

The Patriarchal Construction of Hysteria: Examining the Possessed Woman in the *Paranormal Activity* Franchise

Stuart M. Joy

Abstract

This article contends that despite the resurrection recently seen among popular horror genres, a number of concerns arguably remain consistent including problematic notions about the home, marriage and the family. In these films, normality is invariably destabilized by the figure of the monster that is often coded as the Other.¹ In a more precise sense, the conflict between normality and the Other constitutes an expression of Western society's fear of difference. In the American horror film, it is often the case that this encounter between normality and the Other is communicated via the social and historical construction of gender identity within Western society. In particular, these films are frequently concerned with femininity's uncomfortable position within patriarchal structures of dominance.² This article will examine the *Paranormal Activity* (Oren Peli, 2007, ongoing) franchise with reference to gendered representations within the horror genre (and ensuing subcategories of the genre) with specific focus on hysteria and the domestic space. Furthermore, I locate the female protagonists of the series as part of the horror genre's wider anxieties surrounding the position of women within the patriarchal order and psychological understandings of hysteria. The franchise came about as a result of the surprising success of the original made in 2007. Produced for \$15,000, *Paranormal Activity* went on to gross over \$107,000,000 worldwide. Since then, the films have become a regular part of the Halloween season with one released consecutively for the past two years and a fourth scheduled for 2012. Unlike many critics, I consider the *Paranormal Activity* franchise as a complex metaphor for Freud's theory of hysteria. In particular, I argue that the series engages with what Andrew Britton has labelled the 'Freudian-Feminist melodrama.'³

Key Words:

Horror, domestic space, *Paranormal Activity*, Freud, gender, hysteria.

The horror genre's geographical shift from the European castles of the Carpathian Mountains to the suburban houses of America has been well documented as part of scholarly discourse.⁴ The films discussed in this context include *The Last House on The Left* (Wes Craven, 1972), *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (Tobe Hooper, 1974) and *Halloween* (John Carpenter, 1978), all of which eschewed the foreign space in favour of the unsettlingly familiar domestic space. Indeed, directors such as Wes Craven, George Romero and Tobe Hooper are perhaps responsible for the near inclusive transference drawing upon an increasingly traumatised American society impacted by the atrocities of the Vietnam War, the escalating economic recession and a series of high-profile political scandals and assassinations. Such directors may have aimed to deconstruct the underlying failure of the post-World War II myth of the American dream by examining the disintegration of the family unit as a metaphor for the fragility of American society.⁵ In these films, normality is invariably destabilised by the figure of the monster that is often

coded as the Other.⁶ In a more precise sense, the conflict between normality and the Other, whether that may be social, political, sexual or repressed desires, constitutes an expression of Western society's fear of difference. In the American horror film, it is often the case that this encounter between normality and the Other is communicated via the social and historical construction of gender identity within Western society. In particular, these films are frequently concerned with femininity's uncomfortable position within patriarchy.⁷

Ranging from the commercially successful haunted-house trilogy, *Paranormal Activity* (Oren Peli, 2007 – on-going) to the occult based horror, *The House of the Devil* (Ti West, 2009), as well as child-possession in *Orphan* (Jaume Collet-Serra, 2009) and *Insidious* (James Wan, 2010), these recent explorations of the genre by means of the domestic space arguably reflect similar concerns represented by their cinematic predecessors about the problematic notions of the home, marriage, family and the child. Specifically, the genre's focus on challenging such complacencies can be seen to be directly associated with the postmodern inversion of authenticity, surrendering to various modes of ironic detachment invoking Jean-François Lyotard's notion of the 'postmodern condition.'⁸

This article will examine the *Paranormal Activity* franchise with specific reference to gendered representations within the context of hysteria and the domestic space. I locate the female protagonists of the series as part of the horror genre's wider anxieties surrounding the position of women within the patriarchal order and psychological understandings of hysteria. Specifically, I argue that the franchise critiques typical gender roles by exposing the familiar patriarchal and negative stereotypes of female gender identity within the domestic space that so often characterise texts produced as part of the horror genre. In addition, this article will build on James MacDowell's analysis of the series provided in a post to *The Lesser Feat Blog* arguing that these films engage with what Andrew Britton has labelled the 'Freudian-Feminist Melodrama.'⁹

The *Paranormal Activity* franchise came about as a result of the surprising success of the original made in 2007. Produced for \$15,000, the film went on to gross over \$107,000,000 worldwide.¹⁰ Since then, the films have become a regular part of the Halloween season with one released consecutively for the past two years and a fourth scheduled for 2012.¹¹ A plot synopsis of the series fails to capture the unnerving treatment of the narrative and the shock of the events that unfold. However, a brief summary of the basic plot structure of the series with a few observations on spectatorial experience and cinematic style may be a helpful introduction.

To begin with, the three *Paranormal Activity* films comprise an interconnected and progressive narrative. The trilogy largely maintains a linear (albeit inverted) trajectory, beginning in 2006 and temporarily concluding in 1988. Each film is set within the confines of a suburban home and the premise centres on a couple (and subsequently a family) that become increasingly disturbed by a nightly demonic presence that threatens the safety of their house.

In terms of its visual and narrative elements, the *Paranormal Activity* series engages with the stylistic techniques of cinematic realism and purports to be documentary in nature blending the codes of realism and horror. Consequently, the series' particular stylistic approach constructs the franchise as a vehicle for visual horror powered by the blurred lines between fiction and documentary. Indeed, the series revels in a clear effort to engage with the spectator's imagination that is paradoxically framed by the text's position as an unmediated reality in the form of found footage. Without any form of conventional opening or closing credits, the footage is presented as if it had been discovered after the event. Consequently, the film sustains suspense with a minimal narrative emphasizing the

repetition and initial banality of the protagonists' days and nights in the house. The domestic setting (a split-level suburban home) is central to communicating the series' sense of terror and dread as the franchise is virtually stripped of the stylistic norms of both camera positioning and movement, lighting, and sound commonly associated with the many sub-divisions of the horror genre. However, the series remains entirely within the audience's genre-bound expectations of affective experience. While the series retains thematic principles that identify it as part of the horror genre (including a fear of the unknown and the return of the repressed), the *Paranormal Activity* franchise is generically hybrid fusing with the melodramatic themes of the classic Hollywood woman's film and the female gothic cycle. In particular, the series examines a complex understanding of gender identity that reflects the problematic position of women in relation to patriarchy, a theme that is commonly associated with both the melodrama and the female gothic cycle. As Robert Lang succinctly observes,

The dominant ideology asserts that, whether or not a woman is at the centre of the narrative, what is at stake in the melodrama will be a question of identity – of a failure to be masculine, or a failure to accept the repressive, subjectivity-denying terms of patriarchal femininity. Patriarchy, it should be reiterated, understands femininity as a failure to be masculine.¹²

A number of critics have located the female gothic cycle within the broader context of melodrama.¹³ Particularly, as Juliann Fleenor notes, the female gothic cycle is similarly characterised by the contradictory position of women in relation to the ideological exertion of patriarchal order. Fleenor comments that,

The Gothic is a form created by dichotomies and the subsequent tensions caused by the dialectic between the patriarchal society, the woman's role, and the contradictions and limitations inherent in both.¹⁴

Clearly the problematic nature of patriarchal capitalist culture presented as part of these two genres raises significant concerns about the representation of women, specifically, in that the portrayal of female empowerment is frequently countered by the spectacle of the woman's victimization in response to male dominance. The two genres are thus paradoxically framed between the opposing extremes of female power and an equal display of physical vulnerability and psychological weakness.

It is within the generic boundaries of melodrama and the female gothic cycle that Andrew Britton articulates a comprehensive expression for both terms distinguished by a specific focus on a heterosexual relationship within the troubled domestic space. Building on critical frameworks outlined by Andrea S. Walsh (1986), Mary Anne Doane (1987), and Thomas Elsaesser (1987) Britton extends the scope of melodrama and the female gothic cycle to include an undercurrent of Freudian connotations. In categorising several of the structural themes of the cycle, Britton identifies films such as *Rebecca* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1940), *Gaslight* (George Cukor, 1944) and *Secret beyond the Door* (Fritz Lang, 1947) as part of a 'Freudian-feminist cycle' located within the Freudian-Feminist Melodrama.¹⁵ Although the visual style of the *Paranormal Activity* franchise is unmistakably different from those films that Britton identifies, it is possible to situate the franchise within the wider context of the Freudian-Feminist Melodrama. In particular, I argue the films' thematic focus on the couple's relationship within the domestic space indicates a conscious

commentary on issues surrounding gender identity rooted in Freudian theories of hysteria and repression.

Britton construes the Freudian-feminist melodrama as being primarily fixated on a female protagonist who is married to a domineering husband, and who (for reasons that vary dependent upon the film) comes to feel hysterical, endangered and imprisoned in both her relationship and the marital home. Britton remarks:

From the heroine's point of view, the theme of the Freudian-feminist cycle can be expressed in the formula "compulsory heterosexuality as nightmare." The husband ... aspires to impose the patriarchal organization of sexual difference around the phallus as the signifier of that difference, and the films use the metaphor of persecution to identify the husband's project with a process of systematic, socially organized, and socially legitimated disempowerment. The effect of the process is the heroine's confinement to the house, where a wife ought naturally to be and where her predicament is therefore invisible.¹⁶

The identification of women in relation to difference corresponds to the Freudian-feminist melodrama's emphasis on the oppression of female gender identity through male dominance. Masculinity, as seen in the Freudian-feminist melodrama, is driven by a process of domination motivated by lack and castration anxieties which underlies the narrative and mise-en-scene. Referring to the Freudian-feminist melodrama as the 'paranoid woman's film', Susan Hayward argues that a particular emphasis is placed on the woman's fear of her husband and the master bedroom.¹⁷ The complex nature of this fear emerges from a male fantasy surrounding the continued subordination of women as a way of maintaining the patriarchal order of the household. She writes,

The wife fears that her husband has murderous intentions However, because the actual narrative assumes that this fear is based in female frigidity, fear of sex or even rape, it is evidently a male fantasy that is up on screen.¹⁸

According to Hayward, these films exhibit the repression or removal of female desire as part of the patriarchal reassertion of the woman's role within the household.¹⁹

For Andrew Britton, the Freudian-feminist melodrama cycle is noteworthy for the representation of the marital bedroom. Significantly, then, the intimacy and privacy of the bedroom is signalled to be the site of unequal power relations and the assertion of masculine dominance. Britton states, 'in the Freudian-feminist melodrama, with magnificent symbolic logic, the marriage bed becomes the site of the heroine's ultimate terror and humiliation and of the displacement of her sexuality into hysteria.'²⁰ In *Paranormal Activity*, the recurring association of Katie's (Katie Featherstone) fear and hysteria is aligned with the house, specifically, the site of the aptly named master bedroom as the primary site of heterosexual male power. The underlying fear is generated perhaps as a result of the unequal power relations communicated via the threat of male domination within the bedroom. In accordance with Britton's notes on the Freudian-feminist melodrama, there is a conscious connection between male dominance and phallic power that is central to the subjugation of women in response to fears of castration and impotence. He comments:

It rapidly transpires that the heroine, too, unbeknownst to herself, has been constructed as the object of a fantasy which bears no relation whatever to hers, and which requires her to expiate her husband's profound conviction of his impotence by submitting to a corresponding project of domination.²¹

In *Paranormal Activity*, Katie's partner Micah (Micah Sloat) is shown to be deeply threatened by his inability to control the events within the confines of the master bedroom and more widely, his own house. His inability to maintain control betrays assumptions of ownership and mastery that subsequently result in an extended process of domination over Katie that is putatively presented as attempts to resolve Katie's hysterical response. He remarks, 'This is my house, you're my girlfriend. I'm gonna fucking solve the problem.' Micah's excessive determination to discover the source of the haunting complies with the traditional masculine image of men as powerful providers and protectors. Subsequently, feminine subordination is a necessary and deliberate concession in response to an external threat. In her article, *The Logic of Masculinist Protection: Reflections on the Current Security State*, Iris Marion Young explores how protection and domination are linked concluding that,

She happily looks up to him with gratitude for his manliness and admiration for his willingness to face the dangers of the world for her sake...It is only fitting that she should minister to his needs and obey his dictates.²²

This notion is expressively demonstrated in one sequence that displays Katie's willingness to satisfy Micah's repeated requests for sex despite his lack of interest in her sexual desires.

During the sequence, Katie agrees to have sex with Micah on the condition that he turns the camera off. He reluctantly agrees stating that he'll switch it off for ten minutes leading Katie to sarcastically remark on what she considers to be the short duration of their planned intercourse. She remarks, 'Ten minutes, huh?' To which Micah responds, 'That's all I need, I don't know about you.' Despite Micah's somewhat selfish and ignorant attitude toward his partner's sexual desires and fulfilment, Katie dutifully has sex with him causing a temporary break in the footage.²³ When considered in the context of patriarchal power, Micah's statement aptly encapsulates women's internalised beliefs about the priority of male sexual gratification over female pleasure.²⁴ In this instance, Katie has sex with Micah despite his uncompromising position that the intercourse will finish when he is satisfied as opposed to when she achieved an orgasm. As the film progresses and Micah's failure to adequately protect his partner becomes more overt, Katie's fear of the master bedroom becomes increasingly explicit as the threat of domination becomes more tangible in response to Micah's fear of inadequacy. At this point, I believe a discussion of Freud's theory of hysteria is relevant to the depiction of women within the *Paranormal Activity* franchise. Although it will not be possible here to discuss the complexities of hysteria at length, I would like to give a brief outline of the disorder in so far as it is relevant to the *Paranormal Activity* franchise.

The primary association of hysteria with women has a documented history dating back to references from Hippocrates (b.460 BC) that described hysteria as a uterine disease caused by sexual deprivation.²⁵ The consensus that hysteria was largely a female disorder was connected to symptoms thought to define femininity, such as a lack of emotional

control and irrational behaviour, a common discourse during the Enlightenment period.²⁶ Despite the gradual rejection of the idea of the wandering womb as the source of hysteria physicians largely maintained that behaviour symptomatic of hysteria was linked to a pathological sexuality separated from the requirements of reproduction.²⁷ In either case, the cure for hysteria involved the intervention of a physician to treat the ailment through induced orgasms, the recommendation of pregnancy or invasive surgical operations.

Favouring a different approach, Sigmund Freud was inspired by Jean-Martin Charcot's study of hysterics at the Salpêtrière hospital in 1890. Charcot considered hysteria to be a form of mental deterioration emphasising the psychological nature of physical symptoms such as paralysis, fainting and convulsions.²⁸ Such symptoms, he argued, could be stimulated and treated with the aid of hypnotic suggestions.²⁹ Like Charcot, Freud employed hypnosis as a means of understanding hysterical illness. Alongside Josef Breuer, he used hypnosis in order to encourage patients to verbalise their dreams, memories and desires; a process that became referred to as the 'talking cure', or to use Freud's own terminology, 'the cathartic method.'³⁰ These investigations revealed a common pattern of prior traumatic experience with a particular emphasis on the role of sexuality in neurosis. As a result, Freud theorised that hysteria was a feminine configuration of madness due to repressed sexual desires or a similarly repressed sexual trauma in the patient's past.³¹ Although he later revised these ideas, Freud's 'seduction theory' initially communicated a sexual aetiology of hysteria that would develop alongside his preliminary understanding of the unconscious and repression, or rather the return of the repressed.

For Freud, the return of the repressed can be understood as the intrusion of an unconscious element, upon consciousness, which has repeatedly resisted integration into existing mental schemes.³² By virtue of repression, unconscious associations are displaced from pre-conscious and conscious thought due to a number of potential psychological factors such as denial and dissociation. However, during the return of the repressed, the unconscious element is unwillingly re-appropriated into conscious thought through a continuing process of irruption or in response to a particular external stimulus.³³

In *Paranormal Activity*, the return of the repressed is demonstrated both symbolically and structurally in the form of the demonic presence. Explicitly, if we consider the demon as a literal manifestation of a repressed memory in line with Freud's early opinions about hysteria, the *Paranormal Activity* franchise can be reformulated to be understood as a metaphor for the two sisters attempting to deal with the repressed memories of childhood sexual abuse. For example, in the first and second film respectively, Katie and her sister Kristi (Sprague Grayden) are positioned as victims of adolescent sexual abuse through Kristi's inability to accurately remember the traumatic events that occurred as they were growing up together and Katie's reluctance to discuss them at all. In a conversation between the two, Kristi says, 'I don't remember anything; I just remember being scared all the time.' To which Katie responds:

I remember you crying all the time, I remember you couldn't sleep and you got anxiety attacks, I remember you stopped talking for months...you need to leave this alone, you need to ignore it.

Debatably then, the franchise broadly adopts a Freudian understanding, linking childhood sexual abuse and repression to hysteria. Whilst such a theory may seem tenuous at best, consider, for example, the Freudian understanding of repression and hysteria in line with the sexual meaning of penetration in demonic possession.

According to Yoram Bilu, the significance of penetration in spiritual possession is more convincingly understood when the penetrator and penetrated are aligned with those in a standard heterosexual act.³⁴ In the first film, Katie and Micah initially label the entity 'it'. However, as the film progresses, references to 'it' increasingly become 'him' culminating in Katie's gender specific statement that, 'I just felt him breathing...He was right there.' Despite several similar references to the demon as a gendered entity in *Paranormal Activity 2* (Tod Williams, 2010), it is only in the third film that the demon is attributed the name Toby and revealed explicitly to be a male figure.³⁵ Indeed, throughout the franchise it is only the female figures that are possessed by the demon suggesting that it represents the oppressive power of patriarchal masculinity.³⁶ This revelation acquires particular significance when considered in relation to Freud's theory linking hysteria to child abuse. In particular, it is especially poignant when framed in the context of a plot point that sees Kristi, aged five, being forced into agreeing to marry Toby (and purportedly bear him a son) in order to temporarily protect her older sibling.³⁷

In the *Paranormal Activity* franchise, the demon's ability to enter and manipulate the female body communicates hysteria in relation to a problem of difference in phallic terms. At once, both Katie and Kristi are positioned as liminal characters that embody a male and female identity as a result of the possession. In essence, these characters effectively cross traditional male/female gender boundaries. In this way, the narrative of the *Paranormal Activity* franchise positions the possessed woman as hysterical as she represents a threat to stable gender identities. More precisely, Katie is subject to possession by the demon due to 'woman's inherent weakness and susceptibility to evil' resulting in the expression of the internal gender conflict as external symptoms of hysteria.³⁸ Katie is able to adopt a fluid gender identity thus violating her prescribed gender role, the outcome of which resists patriarchal society as a form of oppression. For example, if we consider the traditional understandings of gender identity within the discourse of patriarchal society, it is possible to see how opposing genders are commonly defined in relation to a prescribed power dynamic that privileges the male over the female. As such, the fluidity of gender roles simultaneously undermines and poses a direct threat to patriarchal society.

In *The Monstrous Feminine*, Barbara Creed explores how gender, specifically the feminine, has been represented in relation to sexual difference and castration anxieties within the horror genre.³⁹ Contrary to Freud's theory of castration, Creed argues that the terror attributed to the representation of woman as monstrous can be understood in relation to man's fears of the woman as castrator, rather than as castrated. The image of the monstrous woman as castrator is coded as a threat to male power as she disrupts the masculine/feminine gender binary of active/passive associations. Creed comments, 'The presence of the monstrous-feminine in the popular horror film speaks to us more about male fears than about female desire or feminine subjectivity.'⁴⁰ According to Creed, any deviation from prescribed feminine gender performance is rendered monstrous.

The real threat to male identity emerges from the active association with masculinity that the figure of the castrating woman embodies. Endowed with imaginary powers of castration, she is devalued and despised within patriarchal structures as part of an effort to re-establish the active/passive binary of male/female dominance. In *Paranormal Activity*, the film makes the affinity between male anxiety and the castrating woman clear. Despite having been constructed largely as a victim throughout the film, in the final act, Katie's repressed female energy finally erupts as she visibly becomes the monstrous-feminine in order to punish the patriarchal male.

During the concluding sequence, Katie, who has acquired supernatural strength as a result of the possession, kills Micah and subsequently throws his corpse at the camera. As

she approaches his dead body, the gaze becomes overtly foregrounded as she acknowledges the presence of an implied spectator with a wry smile before attacking the camera causing an abrupt end to the film. In this instance, the cinematic representation of looking and being looked at is directly acknowledged. In particular, as the camera is not controlled by a character within the diegesis, the nature of the cinematic apparatus is exposed as primarily voyeuristic. Consequently, in this moment, the traditional relationship between the spectator and the cinematic screen is ruptured as the illusory nature of cinema is highlighted revealing the construction of the film as a text.

Throughout the film, the gaze is foregrounded through the use of the POV shot. The POV shot, which typically reflects the perspective of the protagonist, represents not only the gaze but the construction of the gaze, establishing subject and object. Micah's gaze at Katie, an objectified woman, is also the direct gaze of the camera and the gaze of the spectator. In the film's opening few scenes, the camera's gaze eroticises Katie on a number of occasions unmistakably establishing Micah as the predominant purveyor of the look. Specifically, Micah indulges in a form of fetishization as he fragments her body using the camera's gaze to focus his sexual desire on both her feet and bottom. According to Freud, fetishization is a process whereby the male subject is able to allay castration anxieties by maintaining a sense of control and dominance through the act of displacement. The woman's body, lacking the penis, signifies the threat of castration; consequently the absent penis is substituted by another part of the body, an object that can be controlled by the male.⁴¹ Aligned with the way women are framed within the context of the male gaze, the isolation of Micah's desires on specific parts of Katie's body works further to objectify her, thus positioning her as less of a threat allaying castration anxieties.

In their critique of patriarchal authority, several feminist theorists often focus on the gaze in relation to male systems of objectification and control.⁴² According to Douglas E. Hall, such connotations of objectification, mastery, ownership, exploitation and voyeurism connected with the male gaze, relate to the inherent distribution of patriarchal power which inscribes women as passive objects. He states:

The Freudian phallic gaze [which] works to fix its subject; it is one that pre-empts, encompasses, subsumes, and controls, enforcing and reinforcing male power by precluding all alternate visions, claiming insight and suggesting, indeed insisting upon mastery.⁴³

From this perspective, the controlling aspects of the male gaze become even more apparent when considered in relation to Katie's pseudo-sexual comments upon first seeing the camera. She remarks, 'this is big and impressive.' Considered from this viewpoint, the camera's allegorical position as a phallic object, and thus the male gaze, takes on a different meaning when considered within the context of the final shot. In particular, the profilmic manipulation of Katie's mouth places a significant emphasis on her teeth as she lurches forward towards the screen, linking once again to male castration anxieties.

In this respect, after Micah's death, the act of attacking the camera can be symbolically understood as an act of male castration and female defiance directed toward the spectator, and thus, patriarchal structures of control and surveillance. Interestingly, another ending was also considered involving the camera as a weapon. In it, Katie bludgeons Micah to death while the audience watches from the camera's POV.⁴⁴ In this moment, by attacking the camera with the body of her slain partner, or, in one of the alternative endings, Katie co-opts both the gaze and the penetrative weapon attacking the male bearer of the look, and taking back power. Such transgressions of patriarchal order are

seen as sources of horror as she cannot be contained or repressed by the gaze or patriarchal constraints.⁴⁵

If considered as an allegory of the woman and her threat, *Paranormal Activity* offers a complex understanding of Katie's position within the structures and organisation of a patriarchal culture. On one level, the film initially appears to suggest that Katie has internalised patriarchal values which lead her to be complicit in her own subordination and objectification. For instance, despite perfunctory gestures of defiance such as Katie's repeated refusals to perform a striptease and to allow Micah to film their lovemaking, she nevertheless accepts patriarchal ideology, remaining sexually passive and submissive. However, in contrast, Katie's symbolic position as a castrating woman who embodies a fluid gender identity seems to offer a potential critique of gender roles within patriarchal structures of dominance.

The film's fusion of horror and melodrama presents a fragmented female identity that oscillates between violent outbursts directed toward symbols of male power and an acceptance of a system of social structures in which women are submissive and subject to manipulation. For example, Katie's status as a dominated woman is established in the film through her obedience to the power of the male over the female. Particularly, Micah's place within the household as the couple's only source of income points towards a traditional understanding of gender order that is characteristic of the immediate post-Second World War era.⁴⁶ Katie's submissive position is similarly enforced by her engagement with beadwork and knitting, skills traditionally associated with domestic or passive female stereotypes.⁴⁷

During the film's opening section, hegemonic traditional gender roles are established and affirmed conforming to underlying patriarchal conceptions of heteronormativity. This compliance encompasses a number of attributes ranging from her position within the household as a tenant and her objectification by the camera. However, as the demonic possession becomes more evident, Katie's attitude increasingly fluctuates between aggressor and victim conflating fixed notions of gender identity aligned with traditional assumptions of dominance and submission. For example, in an exchange between the couple mid-way through the first film, Katie openly expresses her frustration with Micah and his efforts to observe and control the haunting. He remarks, 'I'm in control, I'm making progress.' To which Katie responds:

You're *not* in control. *It* is in control, and if you think you're in control, then you're being an idiot. Not a single thing you've done has helped and I'm sorry, I don't mean to burst your bubble but...you are absolutely powerless.

This statement aptly encapsulates Katie's position at a crossroads between a repressed domestic existence and an unstable gender identity that threatens patriarchal power relations.

As the film develops, Katie arguably represents the anxiety of the heterosexual male confronted by the possibility of a fluid female gender identity that cannot be controlled. By emphasizing various levels of complicity with and resistance to patriarchal ideology, the franchise communicates female hysteria in relation to a problem of gender identity in phallic terms. At once, Katie is positioned as simultaneously resisting and accepting the given order encapsulating the oxymoronic nature of the horror genre. Clearly, there appears to be something paradoxical about the genre which simultaneously presents weak male power as a source of horror alongside transgressive sexualities which threaten the symbolic

order. This is best illustrated by the female figures of the franchise that, as we have established, are subject to male possession highlighting both the female's inherently 'weak and helpless state' and simultaneously, the threat that a fluid gender identity represents to the male.⁴⁸ Accordingly, at one level, the *Paranormal Activity* franchise appears to perpetuate the assertion of male power within the context of the horror genre at the expense of female gender identity which is conceived of as weak. However, at the same time, what is feared in the possessed woman, or the monster, is the threat that difference seems to pose to patriarchal order.

As the *Paranormal Activity* franchise illustrates, within the context of the horror genre therein exists a complex dynamic that on the one hand, attempts to re-affirm the heterosexual relationship within the domestic space as part of the wider construct of patriarchal order, thus providing a fixed source of gender identities. However, on the other hand, in keeping with the transgressive and often paradoxical nature of the genre, the home and the organising structures of patriarchal culture are shown to be remarkably weak and fragile notions. The idea of the home is, simply, an ideological space revealed to lack the security and safety once commonly associated with it and has therefore become uncanny.⁴⁹ Similarly, traditional gender identities are shown to be unstable. What has been viewed as a traditional male or female position has to a large extent eroded, provoking a tension between masculine and feminine extremes. Correspondingly, the franchise arguably draws attention to, and perpetuates, the horror genre's wider anxieties surrounding the position of female gender identity within the patriarchal order. This brings us back to Katie's hysteria and its function in determining the film's meaning.

As we have established, hysteria is usually considered to be a physical or somatic articulation of a psychological pain. In the *Paranormal Activity* franchise, Katie's internalisation of the demon and the resultant horror within the context of the household is perhaps an inevitable consequence of her gender's oppression by the laws of patriarchal society. Accordingly, the female body becomes the site of a hysterical vocalisation of disenfranchisement because other, more direct, routes of protest have been denied (because passivity is both the result and the cause of appropriate feminine gender performance). As such, the film itself can be considered just another way of demonising the (hysterical) female that the patriarchal social structures are guilty of producing to begin with.

The extent to which this discourse about the role of hysteria in the franchise is relevant depends largely on whether, as this article contends, the demon represents a deeper manifestation of patriarchal concerns surrounding the fluidity of gender identity. In any case, I argue that the franchise perpetuates these concerns transcending the conventional destruction of the female monster during the film's final moments. To elucidate this statement it is necessary to briefly discuss the implications of the film's production. It has been widely publicised that the film's original ending was changed at the suggestion of Steven Spielberg.⁵⁰ In its original form, the film offers a further assault on patriarchal institutions as Katie is killed by law enforcement officers. Additionally, in another edit available as an alternate ending, Katie kills Micah off-screen and then subsequently slits her own throat in front of the camera. Perhaps, in spectatorial terms, this action can be considered a critique of the social and moral implications of (largely male) desires to watch recorded acts of violence against women resulting in the ultimate visceral punishment of the voyeuristic gaze highlighted by Katie's suicide. In the theatrical version, by alerting the audience to Katie's on-going survival during the film's epilogue (thus providing the potential for further sequels) the film preserves the enduring threat of the monstrous woman. Unlike the standard destruction of the female monster which performs the task of affirming masculine dominance, Katie's survival in the franchise debatably points toward a

growing awareness of an on-going question surrounding the stability of gender identity. Whilst the decision to produce an alternative theatrical ending for the film may have been financially motivated, the various other endings arguably contribute more overtly to the horror genre's longstanding preoccupation with gender identity and patriarchal oppression.

The film's various endings seemingly critique the conventional representation of the female monster and correspondingly, the position of female gender identity in patriarchal society. Unfortunately, it is difficult to avoid viewing the theatrical release of the film and the subsequent sequels as anything but clear evidence of Hollywood's characteristic insistence on exploiting financially successful trends for as long as possible. Indeed, it is conceivable to argue that in its original forms, Katie's death in the franchise represents a clearer critique of the organizing structures of patriarchal society that effectively marginalise women as part of the logic of the patriarchal order. As an alternative then, it is more accurate to read Katie's survival in the theatrical release of the film alongside a variation of Carol Clover's 'final girl.'⁵¹ For Clover, the final girl can be understood as a symbolic male who embodies masculine traits in order to prevail against the monster. Admittedly, in this instance, the demon survives but must inhabit a female body in order to do so. It is not accidental, then, that Katie is masculinised by the demon's presence. In this article I have chosen not to linger excessively on the idea that the horror genre is predicated on exploiting and objectifying women. Instead, although these ideas have informed my analysis of the *Paranormal Activity* franchise in that I argue that these films, whilst acknowledging these conventions, ultimately transcend them, articulating concerns about unstable gender identity. In this instance at least, the *Paranormal Activity* franchise arguably offers a critique of the dilemma of a strong female gender identity in a male-dominated world rather than a straightforward reassertion of heterosexual relations patriarchal culture and masculinity.⁵²

Notes

¹ Robin Wood, 'An Introduction to the American Horror Film,' in *Planks of Reason: Essays on the Horror Film*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (New Jersey, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1984), 164-200.

² Ibid.

³ Andrew Britton, 'A New Servitude: Bette Davis, Now Voyager and the Radicalism of the Woman's film,' *CineAction* 6.27 (1992): 37.

⁴ Robin Wood, 'An Introduction to the American Horror Film,' in *Planks of Reason: Essays on the Horror Film*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1984), 164-200.

⁵ Philip Brophy, 'Horrority: The Textuality of Contemporary Horror Films,' *Screen* 27.1 (1986): 2-13.

⁶ Wood, 'Introduction to the American Horror Film,' 164-200.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Jean François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Manchester: Manchester University, 1984).

⁹ *The Lesser Feat Blog*, 6 January 2012, viewed on 1 June 2013, <http://thelesserfeat.blogspot.co.uk/2009/12/antichrist-paranormal-activity-and.html>.

¹⁰ 'Paranormal Activity Box Office Stats.' Last modified 6 January 2012, viewed on 1 June 2013, <http://boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=paranormalactivity.html>.

¹¹ 'Paranormal Activity Date Set,' Last modified 6 January 2012, viewed on 1 June 2013, <http://www.deadline.com/2012/01/paranormal-activity-4-release-date-set>.

¹² Robert Lang, *American Film Melodrama: Griffith, Vidor, Minnelli* (Princeton: Princeton UP 1989), 8.

¹³ Diane Long Hoeveler, 'Mary Shelley and Gothic Feminism: The Case of "The Mortal Immortal",' in *Iconoclastic Departures: Mary Shelley after Frankenstein*, ed. Syndy M. Conger and Gregory O'Dea (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1997), 150-166.

¹⁴ Juliann E. Fleenor, *The Female Gothic* (Montral-London: Eden Press 1983), 16.

¹⁵ Britton, 'A New Servitude,' 37.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 40.

¹⁷ Susan Hayward, *Cinema Studies: The Key Concepts* (Oxon: Routledge 1996), 215.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Interestingly, in the *Paranormal Activity* franchise, unlike many other films within the haunted-house sub-genre such as *The Changeling* (Medak, 1980) and *The Grudge* (Shimizu, 2004), the haunting is not directly attributed to the home. However, the presentation of some events occurring off-screen, beyond the gaze of the camera foregrounds the vulnerability of the suburban home. Rather than providing a safe domestic space, the trilogy's bedrooms, corridors and kitchens are subject to a power that is both dangerous and unknowable perhaps attracted to the home through the female figure. According to Reynold Humphries, horror within a domestic space subverts the notion of the house as sanctuary. He remarks, 'The notion of danger coming from anywhere is to be taken literally and is far more unnerving when it is located within the supposedly reassuring home' Reynold Humphries, *The American Horror Film: An Introduction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2002), 145-146. Indeed, the domestic space, endowed with a complex array of sensibilities, collapses all received notions of safety. Moreover, the centrality of the domestic setting with a particular emphasis on the master bedroom in the franchise is revealing when considered in relation to the Freudian-feminist melodrama.

²⁰ Britton, 'A New Servitude,' 40.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 31.

²² Marion Iris Young, 'The Logic of Masculinist Protection: Reflections on the Current Security State,' in *Women and Citizenship*, ed. Marilyn Friedman (Oxford: Oxford University Press; 2005), 119.

²³ The break in the diegesis is significant as unlike many other horror films, the *Paranormal Activity* franchise avoids scenes of gratuitous sex commonly associated with the genre, Williams, Linda. 'Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess.' *Film Quarterly* 44.4 (1991): 2-13. This is perhaps even more impressive considering the personal nature of the film's presentation which could have easily succumbed to the temptation of reflecting the recent 'skyrocketing increase in true amateur porn' caused by the widespread access to means of low cost production with video cameras and mobile phones with video capability. Carmine Sarracino and K. Scott, *The Porning of America: The Rise of Porn Culture, What It Means, and Where We Go from Here* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2008).

²⁴ J. Holland and R. Thomson 'Young Women and Safer (Hetero) Sex: Context, Constraints and Strategies,' in *Women and Health: Feminist Perspectives*, eds. Sue Wilkinson and Celia Kitzinger (London: Taylor and Francis, 1994), 13-32.

²⁵ During the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, the emphasis on dissatisfied sexuality as the primary cause of hysteria readily transferred to Christian notions of sexual deviance linked to female promiscuity and lust. As a result, the growing influence of Christianity led hysteria to become inextricably linked to witchcraft and demonic possession; Elizabeth Bronfen, *The Knotted Subject: Hysteria and Its Discontents* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998). Accordingly, women were considered to be particularly prone to crimes of witchcraft due their supposed emotional weakness and inferiority to men; Paul Chodoff, 'Hysteria and Women.' *American Journal of Psychiatry* 139.5 (1982): 545-551. When considered in relation to the

franchise, the revelation that Katie's grandmother is the head of a satanic coven of witches in *Paranormal Activity 3* (Joost and Schulman, 2011) hints at the trilogy's consistent fascination with patriarchal fears of female empowerment rooted in masculine inadequacy.

²⁶ Robert Brudenell Carter, *On the Pathology and Treatment of Hysteria* (London: Churchill, 1853).

²⁷ Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, 'The Hysterical Woman: Sex Roles and Role Conflict in 19th-Century America,' *Social Research* 39.4 (1972): 670.

²⁸ Kenneth Levy, 'Psychodynamic and Psychoanalytic Psychotherapy', in *Clinical Psychology: Assessment, Treatment, and Research*, eds. David C. S. Richard and Steven Ken Huprich (London: Elsevier Academic Press, 2009), 185.

²⁹ David Rowley, *Hypnosis and Hypnotherapy* (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania, The Charles Press, 1986), 10.

³⁰ Sigmund Freud, 'Studies on Hysteria' in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, 24 vols., trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth, 1974), 2:109.

³¹ Sigmund Freud, 'Heredity and the Aetiology of the Neuroses,' *Standard Edition*, 3:143-156.

³² Freud, 'Repression', *Standard Edition*, 14:141-158.

³³ Freud, 'Moses and Monotheism', *Standard Edition*, 23:1-138.

³⁴ Yoram Bilu, 'The Taming of the Deviants and Beyond: An Analysis of Dybbuk Possession and Exorcism,' in *Judaism in Spirit Possession in Judaism: Cases and Contexts from the Middle Ages to the Present*, ed. Matt Goldish (Detroit, Mich: Wayne State University Press, 2003), 46.

³⁵ By assigning a specific gender to the demon, the series implicitly draws on the mythological history of the incubus, a male demon who pursues sexual relations with women in order to father a child.

³⁶ In addition to explicit verbal references to the demon as a male figure, it is also possible to implicitly regard the demon as an alpha male in the context of ethology who not only seeks to penetrate the body of the female but also attack subordinate males including Micah, Daniel (Brian Boland) and Dennis (Chris Smith) who try to assert themselves.

³⁷ Set in 1988, *Paranormal Activity 3* continues the stylistic and thematic trend of the previous two instalments. However, the choice to set the film during this particular era leaves an indelible mark on the franchises' narrative understanding of hysterical illness. Specifically, the film's period setting appears to be overtly dominated by psychosexual problems that similarly marked several other horror films during the 1980's. Eighties horror cinema, after all, heralded the emergence of serial killers Michael Myers, Freddy Krueger, and Jason Voorhees. This new collection of monsters slaughtered the children of American suburbia at the expense of inept authority figures demonstrating that childhood no longer offered the safety and protection once associated with it. In particular, these films, and *Paranormal Activity 3* seem to accurately reflect social concerns regarding a loss of innocence associated with the increased reports of child related sexual abuse and satanic rituals during the McMartin preschool trial in the mid-1980s and early 1990s. P. Eberle and S. Eberle, *Abuse Of Innocence: The McMartin Preschool Trial* (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1993).

³⁸ Kristine M. Rankka, *Women and the Value of Suffering: An Aw(e)ful Rowing toward God* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press 1998), 66.

³⁹ Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (London, Routledge, 1993), 44.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁴¹ Freud, 'Fetishism', *Standard Edition*, 21:152-157.

⁴² Laura Mulvey, 'Afterthoughts on "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" inspired by King Vidor's *Duel in the Sun* (1946),' in *Visual and Other Pleasures: Collected Writings*, ed. Laura Mulvey (Basingstoke and London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1989), 29-38; Donald E. Hall, *Fixing Patriarchy: Feminism and Mid-Victorian Male Novelists* (Basingstoke and London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1996).

⁴³ Donald E. Hall, *Fixing Patriarchy*, 112-113.

⁴⁴ 'Paranormal Activity: Three Super-Scary Alternate Endings,' Last modified August 6, 2012, viewed on 1 June 2013, <http://popwatch.ew.com/2009/10/30/paranormal-activity-three-super-scary-alternate-endings-spoiler-alert>.

⁴⁵ Robin Wood, *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1986).

⁴⁶ Michael Bittman, et al., 'When Does Gender Trump Money? Bargaining and Time in Household Work' in *American Journal of Sociology* 109.1 (2003): 186-214.

⁴⁷ Joanne Turney, *The Culture of Knitting* (Oxford: Berg, 2009).

⁴⁸ Karen Hollinger, 'The Monster as Woman: Two Generations of Cat People,' in *The Dread of Difference: Gender and the Horror Film*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Austin, TX: The University of Texas Press, 1996), 299.

⁴⁹ For a detailed account of The Uncanny, see Sigmund Freud, 'The Uncanny', in *Standard Edition* (London: Hogarth, 1974), 17:217-256.

⁵⁰ 'Paranormal Activity: Three Super-Scary Alternate Endings'.

⁵¹ Carol J. Clover, *Men, Women and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 51.

⁵² Special thanks to Dr. Jacqueline Furby, Sophie Cross, Uros Tomic and Trevor Joy.

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Stuart M. Joy is an Associate Lecturer in Film and TV at Southampton Solent University. His current research interests include: Horror, noir, corruption, popular Hollywood genres, time, representations of gender and sexuality on screen and contemporary British TV.

Come Hell or High Water, Part 3: Deluge

Stephen Morris

Abstract

One of two excerpts from the final instalment of the 3-part historical romance saga by acclaimed author, Stephen Morris. 1356: A witch burns! Prague is cursed! 2002: The curse threatens to destroy Prague with a mammoth flood. Can the professors find a way to defend and save the city? It is the winter of 1356-1357 and Nadezda, with the assistance of an elderly rabbi, confronts Lilith to discover the secret of the witch's curse. Meanwhile, in August 2002, George and Magdalena help carry out the witch's curse by conjuring the historic flood to wash away the Charles Bridge and its magical protection of the city, allowing them to unleash the devil Svetovit. Using the magic of tarot cards, the Evil Conference professors struggle to release the defensive magic buried deep beneath the streets of Prague. Finally confronting George, Magdalena, and Svetovit face-to-face, can the professors avert the doom that is engulfing the city?

Excerpt 1

In this excerpt, the Kampa park along the riverbank of the Vltava becomes the feeding ground of Elizabeth, the Dearg-due (Irish vampire-like woman).

Elizabeth wandered the streets of the Little Town of Prague. She had said good night to Alessandro in the hotel lobby, having given him a quick kiss on the cheek. They had been flirting on the Charles Bridge when he seemed suddenly taken ill and had retreated to his room for the night. But she was awake. She was hungry.

She made her way back out into the night air. Prague was surprisingly lively. People filled the streets despite the hour. She stood in the darkness and breathed deeply. She knew the air at this time of year was humid but the city smelled remarkably fresh. She had never been to Prague and was eager to enjoy the delights it offered. She made her way back to the Charles Bridge.

Jazz was still playing at the other end of the bridge, the music swirling through the air. Couples walked along the bridge while small knots of tourists stopped to admire the views of the brightly illuminated castle from the causeway. Some people made their way to the base of St. John's statue to rub the brass plates for luck. Teenage boys whooped and hollered, darting between the more staid adults. Elizabeth stepped onto the bridge and into the happy stream of humanity making their way through the night.

She walked along the bridge a short distance and then made her way down a staircase leading to a cobblestone plaza spread out along the river. The plaza was less crowded than the bridge, but the doors to the taverns and restaurants all stood open, filling the plaza with laughter and chatter.

She strolled along the plaza, smiling at the people she passed. Several of the men paused and smiled in return, nodding their acknowledgement of her presence to the consternation of their girlfriends and wives.

"Interesting," she said to herself. "Several interesting possibilities here, but... No, none are quite right." She paused and closed her eyes. She breathed deeply and caught the fragrance

she was searching for. The whisper of a scent beckoned her and she followed it, continuing unhurriedly through the plaza and into the grassy park area beyond. The river was always beside her as she walked along the dark path. Fewer people were along the river here, all couples arm in arm in the moonlight. As she passed, nearly all the men turned their heads without even being aware there might be a choice to do otherwise.

Then she saw the one she sought ahead.

A man sat alone on a park bench, hunched forward with his elbows on his knees, leaning towards the water. He was in his mid-thirties, and swarthy. The sports jacket he wore was stretched tight across his broad shoulders. She made her way to his side and sat beside him. She put her elbows on her own knees. Their shoulders brushed.

Startled, the man looked up at Elizabeth. She could see his eyes glitter.

“Hello,” she purred in her Irish accent. “Do you speak in English?”

“A bit,” he acknowledged, smiling in return. The rough stubble on his cheeks was darkly etched in the stark light of the streetlamp beside them. This close to him and at this angle, Elizabeth could see that the top buttons of his shirt were undone. Elizabeth shook her long tresses to catch his attention.

“Where are you from?” she asked.

“Turkey,” he answered, his English decorated with the ripple of an accent. “Istanbul. You?” He pulled a cigarette pack from a pocket and offered her one.

“Dublin,” she replied, shaking her head gently to decline his offer. He took a cigarette from the pack and replaced the pack in his pocket. He lit the cigarette and turned towards her. He blew a stream of smoke up and away from Elizabeth’s face. “Have you come to Prague before?” he asked.

“No,” she admitted. “Have you?” She smiled again, resting the tip of her tongue against her teeth. She could feel the man’s nervousness dissolving as tension of another sort built.

“Me?” he asked. “No, no. I have not been to here before.” He glanced at his feet and then back into her eyes. He smiled.

“How long are you here for? You seem to be alone... Are you... sad?” Elizabeth leaned a bit closer and rested her hand on her new friend’s forearm. She could feel his excitement at her touch ripple through him.

“A few days,” he answered. “Alone? Yes, I came to see Prague myself. But sad? No... thinking. How do you say in English? Taking the night air.” He chuckled.

“Are you here on business?” she purred in his ear, her lips brushing the nape of his neck. “Or pleasure?”

His eyes closed in delight, the cigarette dangling from his fingertips. Then, realizing she had asked a question, he shook his head slightly as if to clear his thoughts. He opened his eyes and smiled.

“Would you believe both?” His voice had gotten deeper, fuller, richer. He stood and she could see his erection through his trousers.

“I might believe that,” she told him, standing too and taking the cigarette from him and tossing it into the river. “What kind of business?”

“Imports. Exports.” He reached his arms around the back of her shoulders and pulled her towards him.

“And what kind of pleasure?” She laughed quietly, tipping her head back and exposing the skin of her throat to his gaze.

“What kind might you think?” he laughed gently, running his cheek along her throat.

Elizabeth relished the effect she had on men like this one. Confident, handsome, self-assured men who quickly forgot whatever they had been concerned about once she turned her attention to them.