that shifted their action to contemporary settings, even if it had little effect on the overall treatment of their material. Earlier in the 1940s, the exact opposite had been the case with films, such as *Experiment Perilous* (1945) and *Hangover Square* (1945), which set their stories within a vaguely imagined Victorian era, despite the fact that the original novels on which they were based had been set in the contemporary period. By the late 1940s, filmmakers were explicitly trying to modernise the paranoid woman's film. *Lured*, for example, is the story of 'a taxi-dancer in London who is drafted by Scotland Yard to be the bait in trapping a character who specializes in killing pretty girls.'(36) This serial killer 'advertises for them in the personal columns of newspapers', and is a deranged madman with fondness for Baudelaire. However, despite its 'good cast' and 'lavish backgrounds', it is claimed that these are 'not warranted by some of the aspects of the story', which is less 'inspired' than its production values. None the less, while there seems to be little interest in the story, the film is not dismissed out of hand, and it is generally seen as a competent, if 'rather routine piece', which features 'a sturdy performance' from its star, Lucille Ball, even if the film as a whole 'is about an hour too long and a number of extraneous and rather absurd sequences could have been omitted.'

Similarly, *Sleep, My Love* (1948) is referred to 'a sleek entry' with an 'intelligent script about 'a young matron being slowly driven mad by her husband', who uses a hypnotism and psychoanalysis to unbalance her. (37) Claudette Colbert is also claimed to give 'a convincing portrayal of the terrified and mystified lady', and the film 'can be marked down as a generally competent job, which has its absorbing moments', even if it hasn't 'strayed much from the norm.' The film itself is therefore positively assessed as one that 'manages to run its course without coming a cropper', but it is also seen as 'the latest arrival on an extremely long line of psychological dramas'. In other words, the film is therefore seen as having a 'familiar plot', which ultimately results in 'a general lack of suspense'. *Time* was similarly dismissive: although it claimed that it was 'pretty well filmed' and 'amusingly played' (38), the film was seen as a flimsy affair in which the 'story scarcely matters except as an excuse for some scare scenes.'

If these two films were nominally set in the contemporary period, *Sorry, Wrong Number* (1948) actively announces its modernity through its focus on the telephone, a focus that is mocked by the reviewer who suggest that while it is a film in which the heroine gradually realises that her husband is planning to have

her killed, she doesn't need to be driven mad by her husband because 'she can drive herself mad by excessive utilization of that innocent little machine.' (39) In the film, Leona (Barbara Stanwyck) is confined to her bed with only the telephone as her contact to the outside world and, over the course of one night, she begins to piece together her husband's murderous intentions from a series of phone calls. There are some complaints that, as her 'cold fear increases' until her 'terror is titanic', the 'narrative structure' is too 'involved' with 'flashbacks occurring within flashbacks and extraneities popping up here and there' until it all becomes 'quite bewildering and therefore tedious in the lengthy middle phase.' There is also a complaint that 'coincidence plays almost as big a part in the story as does Barbara Stanwyck' which 'weakens its credibility'. However, while the critic claims that, during the film, 'we squirmed – and not from dread', it is conceded that as 'a sheer exercise in melodrama and in cumulative suspense, this film has some highly vivid episodes and a grimly exciting final reel' in which its director, Anatole Litvak, 'has whipped it up hotly towards the end.' *Time* also praised Litvak who, it is claimed, 'keeps his camera relentlessly on the prowl, soaking up the creepy mood that surrounds' the film's 'terrified leading character' (40), while *Variety* described the film as a 'real chiller' in which direction, music and camera work all have the effect of 'sharpening the building terror.' (41)

Conclusion

As we have seen, then, the cycle of women's horror films went through a shift in the mid to late 1940s as there was a transformation in the reception context. Earlier in the decade, as I have argued elsewhere, Gothic fantasy had considerable prestige with critics, who valued its association with classic literature and the historical past (42), but by the late 1940s, this prestige began to wane and was replaced by a new enthusiasm for films that were seen as frank and realistic social commentaries. It was within this context that many examples of the paranoid woman's film subjected their mentally disturbed heroines to a medical gaze but it was not due to a specific pathologization of female psychology itself but was part of a larger cycle of films, which was at least as concerned with masculinity as femininity.

Within this context, there was also a shift in the generic categorization of these films, and while some films continued to be explicitly associated with horror, there was an increasing tendency to distance these materials from the horror genre. Not only was the prestige associated with the period settings devalued so that they were increasingly seen as old fashioned, but even the association with classic literature was devalued. It was therefore generally films that featured contemporary settings, and which could present themselves as serious social commentaries, that were most highly valued by critics during the period.

By 1950, the cycle of female centred quality horror films that had started with *Rebecca* in 1940 was all but finished, although the following year a new cycle would start with the release of Howard Hawks' *The Thing* (1951).

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4. Waldman, "'At Last I Can Tell It to Someone!'" Female Point of View and Subjectivity in the Gothic Romance Film of the 1940s', 33.
5. Doane, 'The Woman's Film: Possession and Address', 290.
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10. Walsh, Andrea, *Women's Film and Female Experience 1940-1950* (New York: Praeger, 1984), 77.
11. Walsh, 'Films of Suspicion and Distrust: Undercurrents of Consciousness in the 1940s', *Film History*, 8: 1, (Feb 1978), 5.
12. Jancovich, Mark, 'Thrills and Chills: Horror, the Woman's Film and the Origins of Film Noir', forthcoming.
13. It is also be noted that this opposition did not imply that melodrama was a necessarily feminine form, but was rather associated with tales of sensationalism and excitement, rather than seriousness social commentary.
14. Of course, the link between hard boiled crime fiction and horror was never one of simple generic difference, and many films that we would not identify as thrillers were explicitly defined as horror earlier in the decade. However, with the shift in critical tastes, the shift from horror to thriller was an important one as it enabled various elements and materials to be more strongly associated with the taste for contemporary realists' social criticism.
15. Crowther, Bosley, "'Smash-Up, Story of a Woman,'" in Which Susan Hayward is seen as an Alcoholic, Makes its Bow at Capitol Theatre', *New York Times*, (11 April, 1947), 31.

16. Anon, 'Shocker', *Time*, (December 20, 1948), www.time.com.
17. Crowther, Bosley, "'Snake Pit,' Study of Mental Ills Based on Mary Jane Ward's Novel, Opens at Rivoli', *New York Times*, (5 November, 1948), 29.
18. Crowther, Bosley, "'Possessed,' Psychological Film With Joan Crawford as the Star, Opens at Hollywood', *New York Times*, (30 May, 1947), 25.
19. Anon, 'The New Pictures', *Time*, (June 16, 1947), www.time.com.
20. Anon, 'Film Reviews', *Variety*, (1947), www.variety.com.
21. Crowther, Bosley, "'Caught,' Starring James Mason, Barbara Bel Geddes, Robert Ryan, Opens at Capitol', *New York Times*, 18 Feb, 1949, 26.
22. See Jancovich, Mark, 'Bluebeard's Wives: Horror, Quality and the Paranoid Woman's Film of the 1940s', forthcoming.
23. Crowther, Bosley, 'Humphrey Bogart Movie, "In a Lonely Place," at Paramount-Import at Trans-Lux', *New York Times*, (18 May, 1950), 46.
24. Crowther, Bosley, 'Incredible Goings-On Feature "Whirlpool," Mystery-Horror Picture at Roxy', *New York Times*, (14 January, 1950), 9.
25. Jancovich, Mark, 'The Meaning of Mystery: Genre, Marketing and the Universal Sherlock Holmes Series of the 1940', *Film International*, 17 (2005), 24-45.
26. These films include *Laura* (1944), *Leave Her to Heaven* (1945), *Dragonwyck* (1946), and *Whirlpool* (1950).
27. T.M.P., "'Ghost and Mrs. Muir," With Rex Harrison, Gene Tierney and George Sanders, Opens at Radio City Music Hall', *New York Times*, (27 June 1947), 17.
28. O'Hara, Shirley, 'Ghost Story', *New Republic*, (26 May 1947), 36.
29. Crowther, Bosley, "'Woman in White," Starring Eleanor Parker and Sidney Greenstreet, at Strand', *New York Times*, (8 May 1948), 12.
30. Crowther (g), Bosley, "'Under Capricorn," With Ingrid Bergman at Music Hall – Directed by Hitchcock', *New York Times*, (9 September 1949), 28.
31. The *New Republic* also found it 'remarkable' that Hitchcock and Bergman had associated themselves with the project, which it dismissed as 'the purest example of window dressing that has come along in some time.' (Hatch, 27-8)

32. Crowther, Bosley, “‘The Heiress,’ With Olivia De Havilland in Leading Role, Arrived at Music Hall’, *New York Times*, (7 October, 1949), 35.
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34. Crowther, “‘The Heiress,’ With Olivia De Havilland in Leading Role, Arrived at Music Hall’, 35.
35. Hatch, Robert, ‘Movies: The Imitative Muse’, *New Republic*, (31 October 1949), 22.
36. E.J.B., ‘Lured’, *New York Times*, (29 August, 1947), 14.
37. A.W., ‘At Loew’s Criterion’, *New York Times*, (19 February, 1948), 29.
38. Anon, ‘Also Showing’, *Time*, (16 February, 1948), www.time.com.
39. Crowther, Bosley, “‘Sorry, Wrong Number,’ Based on Radio Play, At Paramount – Barbara Stanwyck Stars’, *New York Times*, (2 September 1948), 18.
40. Anon, ‘The New Pictures’, *Time*, (20 September, 1948), www.time.com.
41. Anon, ‘Film Reviews’, *Variety*, (1948), www.variety.com.
42. Jancovich (a), Mark, ‘Bluebeard’s Wives: Horror, Quality and the Paranoid Woman’s Film of the 1940s’, forthcoming.

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