

"*Mother Oh God Mother ...*": Analysing the 'Horror' of Single Mothers in Contemporary Hollywood Horror

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Although the slasher sub-genre has held a prominent position within the American horror film canon for over twenty years, 'ghost horror' is the latest sub-genre proving to be commercially successful with contemporary audiences. Since the 1980s, slasher films have been exceptionally successful in commercial terms because enormous profits have been made on relatively low budgets. However, the sub-genre has been critically derided, particularly for its representation of women. Claims that slashers are misogynistic fantasies have been made repeatedly, with many critics claiming that they are "explicitly about the destruction of women" (Sharrett, 1996: 254).

In contrast, three films that fall under the category of 'ghost horror' have not only been commercially successful, but have also elevated the horror genre's critical respectability. *The Sixth Sense* (1999), *The Others* (2001) and *The Ring* (2002) have been lauded for their rejection of sensational, exploitative and excessive gore – often (and sometimes unfairly) associated with slashers – and for generating chills through sophisticated cinematography, lighting, editing and scoring in order to *suggest* horror rather than simply displaying lingering and spectacularly gory shots of human mutilation.

Although these three films form part of the ghost horror sub-genre, they also form part of a cycle of films within this category, which focus upon women raising children alone in matriarchal family units, unlike other recent ghost horror films such as *The Haunting* (1999), *The House on Haunted Hill* (1999), *What Lies Beneath* (2000) and *Ghost Ship* (2002).

In this paper I discuss the representations of single mothers in *The Sixth Sense*, *The Others* and *The Ring*. I show how these three films, produced and released just before and during George Bush Jr.'s Republican administration, can be read in a conservative context, reflecting a cinematic shift back towards the reflection of 'Republican' ideologies in Hollywood films. I demonstrate how these films appear to reflect traditional attitudes towards female life-choices, originally created by the 'family values' policies of the Reagan/Bush presidencies, and which are prevalent in criticisms levelled against major slashers released during the 1980s, but are absent from major slashers released during the Clinton era. An analysis of the three films' central female characters – Lynne/Toni Collette (*The Sixth Sense*), Grace/Nicole Kidman (*The Others*) and Rachel/Naomi Watts (*The Ring*) – will illustrate how these films can appear initially to extol the need for Republican 'family values', the virtues of patriarchal father figures and, simultaneously, demonise women who raise their children alone either through choice or circumstance. I argue that as *single* parents, the life choices these women make, regardless of whether they have never been married or married and divorced or married and widowed, can be interpreted as catalysts for horror in these films by presenting the viewer with the 'horror' of ineffectual or monstrous single parent mothers. However, I

explore the way in which these films also offer self-consciously critical explorations of patriarchy and the dominant ideologies that suppress women as well as 'others' who resist definition within patriarchal frameworks.

"Go get me a beer ..."

To discuss the way in which the three films under discussion here appear to reflect conservative "Republican/Moral Majority/Christian" (Smith, 2002: 77) ideologies about 'the family' and women's *traditional* place within the family unit, it is necessary to briefly trace the trajectory of so-called 'conservative' moments in contemporary horror films and how they can be seen to reflect political shifts in American culture from the Reagan era to the current Bush Jr. administration.

In "Gender and Family Values in the Clinton Presidency and 1990s Hollywood Film", Carol R. Smith argues that prior to Bill Clinton's election in 1992 the early 1990s saw two films – *Pretty Woman* (1990) and *Thelma and Louise* (1991) – which were seen as "feminist critiques of the naturalness of heterosexual marriage and gender relations" (Smith, 2002: 78). Smith also argues that these two films echoed the sentiments of a speech made by Hillary Clinton in 1992 in which she attacked the Republican 'family values' agenda by stating:

If you don't get married you're abnormal, if you get married but don't have children you're a selfish yuppie. If you get married and have children but then go outside the home to work you're a bad mother. If you get married and have children but stay home you've wasted your education. And if you don't get married but have children and work outside the home as a regional newscaster you get in trouble with the Vice President. (Smith, 2002: 77) [\[1\]](#)

Smith contends that this speech was a "classic feminist diagnosis of the negative impact on available female-life choices created by the 'family values' policies and rhetoric of the Reagan and Bush presidencies" (Smith, 2002: 77). Pro-feminist sentiments were reflected in these two films because "despite their generic differences, this romantic comedy and road movie/Western were perceived as radical reinterpretations of the romance/marriage narrative that marked a shift away from an unquestioning acceptance of the social and economic policy of Reagan/Bush" (Smith, 2002: 78).

Smith suggests that the releases of *Pretty Woman* and *Thelma and Louise* are rather like cinematic precursors, indicating that by Clinton's election in 1992, "the political and cinematic culture of America did seem to be marked by similar shifts" (Smith, 2002: 78). The feminist critiques and alternative representations of 'the family' in Clinton era films were "paralleled by the election of a very different First Family (one for two), whose concepts of 'family values' and public policies promised tolerance and inclusion rather than demonisation and exclusion" (Smith, 2002: 78). However, prior to the cultural/cinematic/political shifts that occurred in America during the early part of the 1990s, "the popularity of the Vietnam War movie and blockbusters has been read as a sign of the success of simplistic and conservative policies regarding gender, which act for 'the regeneration of the interests, values and projects of patriarchy'." (Smith, 2002: 79)

Susan Jeffords observes that one of the Reagan administration's achievements was the successful demonisation of certain 'types' of people who were held up to public contempt. Women, for example, who chose to have sexual relations outside marriage were

not only an affront to the religious right, but, it was claimed, got pregnant and refused to marry, "just to get more money from the government" and were blamed for bleeding the economy dry (Jeffords, 1994: 59).

Reagan's Republican/Moral Majority/Christian 'family values' idealism suggested that the only way to prevent single mothers from disrupting America's economic growth was through *conservative* attitudes towards sexual activities and giving birth in wedlock. In this context, Reagan's successful demonisation of single mothers and his conservative attitudes towards child-bearing is reflected, to an extent, in the claims made by many critics in relation to the representation of women in 1980s slasher films. As Mark Jancovich observes, many critics have lambasted the sub-genre because it is often claimed that "the most graphic attacks are directed against women and particularly ones who have just had sex", while Robin Wood claims that the most horrifying scenes of violence tend to be directed towards female characters who "*resist* definition within the virgin/wife/mother framework" (Jancovich, 2002: 5).

Reagan's demonisation of women who had 'unauthorised', 'immoral' sexual intercourse paralleled the immense popularity of slashers, which, as Carol Clover observes, have a "generic imperative": "[The] killing [of] those who seek or engage in unauthorised sex" (Clover, 1992: 34). Further, Clover also states that "even in films in which males and females are killed...the lingering images are of the latter" (Clover, 1992: 35). Thus, not only is the "dangerous sexuality" the murdered girls "exhibit" removed, but also the potential threat unmarried single mothers pose (Trencansky, 2001).

However, just as *Pretty Woman* and *Thelma and Louise* were indicators that, cinematically at least, American popular culture was shifting away from Reagan/Bush rhetoric, the release and subsequent success of *Halloween* (1978) two years prior to Reagan's election marked, according to Mark Kermode, the formulaic template for the slashers to follow (Kermode, 2000). The film also reflected the 'naturalness' of gender relations prominent in the social policies and rhetoric of the incoming administration. *Halloween* carried the template for the 'Final Girl', in this instance Laurie Strode (Jamie Lee Curtis), the only person to survive the ordeal and offer any significant resistance towards the male aggressor. As Kermode suggests, it is Laurie's "virginal purity", which holds the key to her survival (Kermode, 2000). Thus, *Halloween* and other iconic slashers from the 1980s, such as *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1985), present both the destruction of women who resist definition within the frameworks Wood describes and an entirely male, or rather *Reaganesque*, projection of 'authorised' female sexuality in the form of sexually reluctant 'Final Girls' like Laurie and Nancy (*A Nightmare on Elm Street*), by equating virginity with power and survival (Clover, 1992: 40).

In contrast, many of the slashers from the 1990s also echoed feminist critiques on the naturalness of heterosexual marriage and gender relations. In the previous cycle, many of the major slashers became series; Michael Myers, Freddy Krueger and Jason Voorhees became the stars of numerous sequels and secured their iconic status within the slasher pantheon. For many critics, slashers of the 1980s present an indestructible image of male power and female subordination; indeed, although 'Final Girls' destroy the (usually) male monster, the films often conclude with the monster either disappearing (to fight another day as it were) or simply reappearing in the films' closing moments, thereby suggesting that female virginity is powerful but ultimately too weak to destroy the all-powerful male aggressor. However, in the 1990s this is simply not the case. Freddy's final outing in *Freddy's Dead: The Final*

Nightmare (1991) also reflected a cinematic shift prior to Clinton's election. In this final instalment, Freddy is destroyed once and for all by his daughter Maggie (Lisa Zane), his power no longer an indestructible given. Elsewhere, *Halloween H20: 20 Years Later* (1998) saw Laurie Strode (now calling herself Keri Tate, separated from her husband and raising her son alone) removing Michael Myers' power over her by decapitating him and 'castrating' his power once and for all. Not only is Curtis' iconic character afforded closure at the end of this instalment, but like *Pretty Woman* and *Thelma and Louise*, the film was also a radical departure because *H20* explicitly suggests that being in male dominated 'marriages' of sorts (here with a maniacal, abusive, domineering brother (Myers) or drug abuser husband) is clearly not always the desirable norm for women. In *Scream* (1996) 'Final Girls' like Sidney (Neve Campbell) can also have sex (and therefore the potential to have a child outside of marriage) but still live to defeat her male aggressors. It is also during this period that after eight previous instalments Jason from the *Friday the Thirteenth* series (finally) went to Hell. [2]

In 1999 however, the American public were preparing for the transition from one president to another and the possibility of a transition from a Democratic to a Republican administration as Clinton's second term in office was coming to a close. Amid swathes of controversy surrounding Clinton's private life, what constituted correct 'family values' was back on the election agenda once again. Commentators and politicians at the time had little doubt that Clinton's sexual liaisons with Monica Lewinsky had created irreparable damage to any stance the president might have on 'family values'. In 1998, for example, the Libertarian Party criticised Clinton for his "shameless hypocrisy" stating, "While Bill Clinton was busy taking a sexual wrecking ball to his own family, he was hypocritically pretending to care about everyone else's family... Clinton scheduled numerous sexual encounters on the same day he was lecturing the American people about his 'pro-family' policies or lobbying to pass legislation that would allegedly help children" (The Libertarian Party, 1998). As presidential candidates were being announced in 1999, many media commentators questioned whether Clinton's scandal-ridden presidency would damage any hope for Al Gore, the Democratic presidential candidate, to be elected into the White House. Republican candidates like Dan Quayle and George W. Bush on the other hand were busy extolling the virtues of Republican 'family values'; as Quayle stated in April 1999, "I will lead the fight for *our* values and our families" (AllPolitics, 1999), while Bush was telling voters to say "yes" to families and presumably "yes" to Republican ideals about the family (Saletan, 1999). Although the 2000 Presidential election was fraught with controversy surrounding the counting and re-counting of ballots, Clinton's turbulent and scandal-ridden administrations and Al Gore's association with that administration were clearly major factors in the election of George W. Bush and the narrowing of the divide between Republican and Democratic support in the United States.

Carol R. Smith claims that whilst Bill Clinton eventually began to echo Republican candidate Dan Quayle's claims that "the absence of fathers in the lives of America's children is the single most critical threat [to our future]", she also claims that "whatever the immediate results of Clinton's negotiations over 'family values', at least political and cinematic discourses of the family have begun to incorporate some of the diverse material realities of the family in contemporary America" (Smith, 2002: 80, 88). The release of *The Sixth Sense* in 1999 however, and later *The Others* and *The Ring*, can be read as a cinematic shift back towards the reflection of Republican ideals, particularly in relation to 'the family', but also through the suggestion that the absence of fathers really is "the greatest threat".

If you get married, have children (and get divorced) but then go outside the home to work...

The Sixth Sense stars Bruce Willis as Dr. Malcolm Crowe, a child psychologist who appears to have been assigned to a case involving a young boy named Cole (Haley Joel Osment). Cole lives with his mother, Lynne, who is divorced and works two jobs in order to support her "little family". As the narrative progresses, Lynne becomes increasingly anxious by her son's seemingly erratic behaviour. When she confronts him about taking her (dead) mother's bumblebee pendant for example, he tells her he didn't take it even though she found it in his bedroom drawer; she is therefore convinced he has begun lying to her. She is also bewildered when she discovers bruises and scratches all over Cole's body after he has what seems like a violent seizure at a birthday party and is shocked to discover pages and pages of notes Cole has written with things like "KILL ALL YOU BASTARDS" on them. After Cole has his seizure he admits to Malcolm that he has been keeping a secret: he has the ability to see dead people and not only do they frighten him but he sees them all the time. Although Malcolm does not believe him – initially putting Cole's claim down to school-age schizophrenia – he soon realizes that Cole is in fact telling the truth. Malcolm discovers that a former patient also had the ability to see dead people. Malcolm's failure to help this child left him at the mercy of these frightening apparitions and subsequently caused this patient, in adulthood, to break into Malcolm's home, shoot Malcolm and then himself some months prior to Malcolm's first meeting with Cole. Upon this discovery, Malcolm encourages Cole to speak to the ghosts and find out why they visit him. When Cole does so, he discovers that the ghosts simply want to tell him about how and why they died. It is this revelation that enables Cole to understand his gift and finally tell his mother what he has kept secret for so long. The film concludes with Malcolm's shock discovery that he is in fact dead – a result of the shooting some months earlier – and he has not realised it because, as Cole told him, ghosts do not know that they are dead, "they only see what they want to see".

On the surface, *The Sixth Sense* is little more than an extremely clever ghost story. Audiences and critics alike were intrigued by the film's clever revelatory 'shock' ending and the film was hailed by some as an instant classic. However, an explicit criticism of single-parent mothers can also be drawn from the subtext of the film. Because Lynne appears intermittently throughout the film, the terror Cole endures is marked by her absence and Malcolm's infiltration of this matriarchal family unit. Once Malcolm enters Cole's life he adopts a fatherly role and assumes parental responsibilities. These include coming to the boy's school after he gets into trouble; attending the school play his mother misses because she is at work; trying to tell Cole a bedtime story; like a parental guardian, accompanying Cole to the home of a recently deceased young girl called Kyra to give her father a message in the form of a video cassette showing her mother deliberately poisoning her. Finally, by discussing his own fears and emotions – something that is traditionally considered a 'feminine' trait – Malcolm's presence also enables Cole to consider his own emotions and fears. Malcolm must adopt these roles because as a working single mum, Lynne must usurp the traditional masculine role within the family unit and, therefore, the subtext of *The Sixth Sense* is quite clear: for the psychological wellbeing and safety of children, both maternal and paternal figures must figure in their lives.

One could argue of course that this is a rational, 'common sense' criticism of single parent families generally and is a dominant view which politicians in particular have made repeatedly: if a single parent must work in order to support the family unit as well as maintaining the domestic sphere of the home and trying to focus their attention upon the

wellbeing of their children, it is inevitably harder to fulfil each role. Therefore, the film simply endorses the need for 'traditional' family set-ups. However, not only does the film appear to endorse the virtues of patriarchal father figures but it is also repeatedly suggested that *women* who bring up children alone are incapable of doing so effectively and are, therefore, 'bad' mothers by playing upon the stereotype of women as the 'weaker' sex. When Lynne is repeatedly confronted with Cole's seemingly irregular behaviour all she can do is either scream, as she does when she re-enters her kitchen having left it momentarily only to discover every cupboard door wide open with Cole sitting calmly at the breakfast table, or (to varying degrees) cry, look bewildered or helpless. Although she discovers the scratches and bruises on Cole's body and actively tries to stop this abuse by calling the mother of a child she believes is causing it, her active stance is ineffective because the audience has already heard one of the ghosts attacking Cole at the birthday party and knows that her actions cannot help him.

Thus, *The Sixth Sense* presents us with an image of single mothers as weak, inferior and powerless; a stereotypical image of 'woman' signified by emotional outbursts whenever they encounter a difficulty or shock of some kind. Whilst there is little doubt that Lynne loves Cole and would do anything to protect him the sympathy we feel for her is subjugated by the suggestion that her despair is caused by the lack of an authoritative patriarchal husband/father figure. The only way that Lynne's matriarchal family unit can be stabilised is through the intervention of such a figure and this comes in the form of Bruce Willis.

The casting of Bruce Willis as the film's central male protagonist is significant because of his associations with 'Reaganite' blockbusters such as *Die Hard* (1988). *Die Hard* signified Willis' transition from comedy actor to fully fledged action-hero film star with his role as John McClane, a New York police officer separated from his wife Holly (Bonnie Bedelia) and his children because she has taken a highly paid, high ranking job at the Japanese-owned Nakatomi Corporation in Los Angeles. Upon arriving at the Corporation's skyscraper McClane wages a one-man war against the terrorists who take control of the building. Susan Jeffords argues that Willis' character not only 'saves the day' with his 'hard-bodied' overtly masculine heroics but also manages to eradicate the feminist interests of his wife. As Jeffords observes, at the start of the film Holly has changed her surname from McClane to her maiden name Generro in order to be successful within the conservative Japanese Corporation. A bitter argument ensues during which McClane accuses his wife of wrecking their marriage. However, by the end of the film, having witnessed her husband defeat the terrorists and save her and the hostages, Holly explicitly defines herself as "Holly McClane", thereby "throwing any remaining feminist sentiments aside, and offering a resounding victory for the New Right/Reagan definition of family" (Jeffords, 1994: 61). Thus, by saving his wife and allowing her to go home to her children, Willis is presented not only as the saviour of Holly's matriarchal family unit, but also as a powerful patriarch whom his wife realises she cannot live without.

In *The Sixth Sense*, Willis plays a similar role as the patriarchal saviour of Lynne's family. Not only is Willis' character a (parental) patriarchal guardian angel watching over Cole but he also 'pulls the strings' of Lynne's family unit because, as she tells Cole, their "little family isn't doing so good". Thus, it is only through Malcolm's guidance that Cole gains the knowledge he requires in order to understand his gift and embrace his mother with the truth that has threatened to tear the family apart. Within the film's narrative logic this event would never have occurred had it not been for Malcolm's 'fatherly' intervention. Therefore, whilst the film does not present a traditional family unit at its

conclusion, it can be seen to advocate the need for them by suggesting that the "greatest threat" to children is the absence of father figures and women's inability to provide stability for their children. In this context, the film's content and title can be interpreted as more than an ironic rebuttal to Hillary Clinton's denunciation of Republican ideals at the beginning of the former Democratic administration.

A conservative reading of *The Sixth Sense*, therefore, suggests that the film's presentation of gender relations and the roles of men and women within the family is informed by a 'rational' male perspective, which supports the need for traditional family units, but is also misogynistic and echoes the sentiments held within much of the dominant political rhetoric in relation to the American 'family values' agenda. Whilst the blame for the absence of Cole's father is not explicitly directed towards his mother, a conservative reading suggests that, like numerous readings of 80s slashers, the film is also preoccupied with the removal of feminist interests. How then can the film be read as in any way subversive, despite the seemingly overt misogyny inherent within its narrative?

Britta Schinzel argues that historically, "the conditions under which modern science and technology developed are shaped through the capitalistic production and a special gender role allocation which allocates the sphere of reproduction to women and the sphere of production to men." (Schinzel, 2000) Schinzel claims that this division has created a "metaphoric" and entirely patriarchal division between female and male perspectives of the world:

The male was equipped with the capability of rationality and logic while in contrast woman received a new female nature in which emotional and moral values dominated. The economic function of women was limited to that of a housewife while the men were promoted with an independent employment sphere and a public space...In modern industrial societies the division of male and female roles have led to the formation of a rigid and function-oriented male rationality typos...In the words of the founders of the Royal Society: "The rational mind is male"...Bacon's ideas were directed towards a science, which was supposed to lead towards sovereignty, domination and superiority of man over nature. This was to save humanity from the irrational powers of nature (and femininity). (Schinzel, 2000)

Therefore, the violation of this binary by single mothers like Lynne can be read into *The Sixth Sense* and, as I will discuss later, *The Others* and *The Ring* as catalysts for horror. However, in all three films, science and rational (male) thinking is shown to be ineffective and equally horrifying for those who use it in order to explain the "ghostly" phenomena that occur throughout the films under discussion here.

During one sequence in *The Sixth Sense*, Lynne cradles Cole and asks him, "Baby, why are you shaking? Cole what's wrong? Oh God please tell me. Oh Please". Rejected and considered a "freak" by his peers and even his tutor at school, Cole fails to answer her pleas because he knows that in a culture dominated by rational science his sixth sense makes him an abnormal *other* and, as he tells Malcolm, he cannot bear the thought of his mother thinking about him in the same way. Cole's fear of rejection is justified to an extent when he confesses his secret to Malcolm. Through the use of rational science, Malcolm immediately diagnoses Cole's pathology as "more severe than initially assessed". In addition to his belief that Cole might be suffering from schizophrenia, Malcolm also states that Cole appears to be suffering from visual hallucinations, might need medication and hospitalisation. Above all,

Malcolm rejects any notion that Cole's confession could actually be true. By listening to the recorded interview he had with the young boy who would eventually kill him in adulthood, Malcolm eventually believes Cole. In doing so, however, he abandons his belief in scientific rationality because he realises that it prevented him from saving this patient and threatens to prevent him from helping Cole. Therefore, the only way Malcolm is able to assist Cole is through the realisation that despite his belief in answers, which can be discovered using rational scientific discourses, his expertise in the field of child psychology cannot offer any explanations, hope or salvation. Thus, although Cole receives the emancipatory knowledge and ability to "communicate" through his contact with Malcolm, he is only able to do so through Malcolm's rejection of the rational 'male' scientific gaze. Indeed, Malcolm's punishment for using this gaze is his death at the hands of the young boy he failed to save in the first place.

Like Malcolm, Lynne's view of the world is shaped by the rational 'male' gaze. When Cole does finally "communicate" with her, Lynne's initial reaction to Cole's revelation is one of fear, stating "Cole you're scaring me...", thereby confirming the very thing Cole has dreaded: that his mother will also consider him a freak. However, once Cole relates a series of events, which took place between Lynne and her own (dead) mother when she was a child, Lynne is also forced to reject the male gaze. In the final sequence in which Lynne and Cole appear, the embrace Cole receives from his mother also symbolises her embrace of 'nonrationality', her severing from the patriarchal gaze and the dissolution of Cole's fears.

Initially, *The Others* appears to have little in common with *The Sixth Sense*. Although it is linked (as is *The Ring*) to *The Sixth Sense* through its surface generic traits – supernatural occurrences, a focus on single mothers and children in peril – where *The Others* differs is in the presentation of what seems to be a monstrous single mother as a central character. *The Others* stars Nicole Kidman as Grace, a housewife living in a mansion on the island of Jersey just after World War II has ended. Although she is married, she lives alone with her two children, Anne (Alakina Mann) and Nicholas (James Bentley), and anxiously awaits news of her husband, a British soldier, who has not returned home. A thick fog has surrounded the house and Grace is completely isolated from the other inhabitants on the island; her employees vanished one night and she is unable to leave the house because her two children suffer from Xeroderma Pigmentosum, a rare allergy to sunlight, and cannot be left alone. When three new domestic servants arrive at the house seeking work, unusual, supernatural phenomena begin to occur; locked doors are mysteriously opened; the house piano plays by itself in the middle of the night; crying and hushed whispers can be heard all over the house and Anne claims to have seen a man, a woman, a young boy named Victor and an old woman, a frightening figure with strange eyes whom Victor claims is a witch. These 'intruders', who are either ghosts or unseen human invaders, have told Anne that the house belongs to them. Upon the discovery of the 'others' however, Grace is forced to accept a shocking truth she has heretofore unacknowledged; that she murdered her own children and then killed herself. Grace has haunted the house in which she and her children once resided and is now owned by Victor and his parents. Grace and her children are in fact the unseen, terrifying *others*.

If you get married, have kids and stay home (alone)...

Because her husband has left to fight in the Second World War, Grace becomes both mother and father to her children and adopts the traditional, gendered 'norms' that those roles entail. Thus, although Grace is not a 'working mum' in the same way Lynne in *The Sixth*

Sense or, as I discuss later, Rachel in *The Ring* are, by blurring traditionally gendered roles and behaviour, Grace violates "the social norms of masculinity and femininity, the social definitions of manliness and womanliness" (Wood, 2002: 26). Grace is at once lovingly maternal and *stereotypically* feminine as an emotional comforter to Nicholas and Anne and yet she is a tough 'man-like', disciplinarian: active, aggressive, self-assertive, organised and powerful – traits, which Robin Wood observes are "culturally associated with masculinity" (Wood, 2002: 26) – in the role of academic teacher, religious councillor (to her children) and ruler of the house.

During an early scene in the film, Anne cryptically informs her new nanny, Mrs. Mills (Fionnula Flanagan), that some time ago (undisclosed in the film) "[Grace] went mad" and until the film's revelatory 'shock' finale this "madness" is repeatedly alluded to but never explained. The first revelation of the film's final act is that Mrs. Mills, Mr. Tuttle the gardener (Eric Sykes) and Lydia the maid (Elaine Cassidy) are in fact dead, a discovery Grace makes at the same time her children discover their graves in the grounds of the house. However, from the audience's privileged position, this revelation is not nearly as shocking as the second climatic ending of the film during which Grace and her children discover that they are also dead. This second revelation is far more disturbing because director Alejandro Amenábar deliberately makes the audience suspicious of the three domestics by showing them holding mysterious discussions about what to do with Grace and the children (although their intentions are ultimately good-they only want Grace and the children to realise they are dead). In contrast, for the majority of the film's running time, Amenabar focuses upon Nicole Kidman's vast array of wide-eyed, startled and fearful facial expressions, repeatedly displayed in close-up as she peers into the dark corners of the mansion's many rooms and combines them with intense bursts of silence in which Kidman's rapid breathing can be heard or with equally sudden eruptions of spine-chilling music, all of which is designed to make the audience fear for Grace and her children's safety. Amenabar therefore successfully exploits Brian De Palma's observation that "women in peril work better in the suspense genre...If you have a haunted house and you have a woman walking around with a candelabrum, you fear more for her than you would for a husky man" (Schoell, 1985: 56). However, at the end of the film when the old lady Anne has described (who is in fact a medium) asks the children, "Is that how she killed you? With a pillow?", a conservative reading of the film suggests that Grace committed these violent acts precisely because she became a single mother through circumstance. Indeed, Grace 'went mad' after she was left all alone to fulfil the dual roles of mother and father and be the sole provider for her children.

At one point in the film, Grace's husband, played by Christopher Eccleston, 'appears' at the house and questions her about what happened on the day she went mad. Grace says to him, "why did you have to go to that stupid war that had nothing to do with us? Your place was here with us, your family". One could argue then that Amenábar elicits sympathy for Grace from the audience but only through her revelation that she could not cope with the rigours of childrearing alone. However, by the end of the film Grace is "made to bear strong associations with the monster, who, like her is defined by its difference from the masculine norm. As [Linda] Williams claims, when the woman looks at the monster, she 'recognises their similar status within patriarchal structures of seeing'." (Jancovich, 2002: 57) When Grace stares at the family, who she believed were the frightening unseen 'others', she is faced with the realisation that she is the monstrous *other*, and the reality of her own monstrous deeds. In light of this final revelation, what appears to be suggested is that if Grace had had her husband, the patriarch (at one point he is described as the "master") and ruler of the house there, she would not have become homicidal, suicidal and committed infanticide. Thus, the

revelatory shock ending of *The Others* acts like a cinematic sledgehammer, establishing the virtues of patriarchal father figures but also suggesting that without their domineering presence, mothers who raise their children alone resort to self-destructive behaviour.

However, as in *The Sixth Sense*, Amenábar's narrative undercuts suggestions of misogyny that threaten to dominate the film's subtext through a sophisticated critique of the rational 'male' gaze. Anne tells Mrs. Mills that, "[Grace] says all this stuff about ghosts is rubbish and then she expects us to believe everything written in the Bible". Therefore, although Grace is a believer in the Christian faith and the 'supernatural' all-encompassing spirit of Christ, her perception of the world is also mediated by the patriarchal, scientific gaze, which rejects any possibility that ghostly phenomena can exist within the realms of the living; it is this rational belief, which prevents Grace from realising the truth.

In her analysis of 1980s slasher films, in particular the *A Nightmare on Elm Street* series, Sarah Trencansky makes the important assertion that "contact with the supernatural [for children in these films] is dangerous" (Trencansky, 2001). Trencansky uses Gary Heba's argument to outline how 1980s slashers are far more subversive than many critics have claimed because they offer a critique upon society's patriarchal, bourgeois ideals and present the oppression metered out to those who reveal alternative views, which challenge the dominant order's supremacy. Heba states that, "nonrationality is not tolerated...as a valid means of interpreting events or solving problems" and, as Trencansky argues, slashers therefore characterise "the heroine's battle as a fight for agency against a monster that inadvertently provokes their independent transformations" (Trencansky, 2001). Robin Wood has commented that "children are the most repressed section of the population...the otherness of children is that, which is repressed within ourselves...what the previous generation repressed in us, we, in turn repress in our children, seeking to mould them into replicas of ourselves..." (Wood, 2002: 28) For Trencansky, children who mention "the repressed underside of society brands them...as insane" and thus, the children in the *Elm Street* series either become replicas of their bourgeois parents or are labelled lunatic delinquents and sent to mental hospitals for treatment (Trencansky, 2001). Therefore, the Final Girl must also battle against a monstrous society of adults, which confines those who contest patriarchal, conceptual norms. For Trencansky then, the male killers in 1980s slashers are both oppressor and liberator; "he eliminates youth even as he forces the youthful heroines to acknowledge his dreaded presence as a rite of passage into individuated selfhood" (Trencansky, 2001).

This critique explicitly links 1980s slashers with *The Sixth Sense*, *The Others* and *The Ring*. Grace personifies Wood's claims about the oppression metered out by parents towards their children. Grace repeatedly attempts to control her children's perceptions of the events occurring around them, and when "nonrational" events occur, such as Anne's conversation with Victor, Grace automatically dismisses her claims and tells her "You're lying" and that "Children who don't tell the truth end up in limbo." Grace punishes Anne for these assertions by forcing her to read passages from the bible. Mrs. Mills however, tells Anne that Grace will not believe her because "there are things [Grace] doesn't want to hear, she only believes in what she was taught", and whereas Cole in *The Sixth Sense* fears rejection and oppression by his mother, Anne endures Grace's oppression and is punished for expressing "strange ideas". However, through some form of contact with the supernatural and the acceptance of it, Grace and her children, like Cole, Lynne and Malcolm, are provoked into having independent transformations of perspective outside patriarchal frameworks.

In *The Others* this is made explicit through the sophisticated use of the fog which surrounds the house and which Amenabar uses as a metaphor for Grace's 'blind' belief in the rational that effectively screens her from the truth she is eventually forced to acknowledge. Like Malcolm, up to this point she has only seen what she has wanted to see and it is only when she is faced with the reality of her situation and she accepts the truth that the fog dissipates. Thus, although the film appears to display a conservative, misogynistic narrative, the real monster isn't Grace at all but the male gaze itself. While this might seem like a celebrational rejection, it fails to address Grace's murder of her two children. However, just as Grace and the audience are forced to review the events that lead up to the moment of revelation in the film, so too can Grace's murderous behaviour be reviewed and regarded as an emancipatory act. In the closing moments of the film Anne dances in the sunlight for the first time, something she was unable to do in life, whilst Grace rejects her belief in 'the rational' and will no longer oppress Anne for expressing alternative ideas that counter patriarchal conceptual norms.

What is also clear from the two narratives discussed is that the two films' common critique of patriarchy and its dominant gaze extends to rational discourses, including those which proclaim the virtues of patriarchal father figures yet demonise single mothers or women who step out of *traditional* roles. According to Mark Jancovich, Robin Wood claims that:

the fantastical nature of many horror plots can be read not as escapism, but as an attempt to deal with repressed materials...In other words, [Wood argues that] rather than escapism, fantasy tries to deal with the very materials that rational 'realist' discourse exists to repress and it therefore offers a potentially subversive critique of the social world. (Jancovich, 2002: 21)

Indeed, Wood goes on to claim that in a patriarchal culture, alternative ideologies – those, which are not fundamentally linked to 'rational', heterosexual, patriarchal discourses – must be rejected in order to ensure the continuation of the dominant order (Wood, 2002: 25). However, Wood claims that "the true subject of the horror genre is the struggle for recognition of all that our civilization represses or oppresses" (Wood, 2002: 28). In both films, where an 'other' of some kind (ghosts/the supernatural) is initially denied through the male gaze and then acknowledged, this represents a critique upon the same male gaze that champions patriarchs, yet demonises women through the suggestion that they cannot raise children successfully *and* alone.

This is explicitly articulated in *The Sixth Sense*. Prior to Malcolm's first meeting with Cole, close-up shots of the notes he has already made about the boy show that Malcolm believes that Cole has a possible "mood disorder" and that his parents are divorced. From this introductory sequence director M. Night Shyamalan is encouraging his audience to share Malcolm's 'rational' view (but only to categorically reject it), which it is intoned is also Malcolm's: that Cole's "disorder" and his parents divorce are related and, like so much political rhetoric on the issue, that children who grow up without fathers are prone to abnormal behaviour and are, therefore, a threat to the continuation and stability of the dominant order. Along with the rejection of his rational, scientific beliefs however, Malcolm is also forced to reject the notion that "mood disorders" in children from broken homes are automatically linked to divorces and so forth or that mothers who raise their children alone are 'bad' mothers – a notion he must consider when, prior to Cole's revelations about his sixth sense, Malcolm attends Lynne's interview by doctors who question her about the bruising on Cole's body. Malcolm's response to the doctor's assertion at this point in the narrative is

simply to gasp "Oh man". Further, it is made quite clear that it is not Lynne's two jobs, which drives a wedge between her and her son, but rather the gaze Cole fears his mother will use to judge him. In *The Others*, the notion that children who are brought up in traditional family setups are automatically 'better off' in some way is also discarded. In one scene, Nicholas reads a lesson book that Grace has told him to learn. The chapter she has told him to read, entitled "The House and the Family", informs him that "The family is usually made up of parents" and is accompanied by a 'cosy' traditional sketch of a father reading a newspaper, a mother serving food (in apparent domestic bliss) and children playing with toys on the floor.

Although many critics claimed *The Others* stylistic elements reflected earlier American horror trends, harking back in particular to the gothic horrors of the 1930s, the film is set in Jersey. However, this particular piece of rhetoric, concerning what constitutes a 'normal' family unit, enables the film to be read as a comment upon the 'family values' issue so prevalent in contemporary American culture. The closing moments of the film challenge the 'blissful' assertion implied by the book Nicholas reads, which suggests an idealised perfection of the stereotypically 'normal' happy family and an image that is typified by the term 'the all-American family'. Even if Nicholas and Anne had had their father in attendance, his presence could not possibly have afforded them the freedom they experience under the seemingly monstrous care of Grace. Therefore, in the same way 'Final Girls' in the slasher films Trencansky discusses are afforded independent transformations through their contact with the 'supernatural', the emancipatory acknowledgement of the supernatural/other by Lynne and Grace also privileges a "maternal order in opposition to the destructive elements of patriarchy" (Erens, 1996: 354). As Trencansky notes "nonrationality outside of safe binary codes such as 'mad/sane; dangerous/harmless; normal/abnormal' are traditionally coded 'feminine'." (Trencansky, 2001: 9) *The Ring* differs somewhat from *The Sixth Sense* and *The Others* because it offers no such celebration for its central female protagonist.

And if you don't get married but have children and work outside the home...

In *The Ring*, a remake of the Japanese horror blockbuster *Ringu* (1998), Rachel Keller (Naomi Watts) is an unmarried single mother living in Seattle and working as a journalist. After the mysterious death of Katie (Amber Tamblyn), her son's babysitter, Rachel begins an investigation into her death and the death of her three friends, all of whom spent a vacation together at an isolated guesthouse. Through her enquiries, Rachel discovers that the four victims watched a videocassette and after viewing it they received a mysterious phone-call from a girl who told them they had seven days to live. Viewing the tape for herself, Rachel receives a similar phone-call and is pitted in a race against time to unravel the mystery of the ring and save herself, her son and the father of her son, both of whom she has inadvertently placed in danger by allowing them to view the tape as well.

If the films under discussion in this paper were read straightforwardly as conservative tracts and nothing more, the catalyst for horror stems from the blurring of traditionally gendered norms these women embody within their roles as mothers who raise their children alone. Kathleen Rowe argues that "ideology holds that the 'well adjusted' woman has what Hélène Cixous has described as 'divine composure. She is silent, static, invisible 'composed' and 'divinely' apart from the hurly-burly of life, process and social power.'" (Rowe, 1995: 31) In *The Ring*, Watts' character does not adhere to the desired (patriarchal) ideal of 'woman'. As a journalist, she is neither static nor invisible and certainly not apart from the 'hurly-burly' of social life. Indeed, her chosen occupation requires her visible existence within the public sphere, to vociferously ask questions and investigate. It is her very

existence within the public sphere then, which causes her to watch the videocassette and jeopardise her own life. However, one could also argue that a criticism of women who blur the lines between work (traditionally the 'male' sphere) and domesticity (the 'female' sphere) can be extracted from the film when Rachel brings the videocassette home with her. By bringing the public sphere (her work) into the domestic sphere of the home, Rachel inadvertently jeopardises the lives of her son and the father of her son by allowing them to have access to the tape, accidentally in the first instance and consciously in the second.

Rachel's investigation leads her to the discovery that the cassette has been made by a dead girl called Samara (Daveigh Chase), a psychic child who had the ability to project horrifying images into the minds of those she came into contact with. Because of this power, Samara's mother threw her down a well but the girl survived for just seven days. By placing her family in danger, Rachel allies herself with the dead girl perpetrating these deaths, and also aligns herself with Samara's mother because Rachel also potentially (albeit inadvertently) sentences her child to death by allowing him to have access to the tape. Thus, Rachel is also made to bear strong associations with the monstrous *other*. Rachel's race to unravel the mystery becomes an attempt to extricate herself from that association with both monstrous mother and daughter; if she can solve the disappearance of the dead girl, find her body and lay her to rest peacefully, she can resolve her failure to protect her own child and family unit.

Despite solving the mystery, Noah, the father of Rachel's son Aidan, is killed by Samara and Rachel discovers that it is only because she made a copy of the tape and showed it to him that she managed to avoid Samara's wrath. Therefore, her son's safety can only be secured through the production of another cassette and allowing it to be viewed by someone else. The final scene in the film shows Rachel and her son making another copy with that intention. The film concludes with Aidan asking, "What about the person we show it to? What happens to them?" As the final credits begin to roll Rachel fails to answer this question and she does not need to because the audience has already witnessed the horrifying results of Samara's rage. A conservative reading of the film suggests that Rachel's punishment for entering the public sphere is an enforcement of the association with the monstrous other. If she had never entered the public sphere and viewed the cassette in the first place, she would not have inadvertently caused Noah's death, nor would she have to potentially cause the death of another. Rachel would, perhaps, have been better off staying at home.

When Rachel watches the tape for the first time though she does not believe that the simple viewing of a cassette will harm her because in a world dominated by rational science such a claim seems absurd. Indeed at the start of the film, when Becca tells Katie about the deadly effects the tape can cause, it is during a conversation about 'urban legends' (Newman, 2003: 49). However, once Rachel views the cassette she is forced, in much the same way Lynne and Grace are, to acknowledge a 'nonrational truth'. Rachel quickly discovers that a belief in the rational cannot save her as her perception of what can and cannot rationally happen begins to collapse as images of herself in photographs warp for example, and a paused image of a fly on a television screen can be brought into the 'real' world. Although Rachel does adopt a 'nonrational' perspective outside the boundaries of the rational male gaze, the film's conclusion does enable the film to read conservatively. However, because the film's ending is ambiguous – it does not explicitly suggest Rachel will show the cassette to anyone else – her punishment and the vengeance Samara wreaks upon those who view the tape can also be read as a reaction against the repression metered out to *others* in society who fail to conform.

In *The Ring*, we learn that Samara's parents attempted to repress her power through psychiatry and by placing her in a hospital. Samara was also oppressed by her parents because they kept her in a barn, isolated and alone, and was eventually thrown down a well. Therefore, Samara's rage is marked by her parent's attempted repression and oppression. The videocassette then becomes a tool which Samara exploits in order to assert her 'otherness' and the existence of her supernatural powers; those who dismiss her will die. Thus, although the ending of the film suggests that Rachel must show the cassette to someone else in order for her son to live, it does not mean that she will have necessarily assisted Samara in the death of that person. Rachel survived because she showed the cassette to Noah who eventually believed in Samara's powers; his death then would have been prevented if he had made a copy and showed it to someone else and then that person showing it to someone else and so on. In doing so, Samara can declare her existence but at the same time eradicate society's oppressive "conceptual categories" (Carroll, 1990: 185) that are governed by the male gaze. Provided her existence is acknowledged (the evidence of which can be found in the warping of photographic images taken by those who view the cassette) no one has to die. Samara's anger is driven by the desire to breakdown the patriarchal gaze, to shatter it absolutely. Thus, the 'problem' Samara's existence poses can only be dealt with through a categorical acknowledgement of the problem her existence poses. In this way, Samara's seemingly invincible monstrosity is akin to that of the male killers in the 1980s slashers Trencansky discusses. Trencansky uses Cixous' assertion that "when 'The Repressed' of their culture and their society come back, it is an explosive return, which is absolutely shattering, staggering, overturning, with a force never let loose before" in her analysis of the invincible male aggressors in 1980s slashers (Cixous cited in Trencansky, 2001). Like Freddy and Jason, Samara will continue to return, "unless the very nature of society is transformed and authority definitively undermined" (Trencansky, 2001). Samara uses the video cassette rather like a piece of chain mail, spreading the word as it were of her 'otherness' and the existence of that which is rejected or suppressed in order to guarantee the continuation of the dominant patriarchal order. Rachel is one link in this chain and it is her task to ensure the 'other' is recognised and acknowledged; this is her punishment for placing her faith in the male gaze.

In conclusion, while these latest additions to the horror canon can be used as evidence that the genre continues to veer towards the removal of feminist ideals and blatant misogyny, these claims are moderated by a recurring critique of patriarchy and its oppressive conceptual categories which reject *any* alternatives to the status quo. Regardless of the shifts in sub-genres and the political eras in which "ghost horrors" or indeed slashers have been produced, they are clearly not anti-women; rather, they are pro-*otherness*. As these new additions continue to make quite clear, patriarchy and patriarchal ways of seeing might well be "the greatest threat" to our future.

Notes

[1] Hillary Clinton's reference about an unmarried woman, working and raising a child alone getting into trouble with the Vice President was a humorous "swipe" at Dan Quayle, who criticised the fictional TV character Murphy Brown for having a child out of wedlock (Smith, 2002: 77-78).

[2] Worth exploring is the latest slew of slashers, released during the current Bush Jr. administration. It is interesting that the return of a Republican presidency coincides with the resurgence of films featuring the killers from Reagan era slashers and crucially, the return of

their invincible powers. Jason from the *Friday the Thirteenth* series was resurrected in *Jason X* (2002) and Michael Myers (who returned three times during the 1980s) was resurrected in the aptly titled *Halloween: Resurrection* (2002). However, this does not detract from the overt conclusiveness of these characters' 'final' instalments during the Clinton era. *Jason X* simply ignores the fact that Jason went to Hell in 1993 and can therefore be seen as separate from the narrative flow of the 8 previous instalments in which he is the killer. In *Halloween: Resurrection*, Myers returns because the person Laurie thought she was decapitating in *Halloween H20: 20 Years Later* was in fact an innocent bystander who Myers covered with his mask. This seems genuinely absurd considering the bystander appears to have the same indestructible powers Myers has (prior to his decapitation) and there is no suggestion whatsoever that this switch takes place. *Resurrection* has been described by many critics as illogical and ridiculous in light of *H20's* finale and simply a lame excuse to continue cashing in on the series. Regardless, *H20* stands alone as a film in this series with definitive closure. During the mid-1990s, Freddy Krueger also returned in *Wes Craven's New Nightmare* (1994) but this was also a radical departure from the series that ended in 1991. Freddy returned again (along with his invincibility and the narrative flow of the series, minus his previous demise) in the eagerly anticipated and commercially successful *Freddy vs. Jason* (2003). The nightmare is far from over...

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