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The Spectral and The Figure of the Lesbian in Robert Wise's *The Haunting* (1963)

Discussions about Cold War America often neglect to mention the effects of the Red Scare and McCarthyism on cultural anxieties around homosexuality.[1] During this period, fears regarding deviant gender and sexual identities became enmeshed with fears regarding the spread of communism, creating new narratives of queerness as a threat to democracy. Hollywood, especially horror cinema, served an important role during this moral panic as an ambivalent ideological apparatus which simultaneously reproduced and challenged these homophobic fears. One site where such ideological tensions emerged is Robert Wise's 1963 film *The Haunting*, which uses the spectral to make a defense against non-normative female desire as an unseen supernatural threat while at the same time articulating it in a mode that exceeds patriarchal understanding.

The film reproduces the perception of lesbianism as a threat by establishing a connection between its two female leads and the supernatural occurrences of the house. Dr. Markway describes the Hill house as "sick," "diseased," and "born evil." The film uses anamorphic lenses which distort the final camera image, and thus the shots of the house echo Markway's descriptions. The barrel distortion bends geometric lines in the extremities of a shot, and this warping serves to create a more eerie and diseased sense of the house. It doesn't orient itself like a typical house; "All the angles are slightly off," its walls and doors aren't quite 'straight'. As Patricia White suggests in her article "Female Spectator, Lesbian Specter: 'The Haunting'" from

[1] "Despite the concern, even hysteria, at the time, and the many people affected, historians of the McCarthy era have given stunningly little attention to the Lavender Scare... If they mention the Lavender Scare at all, they portray it as a minor byproduct of the Red Scare..." (Johnson, "Panic on the Potomac," 2).

Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories, in pathologizing the house, the film also anthropomorphizes it (White 1991, 156). This sense of the house as diseased resonates deeply with the notion of queerness as unnatural, a deviation from the biological norm. This association is strengthened by the film in connecting the house with its two female leads. After Theodora makes several romantic advances at Eleanor, Eleanor eventually accuses Theodora as being "the monster of Hill House." She calls her one of "nature's mistakes." But Eleanor is projecting, denying the fact that she, too, is a monster of the house. She is the person at the center of all the supernatural occurrences; the ghosts even go so far as to write her name. As the narrative progresses, Eleanor becomes further absorbed by the sick house, "disappearing inch by inch" into it. Both the house and Theodora have an affinity for Eleanor, and these attractions are linked to each other and perceived as similarly threatening (White 1991, 157). The film's insistence on lesbianism as a threatening disease reflects the homophobic anxieties in the US at the time of its production in the late 1950s. In the introduction "Reclaiming the 'Lost Sex': The Lesbian in Cold War Culture" of his book *Cold War Femme: Lesbianism, National Identity, and Hollywood Cinema*, Robert Corber writes, "The construction of the lesbian as "un-American," a secretive, duplicitous figure who, like the communist, threatened to subvert the nation, surfaced most fully in the antihomosexual witch hunts conducted by the federal government throughout the 1950s" (Corber 2011, 17). Lesbianism was linked to feminism, as both threatened to undermine patriarchal institutions such as marriage and the traditional family model, which were foundational to the nation's structure. "Hollywood films contributed to the homophobic deployment of the category of the lesbian by constructing narratives of female sexuality that pathologized women's desire for freedom and independence, and thereby reinforced the difficulty that women had imagining alternative modes of happiness and fulfillment... Such

movies were instrumental in decreasing the circulation of alternative constructions of womanhood in postwar American society" (Corber 2011, 19). This is reflected in *The Haunting*, as the diseased house is not only pathologized in relation to Eleanor's latent lesbianism but also her desire for autonomy and self-ownership. The house echoes the guilt she feels for getting frustrated by caring for her dying mother,[2] which is intimately linked to her fantasies about having her own home. The film's establishment of a link between the diseased house and the characters' deviant female desires reflects the period's pathologization of non-normative constructions of womanhood.

The film's cinematic deployment of the spectral can be read using Dennis Giles' figural categories to understand its depiction of Eleanor as a latent lesbian, specifically an instantiation of the unseen threatening figure of the femme. During their first night at the house, Eleanor rushes to Theo's room when she hears pounding on her wall. The two of them sit in bed, clutching each other in fear for an extended period of time. Our perspective remains trapped on their side of the door. The audience derives pleasure from the excitement of being denied vision of the source of these sounds. The film deploys a limited perspective and the fact that the threatening force is spectral in order to frustrate our vision. As Dennis Giles writes in his essay "Conditions of Pleasure in Horror Cinema" from *Planks of Reason: Essays on the Horror Film*, "The fetishistic act is the means by which the subject protects himself/herself against a horrible spectacle, and gains pleasure from a vision which stops short of this spectacle" (Giles 1984, 47). The film delivers its audience the pleasure of not seeing: it never shows us the causes of the supernatural forces, and it also never shows us anything beyond socially acceptable homosocial interactions between these two women. It keeps the object of horror hidden from the viewer

[2] "Even women who had made a heterosexual object choice were considered "sick" and latently lesbian if they transgressed the dominant construction of femininity. Strecker and Lathbury, for example, ascribed lesbianism to 'undissolved and unfulfilled mother-daughter relationships' (160)" (Corber 2011, 12).

while also giving them the fetishistic relief of seeing a representation of it. The scene depicts the two women in a highly intimate physical arrangement; at the same time, it is a representation of female homosociality that can be defended as nothing more than platonic. These elements of *The Haunting* reflect the era's anxieties around lesbianism as an unseen danger. Robert Corber writes, "the lesbian posed an "invisible" threat to the nation; because she could pass as "normal," the lesbian could participate in the nation's social and economic institutions without arousing suspicion" (Corber 2011, 3). Giles' figural analysis especially resonates with the figure of the femme, which was previously considered the less "abnormal" lesbian but replaced the butch as the greater threat to American society during the Cold War. "Unlike the femme, the butch was easily identified by her cross-gender identification, which prevented her from participating in mainstream American society and from recruiting other women to the 'secret world' of lesbianism as easily as the femme could" (Corber 2011, 4). The femme could operate unseen, thus making her more dangerous. This invisible quality of lesbianism is reflected in the film, which uses the female homosociality of Eleanor and Theo as a fetishistic stand-in for an overt depiction of queer desire, defending the audience from their desire to see the real object of horror. Similarly, Eleanor misreads and misplaces her desire onto Dr. Markway as a defense mechanism (White 1991, 162). Nonetheless, her attempts to align her sexuality with social norms continue to be haunted by the spectral. Eleanor feels the threatening presence of her desires for Theo; at the same time, the audience feels the threatening presence of Eleanor as a femme-presenting latent lesbian. The film arouses and then soothes the audience's fears by offering signifiers of this threat and then defending them against it.

Despite its defense against homosexuality, the film also offers a space for the expression of these non-normative female desires. The film suggests that Eleanor's sexuality cannot be

reduced to patriarchal modes of understanding. In the final scene after Eleanor dies, Dr. Markway says, "[Hill House] didn't want her to leave, and her poor bedeviled mind wasn't strong enough to fight it. Poor Eleanor!" But, as Robert Corber writes, Theo rejects his interpretation. She says, "Maybe not 'poor Eleanor.' It was what she wanted, to stay here. She had no place else to go. The house belongs to her now, too. Maybe she's happier." Her privileged epistemological standing allows her to view Eleanor in an alternative way that does not deprive her of her agency (Corber 2011, 188). Throughout the film, Dr. Markway can be read as representing dominant, outsider perspectives on queerness. Eleanor's death can subsequently be read as a refusal to be contained by these dominant modes. Her association with the supernatural means that her queerness exceeds explanation (Corber 2011, 188). The Haunting constructs the lesbian in a way that threatens to destabilize understandings of queerness perpetuated during the Cold War. The specter of lesbianism evokes the terror of not just the invisible, but the supernatural: not just what lies concealed beneath normative appearances, but what lies beyond normative forms of articulation.

Since its inception, Hollywood has played a key part in the system of ideological production, and this was no less the case during the moral panic surrounding homosexuality in Cold War America. Conflicting ideologies regarding lesbianism can be found in Robert Wise's 1963 film *The Haunting*, which utilizes the spectral in order to depict queer female desires as an invisible threat while simultaneously offering a space for its expression outside of patriarchal models of understanding. Horror cinema is a crucial site for reading the unstable construction of gender and sexuality categories as they are shaped by political regimes and cultural anxieties, not only throughout different eras but even within the contradictions of a single era.

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