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**University of Southampton**

Faculty of Arts and Humanities

Department of Film

# **Spaces of Female Subjectivity in Contemporary British Women's Cinema**

by

**Sarah Louise Smyth**

Thesis for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

May 2019

**University of Southampton**

**Abstract**

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Conceptualising and representing female subjectivity in cinema remains a contentious problem for feminist film theory. This thesis argues that the notion of space is critical to this problematic, but remains overlooked in studies of women's cinematic subjectivity. Drawing out the spatial investments and implications in key works on female subjectivity, this thesis demonstrates that psychoanalytic feminist film theory offers no space in which to figure the female subject. She can be represented as neither an embedded, embodied, interiorised nor mobile subject. Turning to more recent feminist film theory allows us to conceptualise a female subject who is spatially present; in other words, she *can* be figured as embedded, embodied, interiorised and mobile. Privileging British women's filmmaking as a site where this subjective exploration takes place, this thesis examines a number of British women-authored films to consider how female subjectivity is represented through a specific spatialized mode of representation: as a marginalised subject in *Belle* (Amma Asante, 2014), as an embodied subject in *Prevenge* (Alice Lowe, 2016), as an affective subject in *We Need to Talk about Kevin* (Lynne Ramsay, 2011) and as a mobile subject in *Fish Tank* (Andrea Arnold, 2009). In doing so, this thesis argues that a spatial analysis not only offers a theoretical and conceptual tool through which female representational subjectivity can be figured, but also enables these subjectivities to be contextualised within the specific social, cultural, political, national, and generic spatial frameworks through which these women are located, embodied, affected and move. British women's cinema, then, is as much a realisation of the spatial possibilities of representing female subjectivity on screen, as it is a reflection on the spatial limitations of women in the contemporary moment.

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## Research Thesis: Declaration of Authorship

Print name:	Sarah Louise Smyth
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Title of thesis:	Spaces of Female Subjectivity in Contemporary British Women's Cinema
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I declare that this thesis and the work presented in it are my own and has been generated by me as the result of my own original research.

I confirm that:

1. This work was done wholly or mainly while in candidature for a research degree at this University;
2. Where any part of this thesis has previously been submitted for a degree or any other qualification at this University or any other institution, this has been clearly stated;
3. Where I have consulted the published work of others, this is always clearly attributed;
4. Where I have quoted from the work of others, the source is always given. With the exception of such quotations, this thesis is entirely my own work;
5. I have acknowledged all main sources of help;
6. Where the thesis is based on work done by myself jointly with others, I have made clear exactly what was done by others and what I have contributed myself;
7. None of this work has been published before submission

Signature:		Date:	
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## Introduction: Spaces of Female Subjectivity

### Dreams of a Life

In the compelling documentary-drama, *Dreams of a Life* (2011), director Carol Morley and her team attempt to uncover – and then reconstruct – the life of Joyce Vincent, a woman who died alone in her bedsit in 2003, but was not discovered for another three years. Perhaps even more disturbing than her unnoticed death was that, when she was eventually “found”, there was no body left of her; she existed only as a stain, with her body, as one reporter put it, having “melt[ed] into the carpet”. Investigating what happened, Morley attempts to remember and reconstruct – literally *refigure* – the “lost” female subject through memories and testimony from those who knew her via talking-head interviews, and by restaging key moments in Joyce’s life as performed by Zawe Ashton.<sup>1</sup> The film’s first image, a report of Joyce’s death in the newspaper, pans over the phrase “a woman”. It is an anonymous residual textual mark of her life, abstracted of the specificities of *this* woman, yet providing the initial indication of her existence and the possibility of recovering her identity. As the film goes on, we follow Morley’s labour as she attempts to recover Joyce’s life: her advertisement in the newspaper and on the side of a taxi encouraging those who might know her to come forward; her attempts to reach interview subjects over the phone; and a timeline of Joyce’s life roughly drawn up in pen. Morley’s active search plays out against the static disembodied woman whose abject remains do just that: remain welded to the bedsit where the film returns again and again. We end with astonishing footage of the actual Joyce, filmed at a talk given by Nelson Mandela – a brief and fleeting glimpse at the “real” woman among the crowd.

I start with a brief consideration of *Dreams of a Life* because it provides a lightning rod for the key issues pertaining to women’s representation in British women’s cinema, which I will be discussing in this thesis: the “lost” female subject, abstracted initially only as “woman” (that Joyce Vincent is also a woman of colour further problematizes this abstraction), and the attempts by women filmmakers to “recover” her subjectivity through

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<sup>1</sup> Clio Barnard’s film *The Arbor* (2010) similarly combines documentary and fictional narrative to re-stage and reconstruct the “lost” female subject though an artistic, emotional and geographical composition by the attentive feminist labour of the woman filmmaker. See Beth Johnson, ‘Art Cinema and *The Arbor*: Tape-Recorded Testimony, Film Art and Feminism’, *Journal of British Cinema and Television*, 13.2 (2016), 278-291.

an attention to spatiality. By “spatiality”, I mean both the spatial and temporal contexts which “lose” and “find” the subject (Joyce’s bedsit, after all, both subsumed the most significant evidence of her life and death [her body], and also provided the evidence that enabled Morley and her team to uncover what happened [the stain]), and the literal and symbolic spaces of embodiment, mobility, affectivity, memory and interiority.<sup>2</sup> While the films I examine in this thesis do not “recover” the female subject in such a literal way as Morley does in *Dreams of a Life*, nevertheless, I use this film as a reflection of some of the problems pertaining to women’s representation on screen, and as a starting point for investigating how women filmmakers attempt to overcome this problem. A contentious theoretical problem for feminist film theory, conceptualising and critically analysing representations of female subjectivity in cinema is an issue that has yet to be resolved. Tracing the development of female subjectivity in key works by feminist film theorists, from psychoanalysis to more recent methodologies, I argue that a crucial way of theorising women’s subjectivity is to conceive of the female subject as spatially present rather than spatially absent.

Moreover, in this thesis, I argue that a number of films made by women in Britain since 2000 have emerged which make significant interventions into representations of female subjectivity on screen. Crucially, these films critically explore and construct a woman’s subjectivity through and within a particular space and place. This thesis examines four contemporary British women-authored films which, as I will detail, exemplify this spatial-subjective construction: *Belle* (Amma Asante, 2014), *Prevenge* (Alice Lowe, 2016), *We Need to Talk about Kevin* (hereafter *Kevin*) (Lynne Ramsay, 2011) and *Fish Tank* (Andrea Arnold, 2009). This thesis prioritises Kimberle Crenshaw’s concept of intersectionality, where representations of gender is also read through intersections of class and race.<sup>3</sup> This allows me to account for a historicized, embedded and intersectional subject, enabling us to move away from the abstracted and universalised female subject of psychoanalytic feminist film theory. Considering each film in detail, this thesis makes a key intervention by arguing that, through a spatialized representation, British women filmmakers both reflect on a female protagonist’s postfeminist subject position and also

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<sup>2</sup> Peter Bradshaw notes the spatial and geographical specificities of the lonely London bedsit which enabled Joyce to be “lost” and “found”. Peter Bradshaw, ‘Dreams of a Life – Review’, *Guardian*, 15 December 2011 <<https://www.theguardian.com/film/2011/dec/15/dreams-of-a-life-film-review>> [accessed 29 January 2019].

<sup>3</sup> Kimberle Crenshaw, ‘Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics’, *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1.8 (1989), 139-167.

construct an “alternative” representative space where women’s cinematic subjectivity can be constructed and foregrounded.

Although recent postmodernist theory and deconstructionist practices may suggest that “the subject” is dead, in response, I reiterate Rosi Braidotti’s loaded question: ‘How can we undo a subjectivity we have not even historically been entitled to yet?’<sup>4</sup> For Braidotti, any “Othered” category of difference, whether this be gender, race, ethnicity or sexuality among others, is further marginalised by the erasure of the notion of the subject itself:

[I]f the white, masculine, ethnocentric subject wants to “deconstruct” himself and enter a terminal crisis, then – so be it! The point remains that “difference” emerges as a central – albeit contested and paradoxical – notion and practice. Which means that a confrontation with different locations is historically inevitable, as we – postmodern subjects – are historically condemned to our history. Accounting for them through adequate cartographies consequently remains a crucial priority.<sup>5</sup>

Braidotti mounts an academic defence of subjectivity for feminist ends. Moreover, she stresses the importance of locating subjects in their spatial and temporal contexts. As I will detail, classical psychoanalytic feminist film theory produces an ahistorical and abstract subject. Following Janet McCabe’s assessment of feminist film theory at the turn of the millennium ‘their theoretical endeavours into the omission of the female subject from cinematic pleasures within mainstream cinema confirmed the very arguments they had set out to critique. Theoretical models had ironically contributed to producing another ahistorical, abstracted female subject’.<sup>6</sup> More recently, studies into cinematic representations of female subjectivity have splintered. On the one hand, feminist critics examine discursive representations of women, with particular attention paid to their postfeminist contexts.<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, scholars attempt to account for a philosophically

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<sup>4</sup> Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), p. 9. For similar criticisms of postmodernism’s “death of the subject”, see Nancy Hartstock, ‘Rethinking Modernism: Minority Vs Majority Theories’, *Cultural Critique*, 7 (1987), 187-206; Doreen Massey, ‘Flexible Sexism’, *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 9 (1991), 31-57.

<sup>5</sup> Braidotti, p. 9.

<sup>6</sup> Janet McCabe, *Feminist Film Studies: Writing the Woman into Cinema* (London: Wallflower, 2004), pp. 110-111. See also Mandy Merck, ‘Difference and its Discontents’, *Screen*, 28.1 (1987), 2-9.

<sup>7</sup> See Angela McRobbie, ‘Post-Feminism and Popular Culture’, *Feminist Media Studies*, 4.3 (2004), 255-264; Diane Negra, *What a Girl Wants? Fantasizing the Reclamation of Self in Postfeminism* (New York: Routledge, 2009); Melanie Waters, ed., *Women on Screen: Feminism and Femininity in Visual Culture*

and aesthetically-rendered female subject, often with an attention to embodiment and interiority.<sup>8</sup> While the former offers an account of a historicised subject where ‘contemporary modes of power...operate on and through the making and remaking of subjectivities’, it offers little agency for filmmakers to challenge, problematize or offer an alternative to these representations.<sup>9</sup> By contrast, while the latter enables filmmakers to ‘[do] something different with female subjectivity’, it risks abstracting and universalising the subject as the temporal and spatial context in which the subject is constructed is ignored.<sup>10</sup> In this thesis, I bring both these approaches together to ask: how do women filmmakers challenge dominant contemporary images of women in order to offer alternative representations of female subjectivities in cinema?

In this thesis, I consider representation in terms of Stuart Hall’s definition of images produced by, in and circulating through a specific cultural context, in this case the contemporary moment of postfeminism.<sup>11</sup> Here, the subject, via Foucault, is produced by and within discourse.<sup>12</sup> However, in considering the visual and aural cinematic modes which represent female subjectivity on screen, I also follow Lucy Bolton in her explicit attempt to construct ‘an approach to film that initiates a visual language of female subjectivity’.<sup>13</sup> I consider the representation of the subjectivity of individual female protagonists: Dido in *Belle*, Ruth in *Prevenge*, Eva in *Kevin* and Mia in *Fish Tank*. While the representations of these women are mediated by discursive constructions of subjectivities, these films are also “doing something different”; like Bolton’s examination of *In the Cut* (Jane Campion, 2003), *Lost in Translation* (Sofia Coppola, 2003), and

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(Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2011); Joel Gwynne and Nadine Muller (eds.), *Postfeminism and Contemporary Hollywood Cinema* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

<sup>8</sup> See Lucy Bolton, *Film and Female Consciousness: Irigaray, Cinema and Thinking Women* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); Catherine Constable, *Thinking in Images: Film Theory, Feminist Philosophy and Marlene Dietrich* (London: BFI, 2005); Jenny Chamarette, *Phenomenology and the Future of Film: Rethinking Subjectivity Beyond French Cinema*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012); Kate Ince, *The Body and the Screen: Female Subjectivities in Contemporary Women’s Cinema* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017); Katharina Lindner, *Film Bodies: Queer Feminist Encounters with Gender and Sexuality in Cinema* (New York: IB Tauris, 2018).

<sup>9</sup> Rosalind Gill and Christine Scharff, ‘Introduction’, *New Femininities: Postfeminism, Neoliberalism and Subjectivity* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), pp. 1-20 (p. 8).

<sup>10</sup> Bolton, p. 3.

<sup>11</sup> Stuart Hall, ‘The Work of Representation’, in *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, ed. by Stuart Hall (London: Sage, 1997), pp. 15-74 (p. 15). For a persuasive demonstration of the pervasive nature of postfeminism in the contemporary moment, see Rosalind Gill, ‘Post-postfeminism?: New Feminist Visibilities in Postfeminist Times’, *Feminist Media Studies*, 16.4 (2016), 610-630; Rosalind Gill, ‘The Affective, Cultural and Psychic Life of Postfeminism: A Postfeminist Sensibility 10 Years On’, *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 20.6 (2017), 606-626.

<sup>12</sup> Hall, p. 55.

<sup>13</sup> Bolton, p. 35.

*Morvern Callar* (Lynne Ramsay, 2002), these films ‘create space [my emphasis] for the female characters to explore themselves and others, using language, the body, and consciousness, offering a vision of a possible alternative way of being for women in cinema’.<sup>14</sup> Via Catherine Grant’s consideration of authors as having (limited) agency over the cultural products they produce, I consider the ways in which my female filmmakers negotiate discursive representations of female subjectivity in their films.<sup>15</sup>

By “spatialized representation”, I refer both to the formal construction of cinematic space (the delineation between “on” and “off”-screen space through framing and editing; the construction of on-screen space through production design, *mise-en-scène*, etc) and to the discursive representation of extra-diegetic spaces as diegetic spaces within my films (such as the country house in *Belle*, the city space in *Prevenge*, the home in *Kevin* and the housing estate in *Fish Tank*). This thesis argues that space, as a critical mode of analysis in relation to female subjectivity, enables me to do two things. Firstly, a spatial analysis offers us the conceptual tools with which we can figure female subjectivity with reference to feminist film theory. As I will demonstrate, early feminist film theory, particularly psychoanalytic feminist film theory following Laura Mulvey, constructs a totalized spatialized cinematic apparatus; within this, there is “no space” with which to figure the female subject. As I detail in the first section of this introduction, she can neither be represented as an embodied nor interiorised subject. Turning to more recent feminist film theory allows us to conceptualise a female subject who is spatially present; in other words, she *can* be figured as both embodied and interiorised. This thesis identifies and examines four key women-authored British films that take up a particular spatialized aspect of subjectivity in order to represent the subjectivity of their female protagonists: as a marginalised subject searching for a “place” in *Belle*; as an embodied subject in *Prevenge*; as an affective subject in *Kevin*; and as a mobile subject in *Fish Tank*.

Secondly, I consider space not only as a theoretical and conceptual tool through which female representational subjectivity can be figured, but as a representational image in itself, which comes loaded with specific meanings. In this thesis, I am concerned with the social, cultural, political, national and generic meanings of extra-diegetic spaces and places, and how these meanings become transformed in the act of filming them as diegetic spaces. As I will detail, this enables me to account for a historicized, embedded and

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<sup>14</sup> Bolton, p. 3.

<sup>15</sup> Catherine Grant, ‘Secret Agents: Feminist Theories of Women’s Film Authorship’, *Feminist Theory*, 2.1 (2001), 113-130.

intersectional subject – a crucial consideration if we are to move away from the abstracted and universalised female subject of psychoanalytic feminist film theory. I consider the broader discursively-constructed social, political and cultural spatial frameworks through which these women are located, embodied, affected and move. This allows me to consider the agency afforded to the representations of these female subjects with specificity and nuance. The representation of female subjectivities by British women filmmakers, then, is a complex negotiation between spatial possibilities and spatial limitations.

### **Feminist Film Theory, Female Subjectivity and Space: The “Absent” Female Subject**

In this first section, I survey key works by feminist film critics from the 1970s to the 1990s to demonstrate how early psychoanalytic feminist film theory offers no space through which the female subject can be constructed. Specifically, I argue that, within these psychoanalytic frameworks, women’s subjectivities cannot be constructed because women cannot be figured in cinematic space. Even though a concern with spatiality runs throughout many of these key feminist works, this has not been drawn together in a single study – a corrective this project undertakes. I situate feminist film theory’s use of space within broader contemporaneous constructions of gendered philosophical and geographical space. These, too, utilise psychoanalysis as their methodological framework. Drawing out the problematic implications for women in cinematic space, I argue that, if women are going to be figured in space and, therefore, figured as subjects, psychoanalysis is a methodology which cannot accommodate or enable these figurations. Following Alison Butler, who asserts ‘the historical presence of women rather than their theoretical absence’, I argue that British women’s cinema *does* attempt to account for a “present” representational subject; it does figure women as subjects within (cinematic) space.<sup>16</sup> My engagement with feminist film theory and the relationship between subjectivity and space, then, precipitates the question: how can women’s subjectivities be constructed and represented by women filmmakers if we no longer take women’s impossible cinematic spatial position as a given?

Laura Mulvey’s foundational essay, ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’, argues that male subjectivity is constructed through a psychoanalytic cinematic process, a

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<sup>16</sup> Alison Butler, ‘Feminist Theory and Women’s Films at the Turn of the Century’, *Screen*, 41.1 (2000), 73-79 (p. 77).

process that reduces women to the image of “woman”. Although semiology was another important methodology in early feminist film theory (one which also utilised spatial imagery in significant ways), I focus my attention on feminist film theory which took up Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis.<sup>17</sup> This is both because it has been the more enduring methodology and because it enables me to more thoroughly interrogate the spatialized process of cinematic subjectivity, which is integrally connected to the visual ideology embedded in the male gaze. Mulvey famously theorised the (heterosexual) male gaze by suggesting that a film’s pleasure is structured around the (heterosexual) male spectator who both identifies with the male protagonist and is erotically stimulated by the female image.<sup>18</sup> This identification both reflects and constitutes the male spectator’s ego – his subjectivity – while barring the female protagonist and spectator from this subject formation. As Mulvey argued, the image of woman connotes *to-be-looked-at-ness*; she exists solely as the bearer of man’s look.<sup>19</sup>

Although Mulvey’s argument has had a prolific uptake and influence across multiple academic disciplines, the spatial and temporal implications of her argument remain overlooked. As she argues with reference to the woman as a visual and erotic spectacle: ‘The presence of woman is an indispensable element of spectacle in normal narrative film, yet her visual presence tends to work against the development of storyline, to freeze the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation.’<sup>20</sup> Freezing the temporal order of the narrative’s action, Mulvey argues that the woman ‘takes the film into a no man’s land outside its own time and space’.<sup>21</sup> The image of woman occupies some kind of temporality and spatiality, but one which cannot be imagined in this phallocentric ordering. In contrast, the male protagonist/spectator, ‘advancing the story, making things happen’, sees himself *within* cinematic space.<sup>22</sup> The active male figure, the ego ideal of the

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<sup>17</sup> For foundational work that utilised semiotics in its investigation into the images of “woman”, see Claire Johnston, ‘Women’s Cinema as Counter-Cinema’, *Movies and Methods*, vol. 1, ed. by Bill Nichols (London: University of California Press, 1976), pp. 24-31; Pam Cook and Claire Johnston, ‘The Place of Women in the Cinema of Raoul Walsh’, *Issues in Feminist Film Criticism*, ed. by Patricia Erens (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), pp. 19-27. For the use of space as a metaphor to explain the process of semiotics in representing “woman”, see Teresa de Lauretis’ use of the origin story of the city of Zobeide. Teresa de Lauretis *Alice Doesn’t: Feminism, Semiotics and Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), pp. 8-14.

<sup>18</sup> Laura Mulvey, ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’ in *Visual and Other Pleasures*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 14-30 (pp. 18-19).

<sup>19</sup> Mulvey, p. 19.

<sup>20</sup> Mulvey, p. 18.

<sup>21</sup> Mulvey, p. 20.

<sup>22</sup> Mulvey, p. 20.

identification process, ‘*is a figure in a landscape* [my emphasis]’.<sup>23</sup> With the construction of screen space working to reproduce his perspective, the male protagonist/spectator ‘is free to command the stage, a stage of spatial illusion in which he articulates the look and creates the action’.<sup>24</sup> His command of space, then, integrally reproduces and confirms his subjectivity. As Mulvey suggests here and in later essays, this process of subject formation is an explicitly spatialized relationship between (male) protagonist and spectator: the diegetic subject is ‘located in a desiring or fearing relation to space and place inside the story world’, and the extra-diegetic spectator subject is ‘located in a reading relationship to spaces and places of desire or fear as they appear on screen’.<sup>25</sup>

Mulvey’s argument generates two separate but overlapping gendered problems. Firstly, if the image of woman is constructed by/in a psychoanalytic visual cinematic apparatus, then this spatialized framework shuts her out of the process of subject formation. Secondly, if, within this apparatus, the male protagonist/spectator commands space as the narrative’s active narrator, women’s spatialized role becomes apparent; women collapse into the traditional discursive dichotomy of space, while men become aligned with time. Considering both in turn, we can extrapolate the gendered implications further.

Beginning with the first problem, Mulvey explicitly draws on Lacan’s theory of subject formation through the child’s recognition of his image in the mirror, which is a spatialized process. As Elizabeth Grosz explains, psychoanalysis is primarily concerned with how the body is lived and positioned as a spatio-temporal being. The child’s image in the mirror produces a doubled image in a specular or virtual space, which constitutes the illusion of a totalised and mastered body and identity.<sup>26</sup> In constituting the protagonist/spectator’s subjectivity, Mulvey argues the male figure ‘demands a three-dimensional space corresponding to that of the mirror recognition, in which the alienated subject internalised his own representation of his imaginary existence’.<sup>27</sup> Cinema constitutes the spectator’s subjectivity in a spatial process similar to the child in the mirror, even if this process only offers an illusory image of a “unified” and “complete”

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<sup>23</sup> Mulvey, p. 21.

<sup>24</sup> Mulvey also demonstrates how narrative film works to reproduce “natural” conditions of human perception through camera technology such as deep focus, camera movements that are determined by the action of the protagonist and invisible editing, which all ‘blur the limits of screen space’. Mulvey, p. 21.

<sup>25</sup> Laura Mulvey, ‘Cinematic Space: Desiring and Deciphering’ in *Desiring Practices: Architecture, Gender and the Interdisciplinary* (London: Blackdog Publishing, 1996), pp. 206-215 (p. 208).

<sup>26</sup> Elizabeth Grosz, *Space, Time and Perversion: Essays on the Politics of Bodies* (London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 85-86.

<sup>27</sup> Mulvey, ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’, p. 21.

subjectivity. Mary Ann Doane, via Jean-Louis Baudry and Christian Metz, maps this psychoanalytic process onto the cinematic image. Doane identifies the cinematic apparatus as a topography, meaning the spectator occupies a point in space:

Through its reinscription of Renaissance perspective, the apparatus positions the spectator on the side of the screen, as the mirror of the vanishing point on the other side. Both points stabilize the representational logic producing its readability, which is coincident with the notions of unity, coherency, and mastery. The cinema, according to Baudry, “constitutes the ‘subject’ by the illusory delimitation of a central location...”<sup>28</sup>

Within this spatial configuration, the subject is the master of representation; ‘perspective guarantees the maintenance of the subject and its place.’<sup>29</sup> As Doane argues, it is not surprising, then, that the gaze emanating from a given point in this configuration should be ‘in the service of voyeurism and fetishism – its subject male, its object female’.<sup>30</sup>

Spatializing this psychoanalytic framework and mapping it onto cinema’s mechanisms makes evident the female subject’s impossible position. The totalising nature of the gaze is such that the subjectivity of the female protagonist/spectator cannot be figured at all in this spatial configuration. Indeed, feminist geographer Gillian Rose argues that this mapping can be applied more broadly to spaces beyond cinema. She claims that the visual ideology embedded in the gaze ‘is a fundamental part of masculine subjectivity which shapes and is constituted through [geographical] discourse’.<sup>31</sup> Rose takes up Mulvey’s theory of the gaze to suggest how geography constructs pleasure and knowledge that excludes specific subject positions:

The particular dominant gaze constructs access to knowledge of geography as a white bourgeois heterosexual masculine privilege. And this gaze is not only the gaze at the land, although its dynamics are clearly revealed there: it is also a gaze at

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<sup>28</sup> Mary Ann Doane, *Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis* (New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 82. See also Jean-Louis Baudry, ‘Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus’, *Film Quarterly*, trans. Alan Williams, 28.2 (1974-1975), 39-47; Christian Metz, ‘The Imaginary Signifier’, *Screen*, 16.2 (1975), 14-76.

<sup>29</sup> Doane, p. 84. Feminist critics have also taken up similar arguments in art history. See Griselda Pollock, *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminisms and the Histories of Art* (London: Routledge, 1988).

<sup>30</sup> Doane, p. 82.

<sup>31</sup> Gillian Rose, *Feminism and Geography: The Limits of Knowledge* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993), p. 104.

what are constituted as objects of knowledge, whether environmental, social, political or cultural. Caught in the geographic landscape, people are looked at by a contradictory and exclusionary masculine gaze, which cannot see women because they are the social subjects most in the shadow of Woman...<sup>32</sup>

Once again, the spatial position of the female subject is, at best, fraught. The relationship between phallocentric film and geography is such that they mutually “cancel out” the possibility of constructing a female subject by taking up each other’s praxis. The only strategy for resistance, according to Rose, is to posit a different mode of looking, based on different social relations, where the illusion of the unmarked, unitary, distanced, white, Western masculine spectator is dissolved, and space is reconceptualised through different ways of seeing by and among women.<sup>33</sup>

Also, in a similar move to Mulvey’s spectator-subject, Rose figures the geographer as ‘the coherent, active subjects that we (mis)recognize in the mirror’ and ‘the ego-ideal hero in a landscape...[who] assert and establish their manliness in the face of Nature’.<sup>34</sup> Rose’s argument takes me to the second implication of Mulvey’s argument: that the male subject actively commands space and time, which constitutes his subjectivity. The image of women, by comparison, is unable to be figured *in* space, and so becomes figured *as* space. Specifically, she provides space for this active and temporalized male subject.

Teresa de Lauretis develops this in relation to narrative film. Building on Jurij M. Lotman’s theory of plot texts, de Lauretis identifies a key narrative function: entry into a closed space, and then emergence from it.<sup>35</sup> This space ‘*can be interpreted* as a cave, “the grave”, “the house”, “woman”’ (emphasis in the original).<sup>36</sup> If the elementary sequence of narrative is the entry into this enclosed space and then emergence from it, then ‘the hero must be male regardless of the gender of the text-image, because the obstacle, whatever its

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<sup>32</sup> Rose, p. 109.

<sup>33</sup> Rose, p. 112. See also Gillian Rose, ‘Making Space for the Female Subject in Feminism: The Spatial Subversions of Holzer, Kruger and Sherman’, *Mapping the Subject: Geographies of Cultural Transformation*, ed. by Steve Pile and Nigel Thrift (London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 332-354. Although Rose emphasises that we must consider differences among women, she has been criticised for not more fully acknowledging these multiple spatial “others”. As I will demonstrate, this thesis is attentive to intersectionality. Therefore, I take up Cindi Katz’s critique of Rose’s work to suggest that an emancipatory spatial feminist praxis must ‘engage with the oppositional practices of those whose standpoints include class, race, sexuality and nation’. Cindi Katz, ‘Review of *Feminism and Geography: The Limits of Paradoxical Knowledge*’, *Ecumene*, 4 (1997), 227-230 (p. 230).

<sup>34</sup> Rose, *Feminism and Geography*, p. 93.

<sup>35</sup> See Jurij M. Lotman, ‘The Origin of Plot in the Light of Typology’, trans. Julian Graffy, *Poetics Today*, 1.1-2 (1979), 161-184.

<sup>36</sup> Lotman quoted in de Lauretis, p. 118.

personification, is morphologically female and indeed, simply, the womb'.<sup>37</sup> Indeed, for de Lauretis, the distinction between boundary and passage is the distinction of sexual difference:

Opposite pairs such as inside/outside, the raw/the cooked, or life/death appear to be merely derivatives of the fundamental opposition between boundary and passage; and its passage may be in either direction, from inside to outside or vice versa, from life to death or vice versa, nonetheless all these terms are predicated on the *single* figure of the hero who crosses the boundary and penetrates the other space. In so doing the hero, the mythical subject, is constructed as human being and as male; he is the active principle of culture, the establisher of distinction, the creator of differences. Female is what is not susceptible to transformation, to life or death; she (it) is an element of plot-space, a *topos*, a resistance, matrix, matter.<sup>38</sup>

For de Lauretis, then, the male-hero-human is on the side of the subject; female-obstacle-boundary-space is on the other.

This gendered narrative logic reproduces gendered subjectivity. As Anneke Smelik explains ‘each story derives its structure from the subject’s desire and from its inscription in social and cultural codes’.<sup>39</sup> For de Lauretis, the social and cultural codes inscribed in the primary Western narrative of cinema comes from the story of Oedipus. The constitution of the male subject is bound up with his journey where he leaves home (and the womb/mother/woman) to actively move through, cross and transgress the spaces that transform him into a hero/man and then return him to the home/woman. This, de Lauretis argues, is ‘his social contract, *his* biological and affective destiny – and to the fulfillment of his desire’.<sup>40</sup> The woman, by contrast, is constructed as the “personified obstacle” – the womb/cave/house – for the sole term of reference and address: ‘man, Oedipus, the human male person’.<sup>41</sup> As Doane explains, if the figure of woman is aligned with spectacle, space and image, then ‘there is something about the representation of the woman which is

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<sup>37</sup> De Lauretis, pp. 118-119.

<sup>38</sup> De Lauretis, p. 119.

<sup>39</sup> Anneke Smelik, ‘Feminist Film Theory’, *The Cinema Book*, ed. by Pam Cook, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (London: British Film Institute, 2007), pp. 491- 504 (p. 496).

<sup>40</sup> De Lauretis, p. 133.

<sup>41</sup> De Lauretis, p. 133.

resistant to narrative and narrativisation'.<sup>42</sup> Within this Oedipal logic, women have no access to spatial or temporal configurations through which to construct their subjectivities.

More recently, there has been a resurgence of psychoanalytic film theory, particularly with reference to feminism and the feminine. Agnieszka Piotrowska and Ben Tyrer's edited collections *Femininity and Psychoanalysis: Cinema, Culture, Theory* and *Psychoanalysis and the Unrepresentable: From Culture to the Clinic*, and Piotrowska's collection *Embodied Encounters: New Approaches to Psychoanalysis and Cinema*, argue for the continued relevance of psychoanalysis for cinema studies.<sup>43</sup> Their collections take up not only Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis, but also developments by Melanie Klein, Donald Winnicott, Karen Horney and Joan Riviere, among others, to offer complex readings of female agency, the female body and female subjectivity in cinema.

Piotrowska's monograph *The Nasty Woman and The Neo Femme Fatale in Contemporary Cinema* offers a particularly significant reading of female subjectivity in cinema through the figure of the "nasty woman".<sup>44</sup> Reading this figure through Mulvey's theory of the gaze and Elizabeth Cowie's theory of woman as sign, as well as through the archetypal narratives of Medusa and Antigone, Piotrowska identifies the "nasty woman" as one with determination and agency as she destabilizes and subverts patriarchal norms. However, as Sue Thornham argues, to be the subject of the film text with agency and desire in psychoanalytic terms means being motivated by an Oedipal desire 'whose heroic quest is for self-knowledge, to be accomplished by means of the narrative's female figures'.<sup>45</sup> Within psychoanalytic configurations, we cannot simply change the gender of the hero which associates masculinity with hero/activity/subject and femininity with heroine/passivity/object as narrative functions to produce the subject as male. As Thornham develops in a more recent book, *Spaces of Women's Cinema: Space, Place and Genre in Contemporary Women's Filmmaking*: 'Heroes establish themselves as heroes – and as men – through their penetration and conquest of feminized space and landscape.'<sup>46</sup>

<sup>42</sup> Mary Ann Doane, *The Desire to Desire: The Woman's Films of the 1940s* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1987), p. 5.

<sup>43</sup> See Agnieszka Piotrowska and Ben Tyrer (eds), *Femininity and Psychoanalysis: Cinema, Culture, Theory* (London: Routledge, 2019); Agnieszka Piotrowska and Ben Tyrer (eds), *Psychoanalysis and the Unrepresentable: From Culture to the Clinic* (London: Routledge, 2017); Agnieszka Piotrowska (ed), *Embodied Encounters: New Approaches to Psychoanalysis and Cinema* (London: Routledge, 2015).

<sup>44</sup> See Agnieszka Piotrowska, *The Nasty Woman and The Neo Femme Fatale in Contemporary Cinema* (New York: Routledge, 2019).

<sup>45</sup> Sue Thornham, *What if I Had Been the Hero? Investigating Women's Cinema* (London: Palgrave, 2012), p. 11.

<sup>46</sup> Sue Thornham, *Spaces of Women's Cinema: Space, Place and Genre in Contemporary Women's Filmmaking* (London: British Film Institute, 2019), p. 2.

In order to conceptualise female subjectivity in cinema, it is imperative, then, to engage with women's representation in cinema through spatial terms.

The implications of men being constructed as subject and women being constructed as land in cinema reproduce a long-established and problematic dichotomy between, as noted above, men being associated with time and women being associated with space. Drawing on Kant's *The Critique of Pure Reason*, Luce Irigaray identifies Western philosophy's conceptualisation of time as the interiority of the subject and space as its exteriority: 'The subject, the master of time, becomes the axis of the world's ordering, with its something beyond the moment and eternity: God. He effects the passage between time and space... [T]he feminine is experienced as space... while the masculine is experienced as time.'<sup>47</sup> As Grosz explains, drawing on Irigaray's work: 'Woman is/provides space for man, but occupies none herself. Time is the projection of his interior, and is conceptual, introspective. The interiority of time links with the exteriority of space only through the position of God (or his surrogate, Man) as the point of their mediation and axis of their coordination.'<sup>48</sup> Consequently, Grosz argues, even after major shifts in understandings of space and time in Western knowledge, including psychoanalysis, the fundamental masculinity of the knower remains confirmed; there is 'left little room or no room for female self-representations, and the creation of maps and models of space and time based on projections of women's experiences'.<sup>49</sup>

Conceived of as/providing space for temporalized man, the woman collapses into the representational space of the mother: 'She finds herself delineated as a thing. Moreover, the maternal-feminine also serves as an *envelope*, a *container*, the starting point

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<sup>47</sup> Luce Irigaray, *The Ethics of Sexual Difference*, trans. Carolyn Burke and Gillian C. Gill (London: The Athlone Press, 1993), p. 7.

<sup>48</sup> Grosz, p. 99. Beyond the so-called French feminists, including Irigaray and Julia Kristeva, Anglo-American feminists have attempted to conceptualise female subjectivity within a psychoanalytic framework. Whereas Irigaray and Kristeva deconstruct Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis to question the very possibility of theorising female subjectivity, critics such as Nancy Chodorow and Jessica Benjamin develop the work of Melanie Klein and Donald Winnicott, particularly object relations theory and its focus on the pre-Oedipal mother-child bond, to conceive of female subjectivity through intersubjectivity. Bracha Ettinger, meanwhile, critiques the phallocentrism of Lacan's theories to forge what she calls the matrixial theory where female subjectivity arises out of ideas of trans-subjectivity, co-emergence and encounter. Although significant, I do not draw on this work because, as I will detail later in this introduction, psychoanalysis is a framework from which we must move away from if we are to conceptualise a female cinematic spatialized subjectivity. See Irigaray, *The Ethics of Sexual Difference*; Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985); Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. Margaret Waller (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984); Nancy Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999); Jessica Benjamin, *Like Subjects, Love Objects* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995); Bracha Ettinger, *The Matrixial Borderspace* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2006).

<sup>49</sup> Grosz, p. 100.

from which man limits his things.<sup>50</sup> Not only is the maternal-feminine, deprived of her own place, but she also becomes the place through which men build conceptual and material worlds. As Grosz explains:

Men produce a universe built upon the erasure of the bodies and contributions of women/mothers and the refusal to acknowledge the debt to the maternal body that they owe. They hollow out their own interiors and project them outward, and then require women as supports for this hollowed out space. Women become the guardians of the private and the interpersonal, while men build conceptual and material worlds.<sup>51</sup>

For Grosz, then, women are collapsed into the figure of the mother. Their bodies become reduced to their maternal functions, meaning she occupies no sense of her own body and only provides space for men.<sup>52</sup> Indeed, Rose argues that, in geographical discourse, the land becomes figured as a pull of maternal containment, as well as a seductive invitation of sexual assertion.<sup>53</sup> The collapse of geographical space into the maternal body asserts land as a space for (heterosexual) male pleasure and exploration.

Before I draw together the problems of psychoanalytic feminist film theory together fully, I want to suggest that, even when critics attempt to develop Mulvey's theory of subjectivity to "make space" for the psychoanalytic female subject, this inevitably fails.<sup>54</sup> Indeed, Mulvey herself addresses and complicates de Lauretis' Oedipally-motivated narrative, although the masculinisation of the journey and the subject position remain intact.<sup>55</sup> A number of feminist critics after Mulvey took up psychoanalysis to attempt to

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<sup>50</sup> Irigaray, p. 10.

<sup>51</sup> Grosz, p. 121.

<sup>52</sup> Grosz specifically reads the woman's body/her womb through the *chora* – a "spaceless space" insofar as it provides the condition for material to come into being. Grosz, p. 114. This will be discussed in more detail in chapter 2.

<sup>53</sup> Rose, *Feminism and Geography*, p. 105.

<sup>54</sup> Mulvey offers more flexibility to her foundational argument in the later essay 'Afterthoughts on Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema inspired by King Vidor's *Duel in the Sun*' by suggesting that the female spectator can oscillate between active male and passive female spectatorial positions. Laura Mulvey, 'Afterthoughts on Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema inspired by King Vidor's *Duel in the Sun*' in *Visual and Other Pleasures*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 31-40.

<sup>55</sup> Mulvey challenges the strict masculine codes of the hero's journey in de Lauretis' argument by pointing out the ways the father is othered and constructed as an obstacle in the Oedipal story. However, she maintains that the 'feminine principle is static... She is a resistance, a boundary to be crossed, a space of enclosure. It is clear that the hero represents an active force of masculinity... and thus *man* as the universal point of reference under patriarchy, and the subject position is definitely that of the male child.' Laura Mulvey, 'The Oedipus Myth: Beyond the Riddle of the Sphinx', *Visual and Other Pleasures*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 184-210 (p. 190).

conceive of the female subject in film. E. Ann Kaplan, for example, used a psychoanalytic framework to analyse ‘the subject’s place in history – a place constructed through ideological and institutional constraints which function in psychic as well as other processes’.<sup>56</sup> Tania Modleski, meanwhile, deployed psychoanalysis to account for the “ambivalences” and “contradictions” embedded in both the representations of women on screen and in the experience of watching films by female spectators.<sup>57</sup> Mary Ann Doane’s work, however, explicitly attempts to construct female subjectivity in cinema via an attention to space so will be my focus here.<sup>58</sup> Doane focuses her analysis on the woman’s film of the 1940s – a place where women are centred both as protagonists and as audiences – as it ‘confronts all the difficulties and blockages outlined so far in the attempt to conceptualize female subjectivity’.<sup>59</sup> Yet, these films, she argues, cannot sustain such a representation of female subjectivity within this phallocentric framework: ‘The formal resistances to the elaboration of female subjectivity produce perturbations and contradictions within the narrative economy.’<sup>60</sup> Once again, this fraught access to constructions of subjectivity is mapped spatially, particularly in the paranoid women’s film of the 1940s, where the female protagonists investigate something terrible in the home: ‘In the paranoid subgroup, the space which the woman is culturally assigned, the home, through its fragmentation into places that are seen and unseen, becomes the site of terror and victimisation – the look turned violently against itself.’<sup>61</sup> Moreover, with the woman situated as the agent of the investigative gaze in these films, a “de-speculation” takes place in these films.<sup>62</sup> No longer constructed through an erotic gaze, space reflects and constructs the frustration of the spectacular framework on which classical Hollywood rests; the house

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<sup>56</sup> E. Ann Kaplan, ‘From Plato’s Cave to Freud’s Screen’, in *Psychoanalysis and Cinema*, ed. by E. Ann Kaplan (London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 1-23 (p. 16).

<sup>57</sup> See Tania Modleski, *The Women Who Knew Too Much: Hitchcock and Feminist Theory*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (New York: Routledge, 2016); Tania Modleski, *Loving with a Vengeance: Mass-Produced Fantasies for Women*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Routledge, 2008).

<sup>58</sup> For broader psychoanalytic developments of Mulvey’s work, see Teresa de Lauretis, *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film, and Fiction* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1987); Mary Ann Doane, ‘Film and the Masquerade: Theorising the Female Spectator’, in *Feminism and Film*, ed. by E. Ann Kaplan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 418-436; Miriam Hansen, *Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991); Judith Mayne, *The Woman at the Key Hole: Feminism and Women’s Cinema* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990); Jacqueline Rose, *Sexuality in the Field of Vision* (London: Verso, 1988); Kaja Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana Press, 1988).

<sup>59</sup> Doane, *The Desire to Desire*, p. 13.

<sup>60</sup> Doane, *The Desire to Desire*, p. 13.

<sup>61</sup> Mary Ann Doane, ‘The “Woman’s Film”: Possession and Address’, in *Home is Where the Heart is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman’s Film*, ed. by Christine Gledhill (London: BFI, 1987), pp. 283-298 (p. 295).

<sup>62</sup> Doane, ‘The “Woman’s Film”’, p. 286.

is ‘formulated along the axis of perverted specularisation’.<sup>63</sup> The spaces of these films work to undermine female subjectivity, as particularly evidenced in Doane’s final conclusion that the female spectator has two unstable positions of address to inhabit: narcissistic identification with the female figure as spectacle, or transvestite identification with the active male hero in his mastery.<sup>64</sup> As she tellingly explains: ‘The “woman’s film” thus functions in a rather complex way to deny the woman the space of a reading.’<sup>65</sup>

Doane’s development of Mulvey’s psychoanalytic framework fails to offer a satisfying account of female subjectivity. Although, once again, she suggests the ways in which space is crucial to the configuration, the spatialized logic of the gaze is such that the female subject still cannot be figured. Indeed, if Doane argues that the ‘insistently spatial logic of apparatus theory has rigidly restricted the way in which vision has been understood as a psychical process with film theory’, I paraphrase her argument to suggest that the insistently spatial logic of apparatus theory has rigidly restricted the way in which *female subjectivity* has been understood as a psychical process in films theory.<sup>66</sup> Alison Butler summarises the problem effectively. She draws on de Lauretis’ metaphor of Zobeide – a city that was founded on the fantasy but, ultimately, the absence of women – as a reflection of women in Western discourse:

For de Lauretis, Zobeide is a powerful metaphor for the gendered structure of representation: woman is “both the source of the drive to represent and its ultimate, unattainable goal”. But it could equally well function as a metaphor for feminist film studies itself: for almost fifteen years [before the year 2000], under the influence of Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, feminists chased male subjectivity through the streets of Zobeide, “this ugly city, this trap”. For feminist film scholars studying a cultural form so massively dominated by men, the construction of a theoretical paradigm in which the absence of female subjectivity is a first principle has been more or less a disaster.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Doane, ‘The “Woman’s Film”, p. 286.

<sup>64</sup> Doane, ‘The “Woman’s Film”, p. 295.

<sup>65</sup> Doane, ‘The “Woman’s Film”, p. 296.

<sup>66</sup> Doane, *Femme Fatale*, p. 82.

<sup>67</sup> Butler, p. 74. In Italo Calvino’s *Invisible Cities* (1974), a group of men have an identical dream about a woman running through an unknown city, so the men work together to build this city, Zobeide, in an attempt to trap and find the woman. Despite having no avenue for escape, the woman was never discovered and becomes inscribed in the city as absence. Through patriarchal spatial constructs and heterosexual male desire, woman is paradoxically trapped within this cityscape and not positioned at all, which is comparative, de Lauretis argues, to the position of woman in film: ‘In the discursive space of the city, as in the constructs of

Similarly, reflecting on the methodological strategies used in her work, Doane considers her own restricted academic endeavours: ‘Perhaps the best way of describing my thinking at that time [when she was writing *The Desire to Desire*]...would be to say that I felt intellectually trapped but, at the same time, could not help admiring the form and structure, the specific architecture of my cage.’<sup>68</sup> I am compelled by the spatial metaphor Doane draws on, which is so telling as to the problems I have been detailing. How can we politically and intellectually get “outside” of this cage to find a space where women can be located and scholars are no longer “trapped”?

Early feminist film theory, as particularly exemplified by Mulvey, de Lauretis and Doane, suggests the impossibility of the cinematic female subject precisely because she has no access to spatial frameworks as formulated by psychoanalysis. Reading these arguments via Irigaray, Grosz and Rose contextualises the difficulty of representational female subjectivity in film within broader problems of women’s access to spatial configurations in philosophical and geographical discourse. The implications of this for cinematic female subjectivity, and female subjectivity more broadly, are disastrous: essentialist binaries of gender are reasserted; women become collapsed into heterosexist definitions of their bodies; women are excluded as subjects of knowledge or desire. Although de Lauretis attempts to differentiate between “woman” (‘a fictional construct, a distillate from diverse but congruent discourses dominant in Western works’) and “women” (‘the real historical beings who cannot as yet be defined outside of those discursive formations’), women as socially, materially and historically-inscribed subjects disappear from view.<sup>69</sup> As I noted earlier via McCabe, these theoretical models contributed ‘to producing another ahistorical, abstracted female subject’.<sup>70</sup>

“Abstracting” the female subject fails to account for women’s multiple intersecting axis of identities, resting on a normative assumption of women as white, heterosexual, cis-gender, Western and able-bodied. Patricia White argues that, within feminist film studies, ‘discussions of critical issues such as desire, identification, and visual and narrative

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cinematic discourse, woman is both absent and captive: absent as theoretical subject, captive as historical subject.’ De Lauretis, *Alice Doesn’t*, p. 14.

<sup>68</sup> Doane, *Femme Fatales*, p. 11.

<sup>69</sup> De Lauretis, *Alice Doesn’t*, p. 5. Ince points out that, although de Lauretis argues that psychoanalysis denies women as subjects and producers of culture, she returns to psychoanalytic readings, attributing an overly deterministic power to narrative and retaining too many terms of psychoanalytic feminist film theory. Ince, p. 31.

<sup>70</sup> McCabe, pp. 110-111.

pleasure do not automatically encompass the lesbian subject'.<sup>71</sup> The difficulty of figuring the queer female subject on screen is, once again, mapped spatially. Reading the figure of the lesbian in *The Haunting* (1963) through Freud's uncanny and de Lauretis' theory of gendered plot texts, White argues: 'Given the collapse of "woman" on to the space rather than the subject of narrative, and given the identification of heterosexuality *qua* conception with the very prototype of narrative progression, it is no wonder that the lesbian heroine (and her spectatorial counterpart) are so difficult to envision'.<sup>72</sup> Indeed "envisioning" is crucial for White; for *The Haunting* dramatizes not the lesbian's "deficiency" in relation to vision, but a deficiency in relation to visibility and visualisation.<sup>73</sup> Like the unseen ghost in the film, she haunts feminist film theory's *topos* of the home. Her disembodiment and dislocatedness exemplifies the further spatial precarities of women from multiply-oppressed identity groups. A number of women-authored British films since the turn of the millennium feature queer female characters such as *I Can't Think Straight* (2008), *Nina's Heavenly Delights* (2007), *Do I Love You?* (2002), *The Book of Gabrielle* (2016), *Break my Fall* (2011), *Cracks* (2009) and *Fear of Water* (2014). However, the women in the films analysed in this thesis are all presented as heterosexual, or at least not LGBTQ-identified, with each film plot revolving around a conventionally heteronormative experience: marriage; pregnancy; motherhood; a teenage girl's sexual awakening and an older man's exploitation of it. This speaks both to the kind of spatial explorations heterosexual-presenting women take up in cinema, and the continued centrality of questions around heteronormative femininity for female subjects in contemporary Britain. Although much work has been done on queer women and queer female spaces in contemporary cinema, the focus of this thesis, then, is on the issues surrounding heterosexuality and heteronormativity in the spatial exploration of female subjects in British women's cinema.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Patricia White, 'Female Spectator, Lesbian Spectre: *The Haunting*', *Women in Film Noir*, ed. by E. Ann Kaplan (London: BFI, 1998), pp. 130-150. See also Teresa de Lauretis, *The Practice of Love: Lesbian Sexuality and Perverse Desire* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994); Jackie Stacey, 'Desperately Seeking Difference', in *The Sexual Subject: A Screen Reader in Sexuality* (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 244-257.

<sup>72</sup> White, p. 137.

<sup>73</sup> White, p. 138.

<sup>74</sup> For considerations of queer women's representation in the cinema, see for example Clara Bradbury-Rance, *Lesbian Cinema after Queer Theory* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019); Jack Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998); B. Ruby Rich, *New Queer Cinema: The Director's Cut* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013). For considerations for queer space and cinema, see Lee Wallace, *Lesbianism, Cinema, Space: The Sexual Life of Apartments* (New York: Routledge, 2009); Barbara Mennel, 'The Queer City', in *Cities and Cinema*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Routledge, 2019); Karl Schoonover and Rosalind Galt, *Queer Cinema in the World* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016);

As well as sexuality, we can also critique this women's spatial absence along classed and racialized lines. The collapse of the maternal body and the home has been criticised as a white and middle-class conceptualisation. Iris Marion Young and Emily Martin both criticise Irigaray's image of women's enclosure in the house for failing to consider how working-class women are less likely to understand their bodies as interiorised.<sup>75</sup> bell hooks complicates women's relationship to racialized conception of home, arguing that home can be a subversive and feminist space for black women and communities, and can offer nurturing, shelter and warmth away from the 'wounds' of white supremacy.<sup>76</sup> Her argument can be situated alongside her broader criticism of the whiteness of feminist film theory.<sup>77</sup> Moreover, conceiving of (white, middle-class) women's bodies as providing space for man risks conflating femininity with colonialism. Ella Shohat analyses how colonised land becomes discursively feminised in multiple Eurocentric disciplines, particularly through narratives of Western penetration of "primitive" yet "inviting" virginal land.<sup>78</sup> She argues that feminist film theory, 'must take into account the national and historical specificities of that discourse' and 'the broader structural analogies in the representation of diverse colonized spaces'.<sup>79</sup> This is pertinent to my examination of British cinema, where histories of colonialism, diaspora and immigration are integral, such as in *Belle*.<sup>80</sup>

In my reading of feminist film theory's early work on female subjectivity, then, I summarise several key spatial problems:

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Maria San Filippo, 'Unthinking Heterocentrism: Bisexual Representability in Art Cinema', *Global Art Cinema: New Theories and Histories*, ed. by Rosalind Galt and Karl Schoonover (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 75-91.

<sup>75</sup> See Iris Marion Young, *Intersecting Voices: Dilemmas of Gender, Political Philosophy and Policy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), p. 141; Emily Martin, *The Woman in the Body: A Cultural Analysis of Reproduction* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992).

<sup>76</sup> See bell hooks, 'Homeplace: A Site of Resistance' in *Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics* (London: Turnaround, 1991), pp. 41-50.

<sup>77</sup> See bell hooks, 'The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators', in *Reel to Real: Race, Class and Sex at the Movies* (New York: Routledge, 2009). See also Jane Gaines, 'White Privilege and Looking Relations: Race and Gender in Feminist Film Theory', in *Feminism and Film*, ed. by Kaplan, pp. 336-355.

<sup>78</sup> Ella Shohat, 'Gender and the Culture of Empire: Toward a Feminist Ethnography of the Cinema', *Taboo Memories, Diasporic Voices* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), pp. 17-69. Shohat particularly points to the problematic ways white and largely European feminists interrogate Freud's metaphor of the female sexuality as a "dark continent" without working through the racial and colonial implications in this analogy. See also Doane, *Femme Fatales*; E. Ann Kaplan, *Looking for the Other: Feminism, Film and the Imperial Gaze* (London: Routledge, 1997); Lola Young, *Fear of the Dark: "Race", Gender and Sexuality in the Cinema* (London: Routledge, 1996).

<sup>79</sup> Shohat, p. 61.

<sup>80</sup> Gurinder Chadha is another prominent British women filmmaker who draws on and complicates British colonial histories through the "look" of a British-Asian woman. See Kaplan, *Looking for the Other*.

1. Women's subjectivity is figured as difficult (even impossible) because she cannot occupy cinematic space within the totalising nature of the gaze.
2. Paradoxically, she provides space for man. She is at once reduced to an essentialist notion of her body – her womb – as a provider for man, and yet is unable to “occupy” her body on her own terms as something active, productive, creative, autonomous, sensuous and mobile.
3. She is abstracted as an ahistorical, universalised gendered subject. There is no scope to read her through other differences such as race, class or sexuality, or to contextualise her representation within a social, cultural, historical or national framework.
4. She cannot move through space or “occupy” space; she has no sense of temporality. She is immobile, captive and static.
5. In occupying “no” space, she is figured only in terms of her exterior image; no sense of her interiority emerges. She has difficulty being represented as the subject of narration; she has difficulty being figured as the one who desires.

In this next section, I turn to more recent feminist film scholarship which either implicitly or explicitly works through these spatial problems. The theoretical frameworks used by these works are varied. However, I draw them together deliberately. For Braidotti, one of the strengths of feminist theory is the desire to leave behind linear mode of intellectual thinking and to move beyond the canonical texts of the philosophical humanist tradition. Indeed, if we want to break free of the “Oedipal plot” of theoretical work, as well as cinematic narrative, Braidotti calls for feminists to break away from the patterns of masculine identification that academic style demands and to cultivate ‘the art of disloyalty’.<sup>81</sup> I take up this invitation, constellating together knowledges which enable me to theorise women’s representational subjectivities as spatially present rather than spatially absent.

### **Feminist Film Theory, Female Subjectivity and Space: The “Present” Female Subject**

Several scholars attempt to account for the female cinematic subject via an attention to embodiment and interiority. Vivian Sobchack’s 1992 book, *The Address of the Eye: A*

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<sup>81</sup> Braidotti, p. 24.

*Phenomenology of Film Experience* draws on Maurice Merleau-Ponty's work on phenomenology to challenge the cinematic subject as determined wholly by a visual cinematic apparatus. Sobchack accounts for the lived-body of the spectator, offering a materially-grounded 'interrogation and description of the experiential phenomenon of sensing, enworlded bodies that can see and be seen'.<sup>82</sup> Since then, several feminist film theorists have taken up a phenomenological framework in an explicit attempt to move past the problems of the "abstracted" psychoanalytic female subject, instead accounting for an embodied female subject.<sup>83</sup> Katharina Lindner is sympathetic to what she perceives as a strategic erasure of the body by early feminist film critics, who were suspicious of employing the female body as a material entity for fear of asserting the fetishized body as central to female subjectivity.<sup>84</sup> She does, however, point to some now foundational works of feminist film criticism that account for the gendered body, such as Barbara Creed's *The Monstrous Feminine: Film, Feminism and Psychoanalysis*, which I consider in more detail in my chapter on *Prevenge*.<sup>85</sup> Nevertheless, Lindner critiques early psychoanalytic feminist film theory for reasserting binaries of sexual difference which both universalises this "difference" and fails to account for the specific, lived materiality of the body.<sup>86</sup> Both Linder and Kate Ince enable me to account for an embodied female subjectivity. Ince 'gives attention to situation and agency of the female character(s), to the bodily and emotional experiences and intersubjective encounters that shape her "progress" through the film'.<sup>87</sup> For Lindner, rather than considering gendered subjectivity in terms of voice or discourse, 'we might conceptualise subjectivity (and cinema) relationally, in terms of embodiment, stance, contact and orientation and their variously visceral, corporeal and affective dimensions'.<sup>88</sup> The female subject becomes corporeally-rendered, with an attention to spatial and temporal parameters.

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<sup>82</sup> Vivian Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), p. xvii.

<sup>83</sup> See Chamarette; Ince; Lindner.

<sup>84</sup> Lindner, pp. 13-14.

<sup>85</sup> Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous Feminine: Film, Feminism and Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1993). See also Carol Clover, *Men, Women and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (London: British Film Institute, 1993); Linda Williams, 'Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess', *Film Quarterly*, 44.4 (1991) 2-13.

<sup>86</sup> Lindner, p. 12. Ince also argues that psychoanalysis does not offer a satisfactory account of female subjectivity – 'one that integrates embodiment and is historically flexible to take account of non-white and queer female identities'. Ince, p. 3.

<sup>87</sup> Ince, p. 42.

<sup>88</sup> Lindner, p. 18.

While Lindner is interested primarily in spectatorship, particularly how the spectator is attuned or, via Sara Ahmed, “orientated”, to racialized, gendered and queered bodies, Ince more explicitly examines representations of female subjectivities in order to bring out the ‘agentic, embodied action on the part of women’.<sup>89</sup> However, although Ince accounts for a gendered body in terms of the gendered modes ‘of moving and relating to space as the starting point for its enquiry into differentiated embodiment’, she does not do so in order to situate bodies in their historicised spatial and temporal contexts.<sup>90</sup> As will become particularly apparent in my chapter focusing on *Fish Tank*, Ince offers too much agency to the phenomenologically rendered body and fails to consider the material and historical spatial contexts through which these bodies move. As Grosz argues: ‘If bodies are to be reconceived, not only must their *matter and form* be rethought, but so too must their environment and *spatial-temporal location*.’<sup>91</sup> Therefore, although phenomenology allows me to account for an active, mobile, embodied subject, I complicate the agency afforded to this body by directing attention towards the representational spaces through which my female subject move, something I discuss in more detail in the next section of this introduction.

Giuliana Bruno also offers an alternative model to psychoanalysis that constructs the female subject via an explicit attention to spatiality. Bruno moves from considering film as an optic to haptic medium. Her work can be situated alongside other considerations of film as tactile, such as Laura U. Marks’ theory of haptic visuality which accounts for the film viewer’s multi-sensory, embodied experience, and Jennifer M. Baker’s argument regarding the intimate and close connection we experience through cinema’s tactility.<sup>92</sup> Of particular importance to this thesis, however, is Bruno’s development of the haptic in relation to space. In moving from optic to haptic, Bruno moves from the perspective of the gaze to an attention to ‘diverse architectural motions’; from “sight” and “site”.<sup>93</sup> Whereas

<sup>89</sup> Ince, p. 41. See also Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006).

<sup>90</sup> Ince, p. 42.

<sup>91</sup> Grosz, p. 84.

<sup>92</sup> See Laura U. Marks, *The Skin of Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000); Laura U. Marks, *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002); Jennifer M. Baker, *The Tactile Eye: Touch and the Cinematic Experience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009).

<sup>93</sup> Giuliana Bruno, *Atlas of Emotion: Journeys in Art, Architecture, and Film* (New York: Verso, 2002; rpt. 2018), p. 6. Bruno’s work can be situated alongside a larger academic move to theorise films as haptic journeys, a development from Walter Benjamin who figures spectators as adventurous travellers moving through space. See Walter Benjamin, ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’, in *Illuminations*, ed. by Hannah Arendt (London: Pimlico, 1999), pp. 211-244; Juhani Pallasmaa, *The Architecture of Image: Existential Space in Cinema* (Helsinki: Rakennustieto, 2001); Peter Wollen,

the psychoanalytic gaze “flattens” the representation of women into the spectacular image of woman who is suspended in time and space, Bruno’s investment in “site” conceives of subjectivity as a series of three-dimensional spatialized reflections and displacements.<sup>94</sup> Bruno “maps” the moving image in relation to its tactile connections with geography and architecture. This map, which Bruno calls an “atlas”, is a journey in and with film; ‘the fixed optical geometry that informed the old cinematic *voyeur* becomes the moving vessel of a film *voyageuse*.<sup>95</sup> Bruno argues that figuring the female subject as a *voyageuse* is crucial for dislodging her from the Oedipal journey of cinematic narrative and the rigid binaries of sexual difference on which it depends; it undoes ‘the fixity of binary systems that have immobilized her and effaced her from the map of mobility’.<sup>96</sup> Rather than figuring the journey of cinematic narrative as a return home, she values the journey itself, facilitating a dwelling that is transitive rather than fixed: ‘Wandering defines this cartography, which is guided by a fundamental remapping of dwelling. A constant redrafting of sites, rather than the circulatory of origin and return, ensures that spatial attachment does not become a desire to possess.<sup>97</sup> The female subject’s dwelling is transitive rather than fixed; her wandering is a constant remapping, rather than an attachment.<sup>98</sup>

The female wanderer is an important figure for this thesis. In *Prevenge*, Lowe presents Ruth as a *flâneuse* as part of the film’s broader presentation of the pregnant body’s experience *in* space (rather than *as* space, which is such a prevalent embodied spatial representation for the pregnant woman). Moreover, this figure is also used to convey Ruth’s interiority, particularly her grief over losing her partner and her ambivalence towards pregnancy and impending motherhood. Similarly, in *Fish Tank*, Mia is also a wanderer as various places are unwelcome or inhospitable to her. However, unlike Bruno, I do not always suggest that representations of women’s wandering – the *flâneuse*, the nomadic, the dislocated – are radical, desirable or even possible states for my female subjects. Suggesting the female wanderer as a progressive position is a marker of white, Western privilege, ignoring those who cannot or are forced to move, as well as erasing the

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<sup>94</sup> ‘Architecture and Film: Places and Non-Places’, in *Paris Hollywood: Writings on Film* (London: Verso, 2002); C.S. Tashiro, *Pretty Pictures: Production Design and the History of Film* (Austin: University of Texas, 1998).

<sup>95</sup> Bruno, p. 114.

<sup>96</sup> Bruno, p. 6.

<sup>97</sup> Bruno, p. 85.

<sup>98</sup> Bruno, p. 34.

colonialist associations of this movement.<sup>99</sup> Eva's travels to "exotic" places in *Kevin* necessitate an examination of the colonial histories that underpin these journeys. Dido's search for a literal and representative "place" in *Belle* complicates the value placed on female movement as she seeks stability in a time and place (specifically Britain in the eighteenth century) when/where black and mixed-race people were displaced or made unwelcome. Moreover, as I discuss in my chapter on *Prevenge*, the famous female streetwalker – the sex worker – has a very different relationship to space and subjectivity than Bruno sets out here. Therefore, although Bruno allows me to account for an active and mobile subject, who moves through space rather than being figured as space, it is crucial to consider these women's positionalities – the subject positions they inhabit and the spaces in which they are embedded – to examine more carefully the kinds of subjectivities these spaces bring forward.

Bruno also stresses the importance of emotion to her theorisations of cinematic movement.<sup>100</sup> Although her work mainly appeals to the spectator's "emotional journey" in relation to the moving image, she also makes possible the use of space to represent women's affective and emotional lives. Drawing on Madeleine de Scudéry's map for her novel *Clelie*, Bruno demonstrates how this cartographic space makes the affective world of the novel's female protagonist visible to us: 'In its design, grown out of an amorous journey, the exterior world conveys an interior landscape. Emotion materializes as a moving topography. To traverse that land is to visit the ebb and flow of a personal and yet social psychogeography.'<sup>101</sup> Inspired by this, I consider how my female filmmakers use space to make their protagonist's interiority legible. As I argued earlier, interiority is crucial to represent female subjectivity on screen. In doing so, I draw on Bolton's work on female consciousness. Drawing specifically on Doane's criticism that feminist film theory's dependence on psychoanalysis contributed to the "abstraction of women" in cinema, Bolton argues that this "abstraction" 'offers no insight into the interiority or consciousness of a woman, concentrating instead on external representations and

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<sup>99</sup> Braidotti, for example, asserts that 'issues of exile and asylum are too serious to be metaphorized into a new ideal', and we must pay attention to and be accountable for the cartographic differences among women. Braidotti, p. 56.

<sup>100</sup> For Bruno, movement encompasses emotion. Extending the etymology of the word "emotion", where the Latin root comes for the very "to move", Bruno creates her 'own (e)motion, enhancing the fundamentally migratory sense of the term it employs, in practice, the haptic affect of "transport" that underwrites the formation of cultural travel. It is here, in this very *emotion*, that the moving image was implanted, with its own psychogeographic version of transport'. Bruno, p. 7.

<sup>101</sup> Bruno, p. 2.

images'.<sup>102</sup> To counter this, Doane and Bolton propose the creation of women with specific individual histories and memories – a new cinematic practice of representation:

It is Doane's contention that, through the creation of female characters who display a sense of where they are in time as well as place, the characters would be able to move beyond theoretical abstraction. It is in the very mechanics of representation that the changes are needed for what Doane describes as "the elaboration of a new process of seeing and remembering". If a woman on-screen is shown to be recalling and reflecting upon past personal experiences, creating memories and reactions based upon those experiences, this is likely to create a representation which goes beyond a spectacle or portrait and into a more psychologically complex dimension.<sup>103</sup>

Bolton posits a helpful theoretical tool through which female subjectivity can be constructed on screen. She draws on Irigaray's model of a speculum, which allows us to see 'what is specific to a woman, and to reveal how a woman could construct a world of her own, it is necessary to look inside her. A curved mirror will change perspective, going beyond the flat reflection, facilitating a "journey to interiority, an internalized becoming"'.<sup>104</sup> In a similar move to Bruno's "displacing" mirror, Bolton compares the Irigarayan speculum to filmmaker's camera 'as a means of "getting inside" women's subjectivities, revealing and examining their interiority and consciousness'.<sup>105</sup> Bolton's theory compellingly renders legible the visual and aural ways in which women's interiorities can be represented on film.

These critics suggest that female subjectivity is spatially conceivable: space as something she can occupy; space as somewhere she can move though; space as something which can represent her interiority. I draw on Bruno and recent phenomenologists to account for a gendered body which is active, productive and mobile. This moves past the problem outlined in the previous section of reducing women to an essentialist notion of her body – her womb – as a provider and space for man. It enables us to theorise the female subject as "occupying" her own body. Women are no longer figured as providing space for

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<sup>102</sup> Bolton, p. 11. See also Doane, 'Femmes Fatales, pp. 76-98.

<sup>103</sup> Bolton, p. 13.

<sup>104</sup> Bolton, p.36.

<sup>105</sup> Bolton, p. 37.

the heterosexual male Oedipal narrative. Rather she is figured as moving through space as a means and expression of her own interiority and desires. Furthermore, accounting for women's interiority dislodges us/them from Mulvey's frozen place of erotic contemplation, which only represents "woman's" exteriority. Through Bruno and Bolton, space and place can represent women's emotional and affective life, enabling us to render legible women's desires and interiority.

However, as I have already alluded to, there are limitations to the work of the theorists on which I draw: Ince's investment in the agency afforded to the phenomenologically rendered gendered body, which fails to consider the spatial and temporal contexts through which the body moves; and Bruno's assertion of the *voyageuse* as a radical or desirable figure without considering the white, Western privilege behind this argument. My criticism of these arguments resides in the lack of positionality considered in relation to these subjects. Braidotti calls for an embedded and situated subject, located in both space (geographical, social and ecophilosophical dimension) and time (historical and genealogical dimension).<sup>106</sup> Similar to Adrienne Rich's theory of the politics of location, Braidotti argues that we must be attentive to and accountable for cartographic accuracy and differences among women.<sup>107</sup> Therefore, although I privilege a spatial analysis as a theoretical tool which enables female subjectivities to emerge representationally on screen, I also argue that this spatial analysis is necessary in order to *position* my female subjects in a specific spatial and temporal context. As I was analysing my films and I attempted to decipher the multiple and conflicting meanings embedded in women's spatial configurations, I found it imperative to consider the extra-diegetic meanings of spaces and places at play in the diegetic use of these spaces. How could I not temper an "optimistic" reading of Mia leaving the housing estate at the end of *Fish Tank* with the failure of upward mobility as promised by meritocratic Britain? How could I not embed Eva's desire for travel in *Kevin* against the stasis and claustrophobia of motherhood, in white, Western configurations of "exotic" and imperialist adventures? How could I not link Dido's narrative search for a representative and literal "place" in Kenwood House in *Belle* to the erasure and displacement of the historical figure of Dido, who has been largely whitewashed out of British history and heritage cinema? How could I not situate Ruth

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<sup>106</sup> Braidotti, p. 4.

<sup>107</sup> Braidotti, p. 56. See also Adrienne Rich, *Blood, Bread and Poetry: Selected Prose 1979-1885* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1986); bell hooks, 'Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness' in *Yearnings: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics* (London: Turnaround, 1991), pp. 145-153.

embodied pregnant subjectivity in *Prevenge* within questions of women's bodily autonomy and reproductive rights? Prioritising intersectionality, I remain attentive to the ways in which the intersectional identities of my female protagonists produce different spatial relationships in the films analysed (Dido's spatial relationship cannot be separated from race, Mia's relationship cannot be separated from class and so on). Moreover, I also remain attentive to privileged categories of difference among these women: Eva is specifically a middle-class, white, American mother, which produces a particular relationship to the suburban home, for example; Dido is also upper-class which refracts her position within the country house through a different spatial configuration than Mabel, her family's black servant. If women filmmakers transform women protagonists' relationship to cinematic space by constructing these women subjects as corporeally and affectively rendered, then it is imperative to examine the specificity of these spaces and the specificity of the subject in them. In my next section, I will define my use of space and consider how this mediates – and complicates – the representation of female subjectivity on screen.

### Space, Gender and Cinema

Although space and time are often conceptualised as concurrent dimensions (and, indeed, they are important intersecting categories in this thesis), I prioritise a spatial reading. This is due to my interest in visual representation, which more readily lends itself to spatial representation (and in the interest of managing the scope of my project given the limitations on the thesis format). However, I am mindful that film is both a spatialized and temporalized medium, and I aim to highlight the temporal resonances when applicable, such as the significant temporal rendering of a mother's space through the device of flashbacks in *Kevin*.

In my approach to cinematic space, I follow Antônio Márcio da Silva and Mariana Cunha who consider 'spatiality as a powerful tool of cinema that can reveal aesthetic, political, social and historical meanings of the cinematographic image instead of considering space as just a formal element of a film, whose roles are limited to situating stories and providing a representation of reality'.<sup>108</sup> If space is gendered not only through physical occupation but also through representation, then cinema offers a crucial depiction

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<sup>108</sup> Antônio Márcio da Silva and Mariana Cunha, 'Introduction', *Space and Subjectivity in Brazilian Cinema*, ed. by Antônio Márcio da Silva and Mariana Cunha (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), pp. 1-22 (p. 2).

of this.<sup>109</sup> In this way, I am interested in space both as a diegetic representation and a formal construction, but always in terms of their feminist political function. In my consideration of the representation of spaces and places in my films, I follow Natalie Fullwood's use of the term "cinematic space" to suggest the transformation of profilmic space into filmic space, in a process that both influences and is influenced by the extra-diegetic spaces of society.<sup>110</sup> The majority of my films were filmed mainly on location.<sup>111</sup> Following Fullwood, I argue that the very act of using these spaces within the fictional construct alters their meanings: 'When it is chosen for filming and adapted for the needs of narrative, the historically and geographically specific place in question undergoes an ontological transformation: it becomes a profilmic space.'<sup>112</sup> In my chapters, I pay close attention to cultural and social meanings imbued in extra-diegetic spaces and places and how this mediates their diegetic representation. These include, but are not limited to, the country house, the court room, city spaces, suburban houses, professional work spaces, housing estates and rural spaces. Furthermore, in considering spaces and places as discursive constructions, I, like Thornham, discovered that representations of cinematic spaces are also bound up with genre.<sup>113</sup> I am also attentive, therefore, to the generic meanings embedded in the spaces of heritage cinema in *Belle*, of horror cinema in *Prevenge*, of the maternal melodrama in *Kevin*, and of the social realist film in *Fish Tank*. In this thesis, I am interested in how these become represented as diegetic or filmic spaces by my women filmmakers, transforming them into specific spatial contexts which mediate an exploration of their female protagonists' subjectivities.<sup>114</sup>

Following Doreen Massey, I do not separate out "space" and "place", but consider them as interrelated and overlapping. Massey argues that the space and place are

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<sup>109</sup> Jane Rendell, 'Introduction: Gender, Space' in *Gender, Space, Architecture: An Interdisciplinary Introduction*, ed. by Jane Rendell, Barbara Penner and Ian Borden (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), pp. 101-111 (p. 103).

<sup>110</sup> Natalie Fullwood, *Cinema, Gender, and Everyday Space: Comedy, Italian Style* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p. 18.

<sup>111</sup> Some parts of *Belle* were shot at Pinewood studios. 'Filming of Movie *Belle* "to bring in £1m" to the Isle of Man', *BBC*, 10 September 2012 <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-isle-of-man-19542706>> [accessed 15 February 2019].

<sup>112</sup> Fullwood, p. 19.

<sup>113</sup> Thornham, *Spaces of Women's Cinema*, p. 13.

<sup>114</sup> My thesis can be situated alongside a burgeoning field of broader interrogations into the relationship between cinema, space and gender. See Bruno, *Atlas of Emotion*; Giuliana Bruno, *Streetwalking on a Ruined Map: Cultural Theory and the City Films of Elvira Notari* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993); Fullwood; Merrill Schleier, *Skyscraper Cinema: Architecture and Gender in American Film* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), Thornham, *Spaces of Women's Cinema*; Pamela Robertson Wojeik, *The Apartment Plot: Urban Living in American Film and Popular Culture, 1945 to 1975* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

constructed concurrently through social relations.<sup>115</sup> These relations stretch beyond “place” itself – the “global” is part of the “local”, the “outside” is part of the “inside”: “[Place is] constructed not through placing boundaries around it and defining its identity through counter-position of the other which lies beyond, but precisely (in part) through the specificity of the mix of links and interconnections *to* that “beyond”. Places viewed this way are open and porous.<sup>116</sup> The identification of place as fluid and dynamic, imbricated in a particular relation with space, enables me to conceptualise space and place simultaneously, without need for an artificial divide between them, or to suggest that certain spaces/places always need to have an identifiable and specific geographical locale and boundary. In addition, it undercuts the denigration of the feminine, which is often associated with the local and place.<sup>117</sup>

In this way, I do not follow John David Rhodes and Elena Gorfinkel’s privileging of “place” over “space” in their analysis of cinema. I do, however, follow their line of argument that place (and space) is a constitutive and constructive force of human subjectivity.<sup>118</sup> Massey proposes that, by conceiving dynamic, multiple and simultaneous spatialities and temporalities, we can conceive of numerous subjectivities – ones which are never stable, unified and universal, but remain ‘speculative and incomplete’.<sup>119</sup> Although, as with space, subjectivities are open and fluid, their political importance is paramount. As Massey says: ‘Space does not exist prior to identities/entities, and their relations... [I]dentities/entities, the relations “between” them, and the spatiality which is part of them, are all constitutive.’<sup>120</sup> I suggest that this relationship between subjectivity and space is crucial, not only because space is always constituted by and through subjectivities, but because an analysis of spatial representation enables an analysis of subjectivities and intersectional gender relations to come forward. In this way, I consider how representations of discursive spaces produce discursive subjects.

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<sup>115</sup> This comes from Henri Lefebvre who argues that space is socially produced and socially productive: ‘a space is not a thing but rather a set of relations between things (objects and products)’. Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. by Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1991), p. 83.

<sup>116</sup> Doreen Massey, *Space, Place and Gender* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), p. 5. See also Linda McDowell, *Gender, Identity and Place: Understanding Feminist Geographies* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999).

<sup>117</sup> Massey, *Space, Place and Gender*, p. 10.

<sup>118</sup> John David Rhodes and Elena Gorfinkel, ‘Introduction: The Matter of Places’, in *Taking Place: Location and the Moving Image*, ed. by John David Rhodes and Elena Gorfinkel (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2011), pp. vii-xxix (p. ix).

<sup>119</sup> Nick Mansfield, *Subjectivity: Theories of the Self from Freud to Haraway* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), p. 5.

<sup>120</sup> Doreen Massey, *For Space*, (London: Sage, 2005), p. 10.

Moreover, these discursive spaces/subjectivities are subject to potential transformations. Massey argues that ‘thinking the spatial in a particular way can shake up the manner in which certain political questions are formulated, can contribute to political arguments already under way, and – most deeply – can be an essential element in the imaginative structure which enables in the first place an opening up to the very sphere of the political’.<sup>121</sup> Crucially for this project, one of the connections Massey draws between the spatial and the political is the insistence that the story of the world cannot be told through the story of the West nor the story of the white, heterosexual male; if we are to have any serious recognition of multiplicity and heterogeneity, then this depends on ‘a fuller recognition of the simultaneous coexistence of others with their own trajectories and their own stories to tell’.<sup>122</sup> Thornham draws together the implications of this for women’s filmmaking. Rather than conceiving of women’s filmmaking as *travelling over* space like a surface (which, as I detailed earlier via de Lauretis, genders space female and the subject of the travelling and the narrative male), we should conceive of women’s filmmaking as *engaging with* space in Massey’s terms. Engaging with space is ‘to effect a very different relationship, one which must also change narrative – no longer “overarching” but “simultaneous”, a “meeting up of histories”’.<sup>123</sup> Paying attention to how women filmmakers engage with space enables a close examination of moments of transformation in representation and narrative.

This is particularly important for my consideration of the formal construction of cinematic space. Formalist analysis of cinema has long been interested in the compositional construction of cinematic space, tied to the ambiguous delineation between “off” and “on” screen space.<sup>124</sup> Thornham explicitly genders this, particularly via Stephen Heath’s separation of narrative (time) against “memory spectacle” (space). Rather than privileging time and, therefore, the masculine over space, as Heath does, Thornham points out that, in cinema, time and space are co-implicated: ‘Memory is spatial as well as temporal, events occur in time-space, and telling involves space as well as time, just as showing involves time as well as space. In film, the camera is always at once agent of

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<sup>121</sup> Massey, *For Space*, p. 9.

<sup>122</sup> Massey, *For Space*, p. 11.

<sup>123</sup> Thornham, *Spaces of Women’s Cinema*, p. 6.

<sup>124</sup> See David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Form* (London: Methuen and Co., 1985); Noel Burch, *Theory of Film Practice*, trans. Helen R. Lane (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981); Tom Gunning, ‘Narrative Discourse and the Narrator System’, in *Film Theory and Criticism*, ed. by Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen, 6<sup>th</sup> ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp.470-482; Stephen Heath, *Questions of Cinema* (London: Macmillan, 1981).

description and agent of narration. Film, that is, works through space-time together.<sup>125</sup> Considering the ways in which these are gendered and the ways in which these work together enable Thornham to consider ‘what kinds of subjectivity, what kinds of narrative and space-time relations, might be constructed in the work of women’.<sup>126</sup> Following this, I examine the ways in which my filmmakers construct a woman’s space on screen through formal means such as editing and framing. This is particularly apparent in my chapter on *Kevin*, where Ramsay’s expressionistic style lends itself to constructing a mother’s space through framing, *mise-en-scène*, production and cinematographic design and flashbacks. I consider the implications of this formally-rendered feminised space for the production of female subjectivity on screen.

In my thesis, space is always political. Cinematic space both reflects, mediates and constructs wider social spatial processes, and has the potential to transform, challenge and disrupt gendered spatial configurations. By paying close attention to the generic, social, cultural, political and national meanings imbued in extra-diegetic spaces and places, I consider how these become represented as cinematic space and how they, in turn, mediate the representations of female subjectivities on screen. As I mentioned earlier, this allows me to account for an intersectional subject who is embedded and situated in a specific context, and to consider the feminist politics of these images of subjectivities in more nuanced and specific ways. Moreover, considering how my female filmmakers construct cinematic space for their female protagonists offers a conceptual cinematic tool that enables us to figure female subjectivity. As a result, through an examination of the female protagonist in space, we can consider the ways in which these women are afforded cinematic subjectivity and cinematic agency, as much it allows a reflection on the limits placed on these women given their particular positions and identities.

### **British Women’s Filmmaking**

As I quoted earlier, for Grosz, traditional conceptualisations of space mean there is ‘left little room or no room for female self-representations, and the creation of maps and models of space and time based on projections of women’s experiences’.<sup>127</sup> In order to transform representations of female subjectivities, ‘the overarching context of space-time...needs

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<sup>125</sup> Thornham, *Spaces of Women’s Cinema*, p. 10.

<sup>126</sup> Thornham, *Spaces of Women’s Cinema*, p. 10.

<sup>127</sup> Grosz, p. 100.

serious revision'.<sup>128</sup> For Thornham: 'Such re-visioning does occur...in the work of women filmmakers, for whom the transformation of representations and narratives – and hence the creation of a different 'space-time framework' in which bodies might interact and their narratives unfold – is not a theoretical but an urgent practical necessity.'<sup>129</sup> In this thesis, I take up British women's filmmaking as a productive place where women's spaces and subjectivities are explored.<sup>130</sup> In this section, I set out my consideration of authorship, both as an individual mode of potential creative and productive agency, and as a collective mode of gendered and national filmmaking. In considering female cinematic subjectivity as a process of representation, I suggest that women's authorship is a significant factor in the construction of these gendered images. I consider the gendered meanings that arise from these representations to be the result of a negotiation between an author with partial agency in their work and who implicitly or explicitly challenges the spatial configurations of women in cinema, and the diegetic and extra-diegetic socio-cultural constructed meanings of spaces and places that exceed this authorial intent. In my use of the term "negotiation", I follow Christine Gledhill: 'As a model of meaning production, negotiation conceives cultural exchange as the intersection of processes of production and reception, in which overlapping but non-matching determinations operate. Meaning is neither imposed, nor passively imbibed, but arises out of a struggle or negotiation between competing frames of reference, motivation and experience.'<sup>131</sup> I consider how my filmmakers enable two things: an explicit rendering of female subjectivity through an attention to spatial parameters (marginalisation, corporeal spaces, affective spaces and mobility); and, either explicitly or implicitly, a revelation of the spatial limits imposed on these female subjects through their discursive positions.

How, then, can we account for a female author who is, with feminist intent or not, challenging some of the ways women subjectivities are represented on screen? Catherine Grant asks, how can we reconcile the idea that women filmmakers may attempt to *bring about* a challenge to the sexist representations of women in the film text by formal means with the deconstructive understanding of the "author-as-dead" following Roland Bathes

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<sup>128</sup> Grosz, p. 100.

<sup>129</sup> Thornham, *Spaces of Women's Cinema*, p. 11.

<sup>130</sup> De Lauretis also suggests that women's cinema is a place where women as 'subjects of desire' can be "brought in" to cinematic representation. See de Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't*, p. 8. See also de Lauretis, *Technologies of Gender*, p. 26.

<sup>131</sup> Christine Gledhill, 'Pleasurable Negotiations', in *Feminist Film Theory: A Reader*, ed. by Sue Thornham (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), pp. 166-179 (p. 169).

and Foucault?<sup>132</sup> In other words, how can we theorise women filmmakers' attempts to *bring something about*, given the purposeful agency it should normally imply?<sup>133</sup> Grant argues for a conceptualisation of authors as agents: 'female subjects who have direct and reflexive, if obviously not completely "intentional" or determining, relationships to the cultural products they help to produce, as well as to their reception.'<sup>134</sup> In this way, I follow more recent considerations of authorship, such as by Linda Badley, Claire Perkins and Michele Schreiber in their introduction to contemporary American independent women filmmakers, where the agency and activity of female practitioners are embraced as a pathway for film analysis.<sup>135</sup> This is particularly pertinent in light of recent discussions about women's agency in cinema following #metoo and the resulting conversations about the marginalisation of women's voices and authorship in screen industries.<sup>136</sup> Although I do not preclude authorship's other functions, such as a function of the cultural industries, I posit women's authorship as a function in dialogue with the variable agency of the author, the film's production and reception contexts, and the flexible meanings of the images produced.<sup>137</sup> In my chapters, I pay close attention to moments where my female authors are vocal in their feminist attempts to challenge representations of women on screen, such as Alice Lowe in her representation of pregnant women and Amma Asante in her representation of women of colour. I am also attentive to moments when representations exceed authorial intention, inciting competing ideological or discursive constructions of gender and/or space.

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<sup>132</sup> Grant, p. 113. Feminist film critics have also pointed to Nancy Miller's assertion that Barthes' "death of the author" 'prematurely foreclose[s] the questions of identity for women'. See Shelley Cobb, *Adaptation, Authorship and Contemporary Women Filmmakers* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p. 68. See also Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', *Image-Music-Text*, trans. Stephen Heath, (London: Fontana, 1977), pp. 142-148; Michel Foucault, 'What is an author?', *Essential Works of Michel Foucault 1954-1984*, vol. 2, trans Josué V. Harari, ed. by J. Faubion, (London: Penguin, 2000), pp. 205-222.

<sup>133</sup> Grant, p. 117.

<sup>134</sup> Grant, p. 124.

<sup>135</sup> Linda Badley, Claire Perkins and Michele Schreiber, 'Introduction', *Indie Reframed: Women's Filmmaking and Contemporary American Independent Cinema* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), pp. 1-22 (p. 4).

<sup>136</sup> See B. Ruby Rich, 'She Can Do It', *Film Quarterly*, 71.3 (2018)

<<https://filmquarterly.org/2018/02/28/she-can-do-it/>> [accessed 31 March 2019]; Shelley Cobb and Tanya Horeck, 'Post Weinstein: Gendered Power and Harassment in the Media Industries', *Feminist Media Studies*, 18.3 (2018) 489-491; Stefania Marghitu, "'It's just art': Auteur Apologism in the Post-Weinstein Era', *Feminist Media Studies*, 18.3 (2018), 491-494.

<sup>137</sup> Angela Martin argues female authorship needs to account for the industrial practices of the female director. See Angela Martin, 'Refocusing Authorship in Women's Filmmaking', *Women Filmmaking: Refocusing*, ed. by Jacqueline Levitin, Valerie Raoul and Judith Plessis (Toronto: UBC Press, 2003), pp. 29-35.

I have limited my investigation of women-authored cinema to contemporary British cinema. Since the turn of the millennium, several key works have emerged made by women filmmakers in Britain that make significant interventions into representations of women on screen. As Bolton argues, '[f]ilms such as *Fish Tank* (Andrea Arnold, 2009), *The Arbor* (Clio Barnard, 2010), *Exhibition* (Joanna Hogg, 2013) and *The Falling* (Carol Morley, 2014) prove that British women filmmakers are at the vanguard of exploring the lives and minds of women on screen'.<sup>138</sup> These films, along with other significant films such as *Adult Life Skills* (2016), *Bend it Like Beckham* (2002), *Brick Lane* (2007), *Dark River* (2017), *The Levelling* (2016), *Morvern Callar* (2002), *Red Road* (2006), *Second Coming* (2015), *Unrelated* (2007) critically explore and construct a woman's subjectivity through and within a particular space and place. Four films, *Belle*, *Prevenge*, *Kevin* and *Fish Tank*, particularly exemplify this trend. Each explores and constructs one spatialized aspect of cinematic female subjectivity that I outlined in my survey of feminist film theory: the marginalised subject of *Belle*; the embodied subject of *Prevenge*; the affective subject of *Kevin*; and the mobile subject of *Fish Tank*. My analysis of each film suggests a different way in which British women filmmakers represent female subjectivity via space in cinema, while also accumulatively suggesting the burgeoning body of work by British women filmmakers which explore these representations.

My focus on women's authorship is also a strategic feminist move. Feminist critics continue to defend female authorship as useful and politically necessary. For Yvonne Tasker, 'women filmmakers matter for a feminist cultural politics'.<sup>139</sup> Even though film studies has seemingly moved on from authorship as a methodology, it is important to retain, partly to reject auteurist tendencies in film studies and partly to document women's contribution to film history.<sup>140</sup> For Shelley Cobb, examining and writing about women's creative labour is a defence against women's work becoming hidden or obscured (as has

<sup>138</sup> Bolton, p. x. See also Stella Hockenhull, *British Women Film Directors in the New Millennium* (London: Palgrave, 2017). Charlotte Brunsdon similarly notes this trend, but suggests the difficulty of representing female subjectivity on screen by arguing that contemporary British women's films 'bears witness to the paralysis which continues to attend the project of female subjects starring as agents in their own stories'. Charlotte Brunsdon, "'It's a Film?': Medium Specificity as Textual Gesture in *Red Road* and *The Unloved*', *Journal of British Cinema and Television*, 9.3 (2012), 457-479 (p. 463).

<sup>139</sup> Yvonne Tasker, 'Vision and Visibility: Women Filmmakers, Contemporary Authorship, and Feminist Film Studies', *Reclaiming the Archive: Feminism and Film History*, ed. by Vicki Callahan (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2010), pp. 213-230 (p. 213).

<sup>140</sup> As Shelley Cobb argues, auteurism is a key theory to complicate, both because film is a collaborative medium and because it 'is a term that, because of its masculine connotations, has neither been readily available for women filmmakers nor wholly accepted by feminist film theorists'. Cobb, *Adaptation, Authorship and Contemporary Women Filmmakers*, p 1.

historically been the case), and a rally against the complacency we, as feminist academics, may feel when faced with the low numbers of women filmmakers.<sup>141</sup> Following Cobb, my examination of female authorship is partly strategic to highlight and remember the work done by women in contemporary Britain, contributing to a (re)writing of British cinema where women's contribution is included.

In my examination of British women's cinema, I am indebted to Melanie Bell and Melanie Williams' definition of the "British woman's film". For this, they draw on Janet Basinger's definition of a "woman's film": 'a movie that places at the centre of its universe a female who is trying to deal with the emotional, social and psychological problems that are specifically connected to the fact that she is a woman'.<sup>142</sup> Bell and Williams use Basinger's definition in a British context to suggest a history of British woman's films that, as Basinger says, 'articulate female concerns, angers, and desires, to give substance to a woman's dreams and a woman's problems', but imagined within a British cinematic consciousness.<sup>143</sup> While Bell and Williams are concerned with the British woman's film in terms of reception, audience and critical notions of Britishness and British cinema, I am concerned with linking this to women's filmmaking. In this thesis, then, I take up Bell and Williams' definition of the woman's film via Basinger, with the added concern with women's authorship, to look at British women's films: films made by women about women.

In grouping my women authors and their work, I follow Alison Butler's conceptualisation of women's cinema as a minor cinema. Moving away from early feminist film theory's construction of women's cinema as a counter-cinema, Butler argues that the plurality of forms and concerns populating contemporary women's cinema means that a more flexible conceptualisation is needed.<sup>144</sup> Rather than positioning women's cinema as always oppositional to dominant paradigms of cinema (which women's cinema as counter-cinema presupposes), Butler suggests that we conceive of women's cinema as a

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<sup>141</sup> Cobb, *Adaptation, Authorship and Contemporary Women Filmmakers*, p. 3. Cobb, along with Linda Ruth Williams and Natalie Wreyford, have produced reports on the dismally low number of women directors, screenwriters, cinematographers, editors and executive producers in Britain from 2000-2015. Shelley Cobb, Linda Ruth Williams and Natalie Wreyford, 'Calling the Shots: Women working in key roles on UK films in production during 2015', <[https://www.southampton.ac.uk/cswf/project/number\\_tracking.page](https://www.southampton.ac.uk/cswf/project/number_tracking.page)> [accessed 29 January 2019].

<sup>142</sup> Janet Basinger, quoted in Melanie Bell and Melanie Williams, 'The Hour of the Cuckoo: Reclaiming the British Woman's Cinema' in *British Women's Cinema*, ed. by Melanie Bell and Melanie Williams (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010), pp. 1-18 (p. 3).

<sup>143</sup> Bell and Williams, p. 4.

<sup>144</sup> See for example Johnston, 'Women's Cinema as Counter-Cinema'.

minor cinema in a major language.<sup>145</sup> Minor cinema, Butler argues, reflects ‘the *projection* of a community rather than its *expression*’ [emphasis in original], enabling us to posit the existence of a women’s cinema without premising it on an essentialist understanding of the category “women”.<sup>146</sup> Butler’s mode of grouping corresponds with Jane M. Gaines’ “constellating” of female filmmakers; it is a privileging of the spatial over the temporal as a way of bringing together the histories of women filmmakers rather than imposing a linear trajectory on the history of this filmmaking (again, the spatial proves productive for the feminist scholar).<sup>147</sup> Butler offers a flexible model through which I bring together my women filmmakers. They are not grouped through an essentialist understanding of “women” or an analogous effort to challenge gendered hegemonies; rather, they are brought together – “constellated” – in a way that enables me to uncover both the common and conflicting ways in which they explore women’s subjectivities.

Although I group my films as a minor *British* women’s cinema, I do not do so to shore up national borders. Indeed, my inclusion of *Kevin* is an example of the industrial reality of transnational filmmaking.<sup>148</sup> The film is a UK and US co-production, headed up by a British director (Lynne Ramsay) and star (Tilda Swinton), adapted from a book from an American author who now lives in the UK (Lionel Shriver), which was set and filmed in the US, and which tells a narrative that has been identified as distinctly American.<sup>149</sup> We cannot dismiss nationality as significant structuring factor in the film industry and academy, informing production, funding, distribution and reception. However, women’s cinema encompasses transnational processes and interrelations; it both inhabits and exceeds cultural, political and national affiliations.<sup>150</sup> Following Lingzhen Wang, I stress the importance of enabling British women’s filmmaking to be positioned as part of a

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<sup>145</sup> Alison Butler, *Women’s Cinema: The Contested Screen* (London: Wallflower, 2002), p. 20.

<sup>146</sup> Butler, *Women’s Cinema*, p. 21.

<sup>147</sup> Jane M. Gaines, ‘On Not Narrating the History of Feminism and Film’, *Feminist Media Histories*, 2.2 (2016), 6-31 (p. 21). Sue Thornham also takes up this model as a ‘a way of radically reframing the histories – the textual interchanges of dialogues – that, as feminist film theorists and historians, we both construct and explore.’ Sue Thornham, ‘Space, Place, and Realism: *Red Road* and the Gendering of a Cinematic History’, *Feminist Media Histories*, 2.2 (2016), 133-154 (p. 148). This methodology also recalls Bruno’s important recovery of the work by Italian filmmaker Elvira Notari, which Bruno frames as a spatial uncovering and mapping. See Bruno, *Streetwalking on a Ruined Map*.

<sup>148</sup> *Kevin*, as a UK-US co-production can be situated within a recent trend of British filmmakers going to work in the US. See Will Massa, ‘Atlantic Drift’, *Sight and Sound*, May 2018, 24-27.

<sup>149</sup> Sue Thornham reads Kevin’s violent massacre of his classmates as a performance against ‘all-American values’. Sue Thornham, “‘A Hatred So Intense...’: *We Need to Talk about Kevin*, Postfeminism and Women’s Cinema”, *Sequence: Serial Studies in Media, Film and Music*, 2.1 (2013), 1-38 (p. 13).

<sup>150</sup> Butler, *Women’s Cinema*, pp. 123.

broader network of transnational women's filmmaking.<sup>151</sup> While situating my British filmmakers within a global nexus of female-authored images is beyond the scope of this project, my examination of British cinema does not preclude a consideration of this work as made up of connections and networks with other cinemas. Nor does it ignore the fact that, while not in the same league of cultural dominance as Hollywood filmmaking, British filmmaking still benefits from white, Western, English-speaking privilege in comparison to other national and post-colonial women's filmmaking which, as Butler argues, constitutes a double minor cinema.<sup>152</sup> My use of British cinema aims to highlight women's creative and cultural production in Britain, while not ignoring the fact that, as Patricia White says, women's cinema is a transnational formation drawing on many other histories.<sup>153</sup>

Moreover, in thinking about women's cinema within the rubric of nationality, it is necessary to remember the uneasy relationship women have with the national.<sup>154</sup> This tension, Butler argues, also exists within cinema: '[W]omen's cinema is not "at home" in any of the host cinematic or national discourses it inhabits, but...it is always an inflected mode, incorporating, reworking and contesting the conventions of established traditions.'<sup>155</sup> In British cinema, this gendered unease often manifests itself through genre filmmaking. John Hill argues that since the 1980s, British cinema has utilised genre filmmaking to compete in an international film economy, particularly with Hollywood.<sup>156</sup> Brunsdon argues that women are left out of this generic construction, as most intensely suggested by women-authored films about 'desperate young women', such as Cokey Giedroyc's *Stella Does Tricks* (1996) and Carine Adler's *Under the Skin* (1996). For if, as Hill argues, social realist films of the 1980s and 1990s mobilise male-authored films about angry young men as a metaphor for the state of the nation and a yearning for national

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<sup>151</sup> Lingzhen Wang, 'Introduction: Transnational Feminist Reconfiguration of Film Discourse and Women's Cinema', *Chinese Women's Cinema: Transnational Contexts* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), pp. 1-46 (p. 2).

<sup>152</sup> Butler, *Women's Cinema*, p. 100.

<sup>153</sup> Patricia White, *Women's Cinema, World Cinema: Projecting Contemporary Feminisms: Projecting Contemporary Feminisms* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), p. 8.

<sup>154</sup> If, as Benedict Anderson famously proposes, the nation is an "imagined community", then women have had a particularly difficult time "belonging". Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflecting on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991). Virginia Woolf famously claimed: 'As a woman I have no country, as a woman I want no country, as a woman my country is the whole world.' Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own and Three Guineas*, ed. by Anna Snaith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 113. Rich, however, criticises the whiteness and Western-centrism of Woolf's statement, arguing that we must account for the "politics of location" that exist between women. Rich, p. 162. Accounting for the embedded and situated subject within the national, then, is crucial.

<sup>155</sup> Butler, *Women's Cinema*, p. 22. See also White, *Women's Cinema, World Cinema*.

<sup>156</sup> John Hill, 'British Cinema as National Cinema: Production, Audience and Reception' in *The British Cinema Book*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., ed. by Robert Murphy (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 13-21 (p. 15).

wholeness, then films about desperate young women are more difficult to conceptualise as a representation of the national: ‘It may be more difficult to conceive of, and market, these clearly feminine stories as “representation” of the nation... There are real equivocations in the fit between being a woman and representing Britishness.’<sup>157</sup> Bell and Williams concur, arguing that the woman’s film has been neglected from critical considerations of British cinema because of the genre’s appeal to ‘melodramatic emotionality’, which fails to fit within the “restrained” image of typically British filmmaking.<sup>158</sup>

This gendered national unease, at times, plays out in my thesis through a concern with genre. Although my project is not primarily an interrogation of “Britishness” and British cinema, certain generic modes lend themselves to national understandings of British cinema which I cannot ignore, such as *Fish Tank*’s use of social realism and *Belle*’s use of heritage cinema. Here, I consider Brunsdon’s statement regarding the equivocations of womanhood and Britishness as Arnold and Asante implicitly or explicitly challenge these national generic frameworks through an intersectional lens. At times, I draw on broader, transnational generic images produced by Hollywood, such as the maternal melodrama in *Kevin*, and the horror cinema of *Prevenge*. Moreover, these generic spatial configurations are often codified through gender. At other times, then, I think through the relationship between gender, genre and space: the “feminised” maternal melodrama and (to an extent) heritage cinema; the “masculinised” genres of social realism and horror cinema. I consider “feminine” genre’s conventional association with interiority, confinement and enclosed space in comparison to “masculine” genre’s conventional association with exteriority, movement and open space (with the notable exception of horror cinema).<sup>159</sup> Through my examination of British women’s cinema, I challenge the gendered assumptions on which this dichotomy rests, and suggest, via Mary Harrod and Katarzyna Paszkiewicz that women’s work in genre functions as an incursion into a language they make or reclaim as their own without necessarily undoing it.<sup>160</sup> If, as Kaplan argues,

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<sup>157</sup> Charlotte Brunsdon, ‘Not Having it All: Women and Film in the 1990s’, *British Cinema of the 90s*, ed. by Robert Murphy (London: BFI, 2000), pp. 167-177 (pp. 169-170). This is reiterated in a more recent essay by Thornham in reference to Andrea Arnold’s *Red Road* (2006). See Thornham, ‘Space, Place, and Realism’. See also John Hill, ‘Failure and Utopianism: Representations of the Working Class in British Cinema of the 1990s’, in *British Cinema of the 90s*, pp. 178-187.

<sup>158</sup> Bell and Williams, p. 4. See also, Justine Ashby, “‘It’s been emotional’: Reassessing the Contemporary British Woman’s Film”, in *British Women’s Cinema*, pp. 153-169 (p. 154).

<sup>159</sup> Laura Mulvey, ‘Pandora: Topographies of the Mask and Curiosity’, *Sexuality and Space*, ed. Beatriz Colomina (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1992), pp.53-72 (pp. 54-56).

<sup>160</sup> Mary Harrod and Katarzyna Paszkiewicz, ‘Introduction: Women’s Authorship and Genre in Contemporary Film and Television’, *Women do Genre in Film and Television* (New York: Routledge, 2018), pp. 1-20 (p. 7).

women directors ‘feminize genre’ by ‘mak[ing] female subjects central and active instead of peripheral, exotic, or mere victims’, then my films’ concern with centralising women’s subjectivities necessitates a gendered and generic revision.<sup>161</sup>

This thesis, then, makes an intervention in representations of female subjectivity on screen. It argues that an attention to space enables a cinematic rendering of female subjectivity. Feminist film theory has demonstrated an investment in spatiality as a key figuration of female subjectivity. Yet this has been overlooked in film studies – an oversight this project corrects. This thesis argues that certain spatial modes enable female subjectivity to be represented on screen: through an attention to marginality and the “place” of Dido in *Belle*; through the embodied space of Ruth in *Prevenge*; through the affective spaces of Eva in *Kevin*; through the spaces of Mia’s mobility in *Fish Tank*. However, in order to prevent replicating the abstracted, universalised subject of early feminist film theory, this thesis situates this spatial-cinematic rendering of female subjectivities within the film’s specific discursive spatial and temporal contexts. This thesis also, then, considers spatiality as imbued with ideological social, political, cultural, historical and generic meanings. It argues that doing so enables a historicised, positioned and intersectionally-produced subject to emerge. Moreover, in my analysis of female subjectivity, I privilege women’s filmmaking as a mode through which these figurations come forward. “Constellating” particularly British filmmakers together enables me to uncover the comparative and contradictory ways in which they explore women’s subjectivities. My thesis, then, can also be positioned as an intervention in women’s filmmaking, and the various ways in which they negotiate representations of female subjectivity on screen. Ultimately, considering the spaces of female subjectivity enables a rendering of specific modes of her subjecthood, a demonstration of her simultaneous liberation from and limit in various spaces, and a reflection on the spatial position of different women in the contemporary moment.

## Chapter Outline

My following chapters provide an in-depth examination of the representation of a female subject in a contemporary woman-authored British film: Dido in Amma Asante’s *Belle*,

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<sup>161</sup> E. Ann Kaplan, ‘Troubling Genre/Reconstructing Gender’, *Gender Meets Genre in Postwar Cinemas*, ed. by Christine Gledhill (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2012), pp. 71-83 (p. 82).

Ruth in Alice Lowe's *Prevenge*, Mia in Andrea Arnold's *Fish Tank*, and Eva in Lynne Ramsay's *We Need to Talk about Kevin*. My readings of these films constitute significant case studies because they 'are doing something different with female subjectivity'.<sup>162</sup> As I suggested earlier, through an intersectional approach, I consider how these protagonists are constructed not only through gender but race, class and sexuality, among other categories of difference. With each chapter dedicated to a different film, I consider how each film's representation of space mediates the exploration of the female protagonist's subjectivity. As stated in the previous section, by "space", I mean the representations of the extra-diegetic lived, material spaces and places of our everyday lives and how filming and representing these spaces – turning them into "cinematic space" – further imbricates them with formal, aesthetic and generic meaning.

The films examined in chapters one and two, *Belle* and *Prevenge*, explore the representation of female subjectivity through the context of genre. As I mentioned earlier, throughout my analysis of cinematic space, I found that representations of these spaces are bound up with genre. Both *Belle* and *Prevenge* draw on subjectivities which could be considered "absent" in their respective genres, as *Belle* tells the story of a mixed-race woman in the overwhelmingly white genre of heritage cinema, and *Prevenge* tells the story of a pregnant woman in horror cinema, a genre where pregnant bodies, as I will argue, are usually exploited to generate fear and terror. Moreover, in doing so, both films incite broader political discussions about their subjectivities; for Dido, this involves the legal definition of subjecthood for people of colour in a time of slavery; and for Ruth, this encompasses the philosophical and legal discourses surrounding pregnant people's embodiment. Both films offer a centring of women's subjectivities in these "hostile genres".

Chapters three and four, which examine *Kevin* and *Fish Tank*, appear more oblique in their representations of female desire and interiority. The protagonists' bodily movements – their active figurations – are more ambiguously rendered. Moreover, their generic frameworks are drawn more indirectly. However, I argue that both demonstrate a concern with and representation of female subjectivity. Whereas I consider the generic construction of female subjectivity in chapters one and two, I examine a more historicised subject in chapters three and four. I specifically root these subject formations in their postfeminist and neoliberal contexts: the mother subject in *Kevin* and the working-class

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<sup>162</sup> Bolton, p. 3.

girl subject in *Fish Tank*. As I will argue in each chapter, the mother and the girl are intensely postfeminist and neoliberal figurations, and each film both draws on and challenges these subjective positions. Suggesting the ways in which these protagonists are interpellated by, resist and rework these subject positions, *Kevin* and *Fish Tank* offer a reflection on and a rendering of a particular female subjectivity.

In my first chapter, ‘The Marginalised Subject: Spaces of Genre in *Belle* (Amma Asante, 2014)’, I return to the notion of the “absent” subject as first discussed at the beginning of this introduction with reference to Morley’s *Dreams of a Life*. Although people of colour are “missing” subjects in heritage cinema, I consider Dido as a “marginalised” subject to suggest the ways in which in Britain, historically and generically, people of colour are and have always been “present”, even if they are “invisible”. As a heritage film telling the true story of Dido Elizabeth Belle (a wealthy woman of colour in Britain in the late eighteenth century), *Belle* offers a centring of a woman of colour’s history and subjectivity in a genre that so often marginalises her existence. The film plays out as a search for Dido’s place in a generic, national and historical context. Examining the spatial interrogations by Asante within this search for a literal and metaphorical place opens up significant modes in which these contexts are being challenged and the woman of colour is being centred. Focusing my interrogation on the film’s representations of key spaces – most prominently the country house but also the carriage and the courtroom – I examine how Asante stages her wealthy mixed-raced protagonist within them. Drawing heavily on generic tropes, particularly from Austen adaptations, I read *Belle*’s construction and search for a subject position through generic analogous white women in the long eighteenth century, particularly through a search for romantic love, marriage and citizenship which is often narratively played out through a concern with property. Refracting this spatial configuration through the further intersection of race, I argue that Asante provides a complex representation of a woman of colour’s subjectivity in a genre that so often marginalises, ignores or erases her existence.

In my second chapter, ‘The Embodied Subject: Spaces of Pregnancy in *Prevenge* (Alice Lowe, 2016)’, I examine the pregnant body *as* a space and the pregnant body *in* a space. The pregnant body is so often considered an “ambiguous” space in philosophical, theoretical and postfeminist media discourses. This leads to a complex –even impossible – position in traditional masculinist constructions of subjectivity. In horror cinema, this “ambiguous” body space often becomes mapped onto interior domestic spaces so that pregnant women’s subjectivity becomes “obliterated” as a result. In *Prevenge*, Lowe

constructs her pregnant protagonist in complex spatial configurations. Crucially, *Prevenge* explores the experience of this pregnancy by/for Ruth through her complex orientations in various urban spaces. Not only does Lowe construct the city as a strange and alienating space for Ruth, but she also deploys the figures of the serial killer and the *flâneuse* to represent these experiences further. This both presents a complex image of pregnant embodiment, one which is performative, “de-naturalised” and transgressive, and presents an intense insight into Ruth’s interior emotional life. Moreover, this exploration is intensified as Lowe was pregnant at the time of writing and shooting the film. Lowe’s representation of pregnancy, then, is significant because it offers an important working-through of pregnant women’s embodiment and subjectivity in cinema, particularly horror cinema, and wider philosophical and theoretical constructions.

In my third chapter, ‘The Affective Subject: Spaces of Interiority in *We Need to Talk about Kevin* (Lynne Ramsay, 2011)’, I consider the “impossible subject, par excellence” in critical discourse: the mother. I argue that, through an attention to spatial cinematic parameters, both the formal construction of filmic space and the representative transformation of extra-diegetic spaces into diegetic spaces, Ramsay offers a representation of Eva’s interiority in *Kevin*. Although an attention to interiority and affect is important to all my chapters, I particularly focus on *Kevin* as exemplary in its rendering of an “affective” subject. Significantly, I argue that Ramsay foregrounds Eva’s affective response to her “receding” subject-position as a mother, paradoxically constructing a cinematic space through which a woman’s subjectivity can be represented. Firstly, Ramsay makes Eva’s affective response to this “loss” of subjectivity legible as one of maternal ambivalence with an attention to a formal construction of spatiality and temporality. Secondly, Ramsay links this affectively-rendered “loss” to the representation of diegetic spaces, such as the home, the workplace, public spaces and travel spaces. Ramsay presents these spaces as still difficult for the mother-subject, even for the privileged white, Western, middle-class mother. Ultimately, by representing a woman and a mother’s affective spaces on-screen, Ramsay offers a significant representation of female subjectivity.

In my final chapter, ‘The Mobile Subject: Spaces of Exteriority in *Fish Tank* (Andrea Arnold, 2009)’, I consider Mia as a “mobile” subject. Mia is “on the move” through her dance and her wanderings around various spaces in the film, and her body’s mobility is rendered so as to offer an intense insight into her perspective. Moreover, “mobility” also draws on upward social mobility, gesturing to the class analysis I will also make in this chapter. Mia is a working-class girl, specifically a “chav”, a reviled member

of the working-class in early twenty-first-century Britain. Pointing to the ways Mia is also limited by or constrained in the spaces in which she moves, such as the housing estate, I problematize the physical and social mobility of the young working-class female subject. In this chapter, I examine a series of spaces which do not always fit easily within definitions of urban, suburban or rural spaces. They include the housing estate, the countryside, high streets, A-roads, Traveller's camps, cul-de-sacs, riverbanks, car scrapyards and suburban cul-de-sacs. Mia's movements within these spaces offer complex and sometimes conflicting modalities of spatial configurations as they are at once spaces of potential, becoming, creativity, transgression, solitude, autonomy and agency, just as they are spaces of limitation, dislocation, marginalisation, isolation, vulnerability and exposure. *Fish Tank* both offers a foregrounding of a working-class girl's perspective and subjectivity, while also pointing to the limits of possibilities – even the disastrous consequences – for someone on the periphery of these social, political, geographical and cultural spaces.

## CHAPTER ONE

### **The Marginalised Subject: Spaces of Genre in *Belle* (Amma Asante, 2014)**

In a key moment in Amma Asante's 2014 film, *Belle*, the Chief Justice Lord Mansfield (Tom Wilkinson) reveals to his great-niece Dido Elizabeth Belle (Gugu Mbatha-Raw) the portrait he commissioned of her. A mixed-race woman born to a white British naval officer father and a black African slave mother in eighteenth-century England, Dido is surprised to learn the portrait will hang among her white ancestors in their home of Kenwood House. As he reveals the portrait, Lord Mansfield asks Dido about the book she is reading. She replies that it is *A Gentleman named Thomas Day* who "speaks of a slave who agrees to marry an English lady; a voice for people, people like my mother, who do not have one". When Lord Mansfield asks whether she finds herself in such writing, Dido replies, "I do not know that I find myself anywhere". In this chapter, I investigate the issue of placelessness that the film raises in this moment. Narratively foregrounding the complexity of Dido's identity, *Belle* offers a significant opportunity to investigate the construction of an upper-class, mixed-race woman's subjectivity. Moreover, the first British heritage film with a mixed-race woman as its lead protagonist (and a wealthy one at that), *Belle* enables an explicit interrogation into the marginalised female subject.

As I will demonstrate, little academic work has been done in heritage film studies to interrogate the ubiquity of white representations, or the presence – or absence – of people of colour, particularly black and mixed-raced people. Through Dido's search for her literal and representative "place", *Belle* sheds light on British heritage film's whiteness as it intersects with gender and class. Centring my interrogation on the film's representations of key spaces – most prominently the country house but also the carriage and the courtroom – I examine how Asante stages her mixed-raced protagonist within them. Considering how each of these spaces are loaded with gendered, racialized and classed meanings, both in the heritage film and heritage culture more broadly, I will examine how Asante draws on and challenges these images to provide a complex representation of a woman of colour's subjectivity in a genre that so often marginalises, ignores or erases her existence.

### **Race and the British Heritage Film: The Marginalised Subject**

In this first section, I outline some key debates in heritage film studies to critique the use of the term “heritage” along racialized lines and to set up the difficult context in which Asante’s representation of a wealthy mixed-race female protagonist is making an intervention. The British heritage film has often been conceived of as a quality historical and/or romantic costume drama (often a literary adaptation) which reproduces nostalgic and reductive images of national history and identity. Andrew Higson first used the term in his now canonical 1993 essay, ‘Representing the National Past: Nostalgia and Pastiche in the Heritage Film’. Pointing to a cycle of films made in the 1980s and early 1990s set in Britain (usually England) before World War II, Higson links these films to a particular cultural-industrial moment.<sup>163</sup> Produced during Thatcher’s government, heritage cinema, Higson argues, articulates a nostalgic and conservative celebration of the values and lifestyles of upper class Britain.<sup>164</sup> Since then, academics have complicated and broadened the term, suggesting that the heritage film is a flexible critical category connected to a network of cultural and industrial practices that relate to the construction of collective memory.<sup>165</sup> The term is often used synonymously with “period drama”, “costume drama” or “historical film” to describe narratives wholly or partially set in the past.<sup>166</sup> In this chapter, I deliberately take up the term “heritage film” to question whose history is being remembered; or, to quote Stuart Hall, ‘who is Heritage *for*?’<sup>167</sup>

Scholars have also made various attempts to interrogate on-screen representations of minority groups in British heritage films, particularly gender and sexuality. Much has been written about (white) women’s representation for, as Claire Monk observes, heritage films often exhibit an overt concern with sexuality and gender.<sup>168</sup> Monk historicises the term “heritage film”, suggesting that criticism surrounding it ‘needs to be understood as a

<sup>163</sup> These include Merchant/Ivory productions such as *A Room with a View* (1985), *Maurice* (1987), *Howards End* (1992) and *The Remains of the Day* (1993), and other key films such as *Chariots of Fire* (1981), *Another Country* (1984), *A Passage to India* (1984), *A Handful of Dust* (1988) and *Where Angels Fear to Tread* (1991).

<sup>164</sup> Andrew Higson, ‘Representing the National Past: Nostalgia and Pastiche in the Heritage Film’, in *Fires Were Started: British Cinema and Thatcherism*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., ed. by Lester D. Friedman, (London: Wallflower Press, 2006), pp. 91-109 (p. 93).

<sup>165</sup> For an overview of the debates, see Belén Vidal, *Heritage Film: Nation, Genre and Representation* (London: Wallflower, 2012).

<sup>166</sup> James Chapman, *Past and Present: National Identity and the British Historical Film* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2005), p. 2.

<sup>167</sup> Stuart Hall, ‘Whose Heritage? Un-Settling “The Heritage”, Re-imagining the Post-Nation’, in *The Politics of Heritage: The Legacies of “Race”*, ed. Jo Littler and Roshi Naidoo (London: Routledge, 2005), p. 24.

<sup>168</sup> See Claire Monk, ‘Sexuality and the Heritage Film’, *Sight and Sound*, October 1995, 32-34. See also Pam Cook, *Fashioning the Nation: Costume and Identity in British Cinema* (London: BFI, 1996); Julianne Piddock, *Contemporary Costume Drama: Space, Place and the Past* (London: BFI, 2004); Belén Vidal, ‘Playing in a Minor Key: The Literary Past through the Feminist Imagination’, in *Books in Motion, Adaption, Intertextuality, Authorship*, ed. Mireia Aragay (New York: Rodopi, 2005).

historically specific discourse, rooted in and responsive to particular cultural conditions and events'.<sup>169</sup> She identifies a group of films in the late 1990s, including Sally Potter's *Orlando* (1992) and Christopher Hampton's *Carrington* (1995), as "post-heritage" for the ways in which they revel in and distance themselves from the pleasures of conservative heritage cinema, and preoccupy themselves with political concerns, particularly transgressive sexual politics.<sup>170</sup> Likewise, Richard Dyer has demonstrated how heritage films provide fertile ground for representations of queer histories.<sup>171</sup> However, little effort has been made to interrogate heritage in terms of race. Higson begins to interrogate the concept of heritage in his later book, *English Heritage, English Cinema: Costume Drama Since 1980* (2003):

To identify as heritage cinema a body of films of dubious national identity, circulating a limited set of representations, is clearly to beg the question of whose heritage is being projected. In a multicultural society, there are many, often contradictory traditions competing for attention; yet so-called heritage cinema would seem to focus on a highly circumscribed set of traditions, those of the privileged, white, Anglo-Saxon community who inhabit lavish properties in a semi-rural southern England, within a striking distance of the metropolitan seat of power.<sup>172</sup>

Despite this, challenging the problematic ways in which heritage cinema predominately focuses on white, English, upper-class narratives is not Higson's primary concern. As he explicitly sets out in his introduction, Higson uses the term "heritage" to suggest the consolidation between the heritage film and the heritage industry – what Higson calls, 'a potent marketing of the past as part of the new enterprise culture, a commodification of museum culture'.<sup>173</sup>

Within heritage film studies, only a small amount of work has been done to examine the representations (or lack thereof) of black or mixed-race people in British heritage

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<sup>169</sup> Claire Monk, 'The British Heritage-Film Debate Revisited', in *British Historical Cinema: The History, Heritage and Costume Film*, ed. by Claire Monk and Amy Sargeant (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 176-198 (p. 178).

<sup>170</sup> Monk, 'Sexuality and the Heritage Film', p. 33.

<sup>171</sup> Richard Dyer, *The Culture of Queers* (London: Routledge, 2002).

<sup>172</sup> Andrew Higson, *English Heritage, English Cinema: Costume Drama Since 1980* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 26.

<sup>173</sup> Higson, *English Heritage, English Cinema*, p. 1.

cinema, and to critique the genre's whiteness.<sup>174</sup> Stephen Bourne provides a survey of black representation in heritage films, noting a few supporting roles or extras played by black actors in films.<sup>175</sup> Since Bourne's essay, a few notable British heritage films have been released which either investigate black narratives within Britain's colonial history, such as Amma Asante's *A United Kingdom* (2017), her follow up to *Belle*, or which cast black actors in roles conventionally offered to white actors, such as *Wuthering Heights* (Andrea Arnold, 2012) and *Lady Macbeth* (William Oldroyd, 2017).<sup>176</sup> Although this trend extends the parameters of racial representation in heritage cinema, the extent to which this is being done to interrogate what we mean by heritage itself is questionable. Industrial practices indicate the industry's reluctance to incorporate non-white narratives into the fabric of national history and heritage. Firstly, Black British actors, including Marianne Jean-Baptiste, Sophie Okonedo and David Oyelowo complain about the number of heritage films green-lit by the British film industry, which excludes black British narratives and talent.<sup>177</sup> Indeed, Oyelowo argues that 'people of colour have been expunged from Britain's history'.<sup>178</sup> Secondly, although colour-blind or colour-conscious casting offers actors of colour work opportunities for which they previously may have been excluded, this is an ineffective way to interrogate the construction of British heritage by and through the

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<sup>174</sup> Some work has been done regarding Britain's colonial history with India. See Yasmin Ali, 'Echoes of Empire: Towards a Politics of Representation', in *Enterprise and Heritage: Crosscurrents of National Culture*, ed. by John Corner and Sylvia Harvey (London: Routledge, 1991), pp. 189-206.

<sup>175</sup> Stephen Bourne, 'Secrets and Lies: Black Histories and British Historical Films' in *British Historical Cinema*, pp. 47-65 (p. 48). As Bourne points out, black representation has fared better in heritage dramas on television. Bourne, p. 61. *The Sailor's Return* (1978) is one of the few heritage feature films with a black female protagonist (although the film was denied a theatrical release). See See Ann Ogidi, 'The Sailor's Return (1978)', *Screenonline* <<http://www.screenonline.org.uk/film/id/589461/>> [accessed 14 February 2019].

<sup>176</sup> These films can be situated within a broader group of films which investigate non-white narratives within Britain's colonial history, particularly in relation to India and Pakistan, such as Gurinder Chadha's *Viceroy's House* (2017) and Stephen Frears' *Victoria & Abdul* (2017).

<sup>177</sup> See Marianne Jean-Baptiste, interviewed by Dan Glaister, *Guardian*, 15 May 1997 <<https://www.theguardian.com/film/1997/may/15/news.danglaister>> [accessed 2 March 2017]; Sophie Okonedo, interviewed by Ashley Clark, *Sight and Sound*, 19 December 2016 <[http://www.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/sight-sound-magazine/features/burning-illusions-black-british-film-stardom?utm\\_content=bufferb9d69&utm\\_medium=social&utm\\_source=twitter.com&utm\\_campaign=buffer](http://www.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/sight-sound-magazine/features/burning-illusions-black-british-film-stardom?utm_content=bufferb9d69&utm_medium=social&utm_source=twitter.com&utm_campaign=buffer)> [accessed 2 March 2017]; David Oyelowo, interviewed by Anita Singh, *Telegraph*, February 3, 2015 <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/celebritynews/11385314/David-Oyelowo-why-no-black-actors-in-period-drama.html>> [accessed 2 March 2017].

<sup>178</sup> David Oyelowo, interviewed by Andrew Pulver, *Guardian*, 6 October 2016 <[https://www.theguardian.com/film/2016/oct/06/david-oyelowo-a-united-kingdom-people-of-colour-film?utm\\_term=Autofeed&CMP=fb\\_a-film\\_b-gdnfilm#link\\_time=1475775901](https://www.theguardian.com/film/2016/oct/06/david-oyelowo-a-united-kingdom-people-of-colour-film?utm_term=Autofeed&CMP=fb_a-film_b-gdnfilm#link_time=1475775901)> [accessed 6 October 2016]. <<https://www.theguardian.com/film/video/2016/oct/06/david-oyelowo-speaking-at-the-bfi-london-film-festivals-black-star-symposium>> [accessed 7 October 2016].

exclusion of people of colour.<sup>179</sup> As scholars suggest, colour-blind/conscious casting either participates in the post-racial demand to “transcend” and, therefore, ignore the problematics of race, or burdens actors of colour with intensified pressures of representation.<sup>180</sup> Finally, heritage films continue to whitewash British history and exclude the contributions and narratives of people of colour, as evidenced by Sarah Gavron’s telling of the women’s suffrage movement in *Suffragette* (2015).<sup>181</sup>

Moreover, not only does the film industry fail to interrogate the racial construction of British heritage, but so do heritage film critics. Specifically, heritage film critics largely fail to interrogate the implications of erasing non-white histories within our collective image of British heritage. Taking up Hall’s question of who heritage is for confronts us with the uncomfortable and problematic ways in which British heritage is reproduced as a history by and for white people. For Hall, national heritage is preserved and exercised as a form of social incorporation; it constructs and circulates images of an imagined community and a shared nation. With national heritage enacting a powerful source of meaning, it follows, argues Hall, ‘that those who cannot see themselves reflected in its mirror cannot properly “belong”’.<sup>182</sup> Although images of British history and the shared imagined communities which coalesce around them are divergent, multiplicitous and unstable, British heritage (or, perhaps more accurately, English heritage) is imagined, in broad terms, as ‘culturally homogeneous and unified’.<sup>183</sup> Particularly in terms of Britain’s history of colonialism and the differing racialized histories this produces, Hall argues that, ‘in general,

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<sup>179</sup> *Lady Macbeth*, for example, used colour-blind casting. See Steve Rose, ‘*Lady Macbeth*: How One Film took on Costume Drama’s Whites-Only Rule’, *Guardian*, 15 April 2017 <<https://www.theguardian.com/film/2017/apr/15/lady-macbeth-black-racial-diversity-british-costume-period-drama>> [accessed 14 February 2019].

<sup>180</sup> See Brandi Wilkins Catanese, *The Problem of Color[blind]: Racial Transgression and the Politics of Black Performance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2012); L. Montique Pittman, ‘Colour-Conscious Casting and Multicultural Britain in the BBC *Henry V* (2012): Historicizing Adaptation in an Age of Digital Placelessness’, *Adaptation*, 10.2 (2017), 176–191.

<sup>181</sup> See Radhika Sanghani, ‘The Uncomfortable Truth about Racism and the Suffragettes’, *Telegraph*, 6 October 2015 <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/women/womens-life/11914757/Racism-and-the-suffragettes-the-uncomfortable-truth.html>> [accessed 20 January 2016]; Anna Leszkiewicz, ‘What did the Suffragette Movement in Britain really look like?’, *New Statesman*, 7 October 2015 <<http://www.newstatesman.com/politics/feminism/2015/10/what-did-suffragette-movement-britain-really-look>> [accessed 20 January 2016]. The film was also criticised for its publicity campaign for featuring its four white leading actresses wearing t-shirts with the quote, “I’d rather be a rebel than a slave” on the front of them. See Rebecca Carroll, ‘*Suffragette*’s Publicity Campaign and the Politics of Erasure’, *Guardian*, 5 October 2016 <<http://www.theguardian.com/film/2015/oct/05/suffragette-film-publicity-campaign-erasure-feminism>> [accessed 20 January 2016].

<sup>182</sup> Hall, ‘Whose Heritage?’, p. 22.

<sup>183</sup> Hall, ‘Whose Heritage?’, p. 24. As Vidal points out, British heritage cinema often neglects the specificities of Scottish, Welsh and Irish histories, making English heritage and the iconography of Englishness the norm. Vidal, *Heritage Film*, p. 3.

“Empire” is increasingly subject to a widespread selective amnesia and disavowal... This formative strand in the national culture is now re-presented as an external appendage, extrinsic and inorganic to the domestic history and cultural of the English social formation’.<sup>184</sup> Not only are histories of the British Empire considered “outside” of British history and heritage proper, but so too are the collective, familial and/or individual identities of those for whom this history is formative. As John Corner and Sylvia Harvey argue: ‘Working behind every use of “heritage” ... there is necessarily a sense of an *inheritance* which is rhetorically projected as “common” whilst at the same time it is implicitly or contextually closed down around particular characteristics of, for instance, social class, gender and ethnicity.’<sup>185</sup> Largely, British heritage suggests that those outside of this “common” image do not “belong”.

As a result, the invisibility of what Hall calls the black British presence is problematically absent to the extent that ‘whiteness [is] a specific generic trait of British period films’.<sup>186</sup> Whiteness in the heritage film, then, functions as the paradoxical condition put forward by Richard Dyer: overwhelming present yet apparently invisible, vividly corporeal yet transcendent of the body.<sup>187</sup> In other words, whiteness is constructed through a refusal to be racialized in contrast to non-whiteness, which is peculiar, marked and exceptional; it is positioned as the norm to the extent that it is universal, common and apolitical.<sup>188</sup> Whiteness flattens out racial nuances in the heritage film, literally whitewashing British history, which simultaneously preserves and reiterates the subjects of Britain’s past as commonly, normatively and naturally white. In *Belle*, Asante centralises a woman of colour for whom British histories of colonialism and slavery are integral to her identity; for, not only is Dido born to a slave mother and naval officer father, but, throughout the film’s narrative, Dido involves herself in Lord Mansfield’s ruling on the *Zong* case, an important insurance case pertaining to the human status of slaves.<sup>189</sup> By focalising this figure in a traditional heritage film, Asante sheds light on the whiteness of this genre.

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<sup>184</sup> Hall, ‘Whose Heritage?’, p. 25.

<sup>185</sup> John Corner and Sylvia Harvey, ‘Mediating Tradition and Modernity: The Heritage/Enterprise Couplet’, in *Enterprise and Heritage*, pp. 45-75 (p. 49).

<sup>186</sup> Bourne, p. 49.

<sup>187</sup> Richard Dyer, *White* (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 39.

<sup>188</sup> Dyer, *White*, p. 222.

<sup>189</sup> The *Zong* case was an important insurance case regarding the “lost cargo” of hundreds of African slaves who were thrown overboard. Lord Mansfield eventually ruled that the slaves were thrown purposefully overboard, indicating that the slaves are not cargo but people.

In the rest of this chapter, I will consider in more detail how Asante focalises the figure of Dido within a traditional British heritage film to investigate this figure's marginalised subjectivity. This investigation, I argue, plays out spatially, particularly through Dido's search for a representative "place" in white spaces. Space is a significant field for investigation in heritage cinema because, as Julianne Pidduck argues, structural discourses, such as race, class, gender and sexuality, play out in heritage cinema through spatial frames – 'both the films' intricate textual spatiality, and the cultural and critical locations through which they travel'.<sup>190</sup> In this first section, I pay attention to the country house, a privileged site representing national heritage as 'the jewel in the nation's heritage crown' and 'an iconic signifier of national identity'.<sup>191</sup> I consider the country house as an image loaded not only with national meanings, but also classed, gendered and racialized meanings.

In doing so, I consider firstly what is made spatially visible and spatially invisible. As I argued in my introduction to this thesis, spatiality is a powerful tool of cinema that can reveal aesthetic, political, social and historical meanings of the cinematographic image; the extent of what is made visible or invisible becomes significant. Reading the representation of the country house through the genre's demands as to what is made spatially visible and what must be kept spatially invisible, particularly with reference to adaptations of Jane Austen's novels, I will consider the implications this has when representing a mixed-race female protagonist.<sup>192</sup> Implicated in colonialism and slavery – histories which are kept spatially invisible in heritage films – the representation of Dido's subjectivity is one of tension as Asante both conforms to and challenges these generic demands. Secondly, in keeping with my readings via Austen, I will then examine the country house as a space of longing and belonging. Specifically, I will consider how the country house provides a contentious place for middle-class white women, as a precarious place of "belonging" in relation to marriage and inheritance, and as a space of longing and desire for heterosexual romance and marriage. That Dido is an aristocratic woman is significant to Asante's interrogation of heritage's whiteness and her investigation into Dido's "place". This is not because it offers a "positive", "aspirational" or even "atypical" representation of a woman of colour in a heritage film. Rather, by offering an equivalent comparison to Austen's

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<sup>190</sup> Pidduck, p. 3.

<sup>191</sup> Madge Dresser and Andrew Hann, 'Introduction', in *Slavery and the British Country House*, ed. by Madge Dresser and Andrew Hann (Swindon: English Heritage, 2013), pp. 13-16 (p. 13).

<sup>192</sup> For another interrogation of Austen via the lens of race and post-colonialism in a British woman-authored film, see Gurinder Chadha's *Bride and Prejudice* (2004).

middle-class and upper-class heroines, Asante racializes this figure. Refracting these spatial configurations through race, Asante throws into relief their whiteness (and, indeed, the whiteness of the heritage genre itself), and enables a representation of a woman of colour's subjectivity in a genre that so often marginalises her existence.

### **The Country House: Visibilities and Invisibilities**

The fraught generic context in which Dido's subjecthood is to be explored is set up in the opening scenes. Here, heritage cinema's spatial demands – what or *who* is made visible or invisible – is complexly negotiated by Asante. In the first scene, Captain Sir John Lindsay (Matthew Goode), a white British naval officer, arrives at a port to collect young Dido (Lauren Julien-Box), his daughter born to a black slave mother who has since died. Asante explicitly situates us in the film's historical colonial context through the film's opening title card which reads: "The year is 1769. Britain is a colonial empire and a slave trading capital." The opening frame of this scene gestures to this colonial history as the first shot – a long shot of an English port – shows the hustle and bustle of seafaring life, with rows of ships lined up in the foreground and background of the shot. The 'spectre of colonial space', Pidduck argues, can be read through the image of the ship.<sup>193</sup> Symbolising the broad journeys of the English coloniser's missions and the specific transatlantic journeys of the slave trade, the ship offers a potent reminder of colonialism – the 'shadowy yet essential aspect of an audiovisual economy of restraint and movement' in heritage cinema.<sup>194</sup> The ships in this opening frame gesture to these spatial configurations just off frame.

The loaded symbolic, spatial image of the ship functions in a similar way to the gestures to the "invisible" issue of slavery in Austen's novels and adaptations of her work. Edward Said famously makes visible and significant the seemingly invisible and inconsequential implications of the passing references to Sir Thomas Bentham's slave plantation in Antigua in Austen's *Mansfield Park*:

[T]he casual references to Antigua... here stand for a significance "out there" that frames the genuinely important action *here*, but not for a great significance. Yet these signs of "abroad" include, even as they repress, a rich and complex history,

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<sup>193</sup> Pidduck, p. 35.

<sup>194</sup> Pidduck, p. 35.

which has since achieved a status that the Bertrams, the Prices, and Austen herself would not, could not recognize.<sup>195</sup>

For Mireia Aragay, the slave ship “speaks” these silences surrounding slavery in both Austen’s novel and Patricia Rozema’s 1999 adaptation of the novel, which explicitly foregrounds a post-colonial reading of the novel.<sup>196</sup> Indeed, Asante claims *Belle* is an “Austenesque” film, which raised certain tensions when centralising a mixed-race woman in this style of heritage film:

It was very much my wish that we didn’t see slaves but that we actually had to feel that we were looking at the laws that supported slavery, and we had to feel the impact from the story from that point of view... I wanted to prove that you could put a woman of colour front and centre of an Austenesque piece of work, a traditional British period drama and that it would work...<sup>197</sup>

Asante’s comment reveals the strict ways in which what is made visible and invisible is policed in heritage cinema to construct a familiar generic verisimilitude for audiences.<sup>198</sup> Moreover, her comments reveal whose subjectivities can be revealed and explored – and whose cannot. As a slave, Dido’s mother is never seen, although the film identifies “Belle” as Dido’s mother’s name, indicating her important structural (if not visible) presence. In

<sup>195</sup> Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage, 1994), p. 93. Said’s reading of Austen’s novel is not without criticism. Susan Fraiman pays close attention to the gender politics underlying Said’s postcolonial project, claiming that Austen is not the ‘flatly conservative figure’ put forward in Said’s analysis, but inflects and disrupts English domination abroad. Susan Fraiman, ‘Jane Austen and Edward Said: Gender, Culture, and Imperialism’, *Critical Inquiry*, 21.4 (1995), 805-821 (p. 807). Similarly, Jon Mee interrogates the role of women during Austen’s lifetime to explore more fully Austen’s interest in domestic management and the relationship this has with the expansion of the Empire. See Jon Mee, ‘Austen’s Treacherous Ivory: Female Patriotism, Domestic Ideology, and Empire’, in *The Postcolonial Austen*, ed. by You-me Park and Rajeswari Sunder Rajan (Abingdon: Routledge, 2000), pp. 74-92.

<sup>196</sup> Mireia Aragay, ‘Possessing Jane Austen: Fidelity, Authorship, and Patricia Rozema’s *Mansfield Park*’, *Literature/Film Quarterly*, 31.3 (2003), pp. 177-185 (p. 180). See also Patricia Rozema, interviewed by Carol Allen, *Times*, 30 March 2000.

<sup>197</sup> Amma Asante, interviewed by Clennita Justice, *YouTube*, 23 May 2014

<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CApscmt3XE0>> [accessed 20 January 2016].

<sup>198</sup> I follow Steve Neale’s assessment of generic verisimilitude as the genre’s framework of expectations of audiences as to what is probable, intelligible and believable. Steve Neale, ‘Questions of genre’, in *Film and Theory: An Anthology*, ed. by Robert Stam and Toby Miller (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2000), pp. 157-178 (p. 158). Responses by film critics and academics to Rozema’s adaptation of *Mansfield Park* suggest the serious ways in which the generic verisimilitude of heritage dramas are policed in terms of racial parameters and geopolitical borders. See Derek Elley, ‘Review: *Mansfield Park*’, *Variety*, 6 September 1999

<http://variety.com/1999/film/reviews/mansfield-park-2-1200459211/> [accessed 1 March 2016]; Keith

Windschuttle, ‘Rewriting the History of the British Empire’, *The New Criterion*, 18.9 (2000)

<<https://www.newcriterion.com/articles.cfm/britishempire-windschuttle-2656>> [accessed 1 March 2016].

fact, *Belle* goes as far as to elide any ethical questioning of the relationship between Captain Lindsay and Belle, or the terms under which Dido was conceived, by cutting a line from Lord Mansfield who describes Captain Lindsay's relationship with Belle as "sheer lack of 'self-control'."<sup>199</sup> Some aspects of slavery and colonialism, it seems, are "too much" to reveal in a heritage film, particularly one imitating an Austenesque romance.

The tension between what – and who – is made visible or kept invisible continues in this establishing scene after Captain Lindsay takes Dido to his carriage to begin their journey to Kenwood House. In the film, a representation of this journey is replaced with an establishing shot of Kenwood house. After Captain Lindsay and Dido get into the carriage to make their journey, the film cuts to a panning shot of Kenwood from an objective and omniscient point of view (Figure 1). The shot reveals the country house nestled into the picturesque pastoral landscape of Hampstead Village (now Hampstead Heath, north London); its idyllic status is emphasised by the glorious sunshine and swelling orchestral score. Higson argues that the heritage film constructs a nostalgic gaze that resists visual ironies, social critiques and political tensions, and instead, turns images and objects, including the country house, into an excessive spectacle to be admired.<sup>200</sup> In *Belle*, the first shot of Kenwood House certainly encourages the pleasures of looking through the emotive music and beautiful landscape, contrasting sharply with, for example, the audience's first look of Mansfield Park in Rozema's adaptation.<sup>201</sup> The first shot of Kenwood House, then, perhaps reflects Higson's argument that heritage cinema represents the national past for spectators through a visual display of spectacular pastiche; the images of the past are purged of national political tension and are turned into an apolitical fantasy for consumption.<sup>202</sup>

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<sup>199</sup> Misan Sagay, *Belle*, Film Script (2014).

<sup>200</sup> Higson, 'Representing the National Past', p. 99.

<sup>201</sup> When Fanny eventually arrives at Mansfield Park, the house is shrouded in darkness, obscuring our vision. As Pamela Church Gibson says about the film: 'All our visual expectations are crushed, all heritage pleasures denied to us, from the very first shots of the gaunt buildings of Mansfield Park (filmed at Kirby Hall, Northamptonshire) ... All of this is a world away from the fatly-upholstered, over-decorated rooms of the conventional heritage film.' Pamela Church Gibson, 'Otherness, Transgression and the Postcolonial Perspective: Patricia Rozema's *Mansfield Park*', in *Janespotting and Beyond: British Heritage Retrovision Since the Mid-1990s*, ed. Eckart Voigts-Virchow (Tübingen: Narr Dr. Gunter, 2004), pp. 51-64 (p. 56).

<sup>202</sup> Higson, 'Representing the National Past', p. 96.

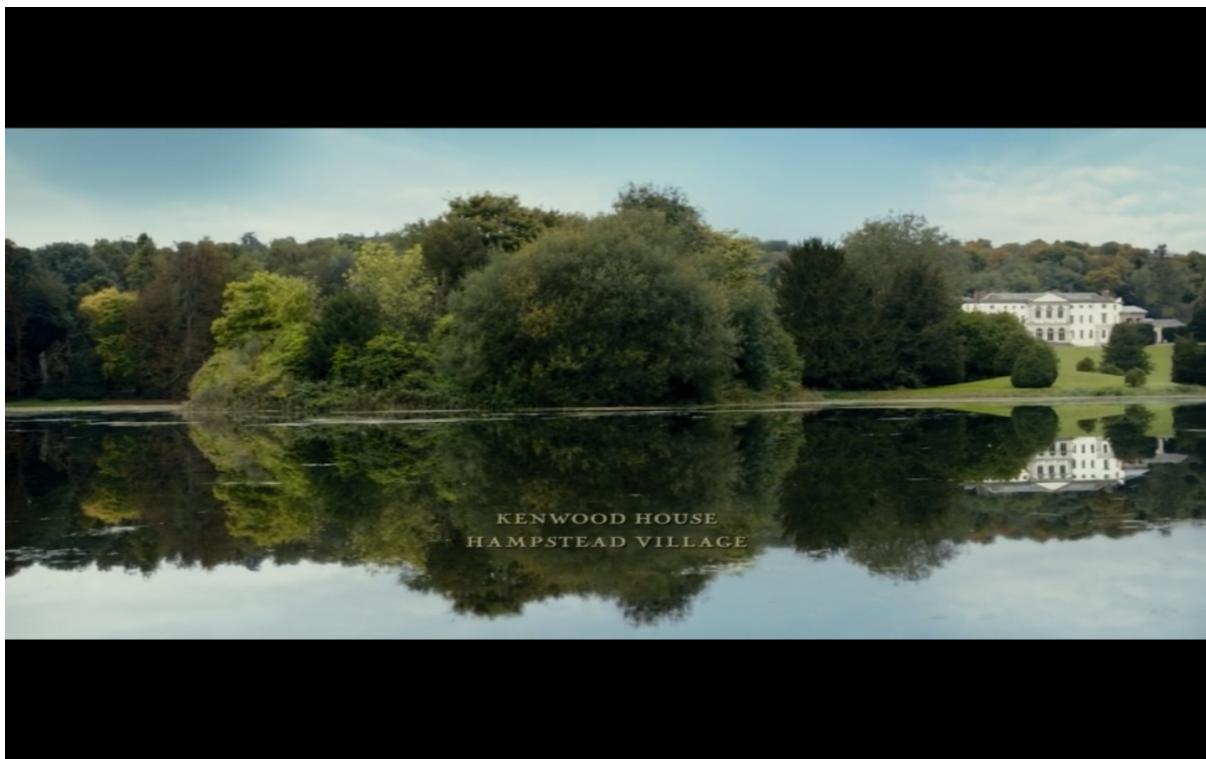


Figure 1: A panning shot of Kenwood House from an omniscient point of view

The country house has a difficult and contentious relationship to race. Scholars point to the ways in which people of colour are excluded from histories and representations of country houses.<sup>203</sup> As Caroline Bressey argues, the country house is a space of whiteness. The image of the country house is sustained in the popular imagination, Bressey argues, because the presence of black men and women who lived and work in country houses remains hidden in the main narratives told at heritage sites:

[T]he relationship between whiteness, British greatness and great estates remains largely unchallenged by major heritage institutions. This contributes to an idealisation of a certain understanding of our past; assumptions still prevail that

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<sup>203</sup> See Madge Dresser and Andrew Hann (eds.), *Slavery and the British Country House* (Swindon: English Heritage, 2013). This collection was commissioned by English Heritage as part of the bicentenary of the abolition of the British slave trade. It investigated the slavery connection of twenty-six properties including Kenwood House. Although this is a significant and interesting challenge to the way in which English Heritage commemorates Britain's history, the resulting collection was largely critical of the trust's methods. See also Roshi Naidoo, 'Never mind the buzz words: "race", heritage and the liberal agenda', in *The Politics of Heritage*, pp. 36–48; Catherine Hall, Nicolas Draper, Keith McClelland, Katie Donington and Rachel Lang, *Legacies of British Slave-Ownership: Colonial Slavery and the Formation of Victorian Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

black people do not belong in the history of country houses and did not contribute to their creation, maintenance or preservation.<sup>204</sup>

The resulting representation of country houses by heritage institutions has implications for people's sense of history, identity and belonging in Britain.<sup>205</sup> Moreover, in terms of filmic representations, as John David Rhodes argues with reference to *Gone with the Wind* (1939), 'when we look at cinematic images we are always already looking at property, we are, in a sense, always looking at black bodies: invisible and yet materially there, even when as is so often the case, they are nowhere in sight'.<sup>206</sup> Kenwood House, then, is imbued with discursive racialized meaning, even if this meaning is hidden in plain sight.

That the shot of Kenwood House replaces another spatial configuration (the journey made by young Dido and Captain Lindsay) exacerbates these ideological problems. The film is unclear as to the geographical specificity of this journey. The script identifies the location of the beginning of the journey, the port, to be set in England, although the film offers no visual clues to confirm this.<sup>207</sup> Nevertheless, even if young Dido's literal journey is from one part of England to another, her ancestry and terms under which she was conceived very much implicates her within a wider mapping of colonial journeys and exchanges.<sup>208</sup> If, as Piddock argues, colonialism constitutes a shadowy yet essential aspect of an audiovisual economy of restraint and movement, then this unseen journey from one part of England to another marks another absent (or "shadowy") journey of wider

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<sup>204</sup> Caroline Bressey, 'Contesting the Political Legacy of Slavery in England's Country Houses: A Case Study of Kenwood House and Osborne House', in *Slavery and the British Country House*, pp. 114-122 (p. 114).

<sup>205</sup> Dresser and Hann, 'Introduction', p. 14.

<sup>206</sup> John David Rhodes, *Spectacle of Property: The House in American Film* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), p. 4.

<sup>207</sup> The script suggests the port is in England. Sagay.

<sup>208</sup> Very little is known about the actual journey made by the real Dido Elizabeth Belle – another indication as to whose history gets recorded and remembered. Biographer Paula Byrne argues that Captain Lindsay is thought to have met Dido's mother, a slave known only as Maria, on board a captured Spanish ship. However, it is also unclear whether she was brought from Africa and captured by Lindsay on the way to the West Indies or if she was working on a Caribbean plantation at the time he met her. It is equally unclear where Dido was conceived or born. Evidence strongly suggests that she was conceived on her father's ship, the *Trent*, during a colonial mission and that Dido was born in England once the ship returned home, although a later Murray-Mansfield family tradition has it that she was born at sea. See Paula Byrne, *Belle: The True Story of Dido Belle* (London: William Collins, 2014), pp. 23-34. The only report of her birth, from Thomas Hutchinson's diary, is also unclear but suggests that she was born in England: 'Sir John Lindsay, having taken mother prisoner in Spanish vessel, brought her to England, where she was delivered of this girl, of which she was then with child, and which she was taken care of by Lord M[ansfield], and has been educated by his family.' See Thomas Hutchinson, *The Diary and Letters of his Excellency Thomas Hutchinson* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Co., 1886), p. 276.

<<https://archive.org/details/cu31924080796950>> [accessed 7 March 2016].

transatlantic journeys and exchanges through which Dido was conceived and brought to England. Replacing the literal and symbolic journey with a shot of the “white” country house suggests the racial demands of the genre in order to make it “work”.

However, I also complicate this argument because, in the next scene, Asante begins to trouble this hegemonic reading. When Captain Lindsay and young Dido arrive at Kenwood, Asante frames their carriage pulling up through the perspective of Dido’s young white cousin, Elizabeth (played as a child by Cara Jenkins, and as an adult by Sarah Gadon). An over-the-shoulder shot with Elizabeth in the extreme foreground of the frame shows the carriage pulling up and Dido being lifted out, before Asante cuts to a medium close-up shot of Elizabeth’s quizzical look at Dido (Figure 2). Framing this moment through Elizabeth’s gaze, Asante emphasizes the “strangeness” of this arrival for the white inter- and extra-textual onlooker. As Asante said in an interview: ‘I wanted to reflect a world that we were familiar with, the same world we know well through *Pride and Prejudice* and *Mansfield Park* and *Sense and Sensibility*. But this world is also unfamiliar because it immediately has this character we weren’t expecting to find in a very strong position.’<sup>209</sup> The film may situate us in the familiar iconography of the county house, with an Austenesque gesture to the history of colonialism and slavery that is just out of frame, but Asante also makes clear that this is also a perspective of history and heritage with which we are unfamiliar: the perspective of an aristocratic woman of colour.

Dido’s arrival and subsequent presence in the “white” country house, then, makes an explicit racialized statement about whose history and heritage is remembered and addressed. Dido Elizabeth Belle is based on a largely forgotten historical figure from eighteenth-century England. Hilary Radner argues, that the film has an ‘explicit political agenda’ as a female biopic, a genre which ‘continues and builds upon the second-wave project of bringing women’s history to the attention of both academia and the wider public, a project that included the redefinition of history as having its goal something beyond a recounting of the actions of great men’.<sup>210</sup> Although I agree that *Belle* makes a concerted effort to remember Dido’s as a marginalised historical figure, I emphasise that we must

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<sup>209</sup> Amma Asante, interviewed by Tara Brady, *Irish Times*, 13 June 2014  
<<http://www.irishtimes.com/culture/film/belle-director-on-women-film-makers-and-how-the-zeitgeist-rules-cinema-1.1830563>> [accessed 20 April 2016].

<sup>210</sup> Hilary Radner, *The New Woman’s Film: Femme-Centric Movies for Smart Chicks* (New York: Routledge, 2017), pp. 160-161.

position this as an intersectional feminist intervention; Asante is as much making a comment on race and class as gender.



Figure 2: An over-the-shoulder shot of Dido's arrival at Kenwood with Elizabeth in the extreme foreground

Dido's arrival and presence in the house also intimates the film's critique of the whiteness of the country house and the heritage genre more broadly. In this next section, I look more closely at this "presence" to examine how Dido's subjectivity is represented on screen. In doing so, I examine the textual representation of the country house in *Belle*, considering how this mediates the representation of classed, racialized and gendered subjects in the film. I have already suggested how the country house is a significant space of racialized meanings. In this section, I will also consider this more explicitly in relation to classed and gendered meanings. As Jo Littler argues, the country house's association with property ownership and inheritance privileges 'the "lineage" of particular groups – their worth and power – at the expense of others'.<sup>211</sup> Moreover, as Piddock extrapolates, these issues intersect with race and gender to position the country house as a contentious place for middle-class white women, particularly in Austen adaptations: as a representational space of women's limited agency; as a contested site of subjecthood through property

<sup>211</sup> Jo Littler, 'Introduction: British Heritage and the Legacies of Race' in *The Politics of Heritage*, pp. 1-19 (p. 2).

ownership, inheritance and marriage; and as a place symbolizing romantic heterosexual desire and longing.<sup>212</sup> Asante's staging of her wealthy mixed-raced female protagonist in the country house centralizes the intersection of issues of nation, race, class and gender. This both opens up new maps of enquiry within the spatial configurations of heritage cinema, and enables a more explicitly intersectional interrogation of a woman's subjectivity in British women's cinema.

### **The Country House: Belonging**

In *Belle*, Asante centralises the country house to focalize Dido's intersecting axes of privilege and oppression, and the conflicting notions of "belonging" they reflect. The country house represents the metaphorical and literal space of a woman of colour's limited social, financial and political freedoms in the long eighteenth century; like Austen's narratives, *Belle* explores the limited social agency afforded to upper- and middle-class white women through the complexities of marriage and property ownership. Lady Mansfield (Emily Watson) makes clear that Dido is not to marry because "any gentleman of good breeding would be unlikely to form a serious attachment to Dido, and a man without would lower her position in society". Privileged as a wealthy heiress without need to seek financial security, yet socially and politically marginalised as a mixed-race woman, Dido occupies a conflicting position. This position is crystallised when Dido is offered the keys at Kenwood to take over household duties of Lady Mary, who is Dido's unmarried great-aunt. The keys, however, offer Dido little freedom, symbolising not property ownership or economic security, but acting as a reminder of her low social and domestic position.<sup>213</sup>

This moment inflects feminist critiques of patriarchal property ownership through the further intersection of race. Sally Potter, by way of Virginia Woolf in *Orlando* (Sally Potter 1993) and Emma Thompson, by way of Austen in *Sense and Sensibility* (Ang Lee 1995) both express complex but powerful feminist statements about the gender and property ownership: *Orlando* through the gender-bending narrative where the titular

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<sup>212</sup> See Piddock, pp. 26-37.

<sup>213</sup> Until Kenwood House was handed over to the London Country Council in 1949 and then English Heritage in 1986, the house conformed to the gender norms of British inheritance laws and passed from male relative to male relative. After William Murray, the Lord Mansfield featured in *Belle*, died in 1793, his nephew, David Murray, Viscount Stormont, succeeded to the earldom and inherited the house. See Susan Jenkins, 'History of Kenwood', <<http://www.english-heritage.org.uk/visit/places/kenwood/history-stories-kenwood/history/>> [accessed 1 October 2016].

character returns home as a woman after living and travelling as a man, and so can no longer legally hold property; and *Sense and Sensibility* through Elinor's complaint to Edward in the garden of the Norland estate that she, as a woman, cannot inherit or earn her fortune. With reference to the latter, Pidduck draws on Gillian Rose's analysis of British landscape paintings where "natural" landscapes are culturally coded as masculine through capitalist and patriarchal relations of ownership.<sup>214</sup> Pidduck argues: 'In a sense, this exchange superimposes a feminist commentary on land tenure over the mute countryside. Laid out like a feast in the background, the Norland estate is the prize at stake in Elinor's wry commentary. From her comfortable spot by the window, Thompson's script deliberately poses a critique of patriarchal laws of inheritance.'<sup>215</sup> This feminist commentary on the spatial configurations and representations of women in heritage cinema, however, is explicitly a comment on white patriarchy and the position of white women.

Dido's relationship to the interiors of the house throws this into relief. Pidduck makes a gendered criticism of Dyer's argument that heritage cinema's *mise-en-scène* represents a sumptuous experience of the past – what he terms "museum pleasures".<sup>216</sup> Speaking particularly about Austen adaptations, Pidduck argues that the focus on interiors 'at times evokes the claustrophobic weight of history, oppressive patriarchal laws of inheritance, and the strict codes of comportment that Austen at once problematizes and upholds'.<sup>217</sup> However, Asante also demonstrates how this is racialized, further destabilising Dido's sense of familial, social and national belonging. At several moments in the film, Dido gazes at paintings around the house depicting black servants and their white masters. In one scene, Dido walks down a corridor at Kenwood. Shot in wide long-shot, the scene emphasises Dido's position in this space. Darkly-lit and silent but for the sound of her footsteps, the house seems overwhelming – even oppressive – with the weight of her white ancestors bearing down on her. As Sarah Hill argues, the relationship between Dido and this space, as mediated by the paintings, serves as a reminder of the heritage's films whiteness.<sup>218</sup> The scene then cuts to a point-of-view shot of Dido's look at the painting of a black boy looking up at his white master, the camera tilting upwards to follow his and

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<sup>214</sup> See Rose, *Feminism and Geography*, pp. 86-112.

<sup>215</sup> Pidduck, p. 31.

<sup>216</sup> See Richard Dyer, 'Feeling English', *Sight and Sound*, March 1994, 16-19.

<sup>217</sup> Pidduck, p. 29.

<sup>218</sup> Sarah Hill, 'Young Femininity in Contemporary British Cinema: 2000-2015' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of East Anglia, 2015), p. 220.

Dido's gaze. The painting and Dido's gaze at it refracts this 'weight of history' and 'the oppressive patriarchal laws of inheritance' through the further intersection of race.

The paintings, as a financial and decorative symbol of familial inheritance, function in *Belle* to suggest the gendered, classed and racialized modes of spatial property ownership and "belonging". Moreover, they also suggest the broader "position" of Dido both within the country house and outside of it. Later in this same scene, Mr. Davinier asks why Dido does not dine with her family to which Dido responds: "It is a statement of [my place]". The scene then cuts to another point-of-view shot from Dido's perspective. This time she looks at a painting of a black woman. Although this woman also looks up at her white mistress, the camera does not pan up to the white woman's face, instead lingering on the face of the black woman via Dido's gaze. The lingering camera consolidates their shared racial (if not class) identity, and their fraught positions in this white space – a connection that is further reiterated in the next scene when Dido looks at herself in the mirror and begins punching and pulling at her skin, in a suggested act of racial self-hatred.<sup>219</sup>

Later in the film, Dido herself is to be painted, the results of which will hang at Kenwood, offering her a representative "place" within the house. The actual painting, upon which this moment is based, provides the most convincing evidence of Dido's historical existence and the status of the position which she held at Kenwood (Figure 3).<sup>220</sup> Her silk clothes and fine jewellery suggest her wealthy if exoticised position, and her height and Elizabeth's affectionately-placed hand suggest her comparative status to her cousin. The painting reiterates the importance of material objects in commemorating subjects within history which, in turn, become included and circulated within discourses of national heritage. Despite the existence of the painting, Bressey demonstrates the historical figure of Dido's fraught commemorated position within the history of Kenwood House. Writing as part of a report commissioned by English Heritage into the connection between slavery and twenty-six properties for the bicentenary of the abolition of the British slave trade, Bressey analyses how the complex histories of race, slavery, injustice and identity are not woven easily into the narrative of the Kenwood House. The resulting representation of Dido's

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<sup>219</sup> That this is a classed as well as racialized position is also suggested in this scene by the white servant who announces that Dido's dinner is ready, and by Dido's incredulity that Mr Davinier, the son of a clergyman, may dine at the dinner table whereas she, a lady of the house, cannot.

<sup>220</sup> For a history and analysis of the portrait, see Byrne; 'Dido Elizabeth Belle', *English Heritage* <<https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/learn/history/women-in-history/dido-belle/>> [accessed 14 February 2019].

history is awkward, Bressey argues, as it must compete with Kenwood's other narratives.<sup>221</sup> Since the release of *Belle*, Kenwood House has made a stronger effort to acknowledge the legacy of Dido as a historical figure.<sup>222</sup> This suggests the consolidation between the heritage film and heritage industry in constructing and circulating images of national history, and the complex and uneven ways in which material history contributes to a sense of "belonging" within a national heritage.<sup>223</sup>

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<sup>221</sup> Bressey, p. 116.

<sup>222</sup> Kenwood House's website promotes the links between the film and the estate, inviting fans to 'find out more about Dido Belle's story' by visiting Kenwood House or purchasing the Kenwood guidebook. See Sam Kinchin-Smith, 'Belle: What Happened to Dido After the Film Ended?', <<http://blog.english-heritage.org.uk/belle-happened-dido-film-ended/>> [20 March 2016]. However, Bressey is sceptical over the role cyberspace as an alternative "off site" space as it allows the narrative of Kenwood House to remain undisturbed and intact. Bressey, p. 122. In addition, Kenwood House's gift shop sells copies of *Belle* on DVD and Paula Byrne's biography of Dido Elizabeth Belle (which, with the film poster on the cover, boasting that the book is "now a major motion picture", suggests a further way in which heritage films help to promote and commodify British history and the heritage industry).

<sup>223</sup> Much work has been written about the link the heritage film and the heritage industry, particularly in terms of the marketing and consumption of Britain's cultural heritage as a tourist attraction. See for example Amy Sargeant, 'Making and Selling Heritage Culture: Style and Authenticity in Historical Fictions on Film and Television' in *British Cinema, Past and Present*, ed. by Justine Ashby and Andrew Higson (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 301-315.



Figure 3: A portrait of Dido Elizabeth Belle and Elizabeth Murray (c. 1778). Scone Palace, Perth, Scotland. Public domain image reproduced via Wikipedia

*Belle*, then, can be read as a further attempt to (re)position Dido within a national history and heritage. Indeed, Asante reveals that the painting inspired the film, consolidating this link.<sup>224</sup> Moreover, the painting suggested the significance of Dido's subjectivity to Asante: '[The painting] said: I am here. I'm relevant. I'm a lady. I'm brown.'<sup>225</sup> In the film, the portrait is revealed to Dido as an emotionally significant moment. As the painter unveils the portrait to Lord Mansfield, only Elizabeth's representation is visible in the shot; Lord Mansfield blocks the audience's view of Dido, heightening the anticipation and significance of her painterly representation. As Rachel Portman's emotive score swells to a rich crescendo, the camera cuts between a mid-shot of

<sup>224</sup> Amma Asante, 'Director Amma Asante on the Inspiration Behind her Film *Belle*', *Independent*, 19 June 2014 <<https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/films/features/director-amma-asante-on-the-inspiration-behind-her-film-belle-9549362.html>> [accessed 14 February 2019].

<sup>225</sup> Amma Asante, interviewed by Kate Kellaway, *Observer*, 18 May 2014, <<https://www.theguardian.com/film/2014/may/18/amma-asante-belle-bicultural-ghanaian-british-director-grange-hill>> [accessed 14 February 2019].

Dido looking intensely at the portrait and a close-up shot of the portrait as the camera zooms slowly in on Dido's face. The construction of the scene emphasises the affective resonances of this moment for Dido; her sense of "belonging" and her subsequent subjective position in this white world depends on this representation. The painting and the film raise broader questions of (national) belonging both inside the country house and outside of it, and suggest the significance of representation when constructing (a woman of colour's) subjectivity.

The film's use of paintings, then, suggests the complex ways in which Dido's sense of "belonging" and the subsequent subjective position this affords her, is located in the representational and literal "place". This is further suggested by another place in the country house: the dining table. I have already suggested the importance of the dining room as a trope which makes explicit Dido's position at Kenwood and wider social structures during her conversation with Mr Davinier. This is reiterated in another conversation between Dido and Lord Mansfield. When the Mansfields receive guests, Dido is told she will not dine with the family, prompting her to ask Lord Mansfield, "Papa, how may I be too high a rank to dine with the servants and too low to dine with my family?" The dining table here functions as a class and race marker which prevents Dido from integrating into upper-class social life and finding a potential romantic suitor. However, Asante also uses the dining table as a space in which to mount an intersectional feminist critique against such a positioning.

In another scene, after being served breakfast by Mabel (Bethan Mary-James), the Mansfield's black servant, Dido asks the family whether Mabel is a slave. After Lord Mansfield informs her that Mabel is "free and under our protection", Dido curtly responds, "oh, like me", before further antagonizing her uncle by asking how the *Zong* trial is going, which she calls a "fraud appeal". Through her challenge to Lord Mansfield's white patriarchal rule, Dido (and, by extension, Asante) function here as Sara Ahmed's intersectional figure of the feminist killjoy.<sup>226</sup> Seated around the family table, Ahmed's

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<sup>226</sup> Ahmed, via Audre Lorde, reminds us that some bodies are attributed with the cause of unhappiness more than others, such as the figure of the angry black woman. The angry black woman often has a contentious relationship with white women as they are accused of 'creating a mood of helplessness', 'preventing white women from getting past guilt' or 'standing in the way of trusting communication and action'. Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), p. 68. See also Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Trumansburg: Crossing Press, 1984). Ahmed contends, however, that the figure of the feminist killjoy is an intersectional figure who can point out multiple and overlapping forms of discrimination including sexism, racism and homophobia. See also Sara Ahmed, 'Feminist Killjoys (and Other Willful Subjects)', *Polyphonic Feminisms: Acting in Concert*, 8.3 (2010) <[http://sfonline.barnard.edu/polyphonic/print\\_ahmed.htm](http://sfonline.barnard.edu/polyphonic/print_ahmed.htm)> [accessed 10 August 2018].

feminist killjoy becomes tense as the conversation turns to something she finds problematic yet cannot challenge without disrupting the apparent happiness of this family image: ‘In speaking up or speaking out, you upset the situation. That you have described what was said by another as a problem means you have created a problem. You become the problem you create.’<sup>227</sup> For Asante and Dido, the table symbolizes and enacts intersectional feminism as an “object of feeling” – as a way of relating to and making sense of the world – which allows us to see what the picture at the table does not and will not reflect.<sup>228</sup> Although Lady Mansfield attempts to restore the happy family image by telling Dido to desist discussing the “vulgar subject”, which, in turn, vocalizes the broader silencing of slavery and race relations in Austen’s work and heritage cinema, Dido/Asante’s challenge turns them into wilful subjects: *‘a refusal to look away from what has already been looked over* [emphasis in original]’, whether this be Lord Mansfield’s refusal to consider the racial politics at play at home and work, or British heritage cinema’s broader marginalization of slavery and the history of people of colour.<sup>229</sup>

But to assume a feminist *is* a killjoy at the table is to assume, of course, that she has a place at the table in the first place. Dido is not always welcome at the dining table but Mabel, as a black servant, is not welcome at the table at all. Although Asante suggests that Mabel and Dido are, to some extent, comparable in their blackness – race, after all, is what compels Dido to compare herself to Mabel and to become a killjoy in this moment – Dido’s status as an heiress to a fortune gained through colonialism offers her a tenuous privilege never afforded to Mabel. Yet the film also offers a moment of affinity between Mabel and Dido at another table – the dressing table – when Dido struggles to brush her hair, and Mabel, taking pity on her, shows her how to do it. Although still performing labour for Dido (and indeed, Mabel would not be welcome to sit at the dressing table either), Asante presents this as a moment of black female solidarity by framing them looking at each other in the mirror (Elizabeth, standing in the background, is tellingly out of focus) (Figure 4). It enacts what bell hooks calls the ‘process of mirrored recognition’ and the ‘shared gaze of...solidarity’ between women of colour in the struggle to represent black women’s subjectivity.<sup>230</sup> This recuperates Dido’s earlier self-hating gaze at her reflection in the mirror into this moment of explicit black female subject formation. Also, in its gesture to

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<sup>227</sup> Ahmed, ‘Feminist Killjoys’.

<sup>228</sup> Ahmed, ‘Feminist Killjoys’.

<sup>229</sup> Ahmed, ‘Feminist Killjoys’.

<sup>230</sup> hooks, ‘The Oppositional Gaze’, p. 272.

the symbolic significances of hair to black and mixed-raced women's identities, Asante inserts the maternal figure (Mabel tells Dido that her "mam" taught her how to brush her hair).<sup>231</sup> Asante locates this collective construction of black female subjectivity across a generational and class struggle, even if this is constrained by spatialized class positionings that cannot be overcome.



Figure 4: Dido and Mabel's shared gaze of black female solidarity

### The Country House: Longing

Dido's search for a representational "place" in the house plays out not only through Dido's longing for a familial and socially-sanctioned "place" at Kenwood, but also for romantic love and marriage. Pidduck argues that in heritage films, particularly Austen adaptations, the heterosexual woman's 'desiring narrative tug towards heterosexual courtship and marriage is inextricable from the question of historical property relationship'.<sup>232</sup> Offering consolation to Dido after she is told that she is not to marry, Elizabeth asks: "Aren't you quietly relieved that you shan't be at the caprice of some silly sir and his fortune? The rest

<sup>231</sup> See Cheryl Thompson, 'Black Women, Beauty, and Hair as a Matter of Being', *Women's Studies*, 38.8 (2009), 831-856; Maria Root, 'Mixed-Race Woman', in *Race/Sex: Their Sameness, Difference, and Interplay*, ed. by Naomi Zack (New York: Routledge, 1997), pp. 157-173.

<sup>232</sup> Pidduck, p. 27.

of us haven't the choice: not a chance of inheritance if we have brothers and forbidden from any activity that allows us to support ourselves. We are but their property." This moment, like Thompson's in *Sense and Sensibility*, crystallises the tenuous security marriage offered women during this the long eighteenth century. Elizabeth and Dido's conversation takes place in a carriage – a liminal space between the white, patriarchal public and private worlds, which enable these frank conservations between the women to take place. Asante emphasises this as a space of female intimacy both narratively, as only women inhabit the carriage in the scene, and formally, as the camera frames Dido and Elizabeth talking in a tight close-up shot.<sup>233</sup> However, for Elizabeth, as an upper-class white woman, the carriage both anticipates her social and physical entrance into London life and the start of her marriage journey, which promises to result in economic security; it occupies a space between the white patriarchal home of her present and the white patriarchal marriage of her future. For Dido, as a wealthy but racially-othered woman, the carriage similarly functions as a threshold between these white patriarchal worlds but does not anticipate marriage. Rather, a product of her family's white colonial wealth, from which her inheritance and, therefore, prescribed single status comes, the carriage signals the multiple racial and colonial oppressions enacted on Dido.

Despite being told she will not marry, Dido does secure a match in Oliver Ashford (James Norton), a second-born son in a high-ranking family, whose attraction to her inheritance outweighs the potential shame her race would bring to him and his family. His brother, James Ashford (Tom Felton), however, disapproves of the match, and assaults Dido while accusing her of destroying "the entire order of our family". In the scene following this incident, Dido looks out of the window, with the camera cutting from a long-shot of her silhouette in the window frame to a close-up shot of her contemplative face (Figure 5). Pidduck argues that the trope of the woman looking out of the window in heritage cinema represents female desire: '[T]he woman at the window encapsulates a gendered structure of feelings at work in Austen and in costume dramas more generally – a generic spatio-temporal economy of physical and sexual constraint, a sumptuous waiting barely papering over an elaborate yet attenuated register of longing.'<sup>234</sup> Attached to questions of property relationships, this gendered longing brings forward these questions of legal citizenship and subjecthood: 'In this sense, the gaze from the window may also be

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<sup>233</sup> This space can be situated among Dido and Elizabeth's other intimate spaces, such as their shared bedroom where they have other conversations about love, marriage and inheritance.

<sup>234</sup> Pidduck, p. 26.

read as a retrospective yearning for middle-class entitlements of citizenship denied Austen's female protagonists by accident of sex.<sup>235</sup> Dido's look out of the window visually represents her interiority, namely her classed and gendered longing, which is further refracted through the intersection of race. This subjective affective moment offers a potent reminder that the yearnings for "entitlements of citizenship" means something very different to Dido than to analogous white women.



Figure 5: Dido's longing gaze out of the window

Although implicit in this scene, Asante makes this affective desire explicit in a second scene where Dido gazes out the window again. This follows both a romantic development (this time a genuine moment of desire with Mr. Davinier [Sam Reid], the man Dido eventually marries, as he touches her hand affectionately), and a moment of political awakening for Dido. Dido compels Mr. Davinier, who is working with Lord Mansfield as he prepares to rule on the *Zong* case, to tell her what he believes happened on the *Zong* ship. As he outlines the details of the case – that slaves were deliberately thrown overboard as they were diseased and therefore "worth more as dead insured merchandise than as alive spoiled goods" – Dido's eyes fill with tears. The cut to the next scene, where Dido looks out of the window, makes clear the gendered, racialized and classed structures of feeling. Pidduck argues, in heritage cinema, middle- and upper-class white woman's yearnings for

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<sup>235</sup> Pidduck, p. 27.

personhood, social mobility and corporeal and sexual freedoms is always in relation to other social groups who do not have any, such as slaves. Pidduck draws out this argument via Toni Morrison's reading of the interdependence of slavery and freedom in Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*: 'To tease out the contemporary yearnings afoot in the Austen adaptations is to bring forward the supporting characters of servants and countryfolk – and to consider the structuring absences of colonial peoples and places just outside the frame.'<sup>236</sup> Dido is a financially privileged woman, but she is intimately entangled in the history of slavery, colonialism and the *Zong* trial. Asante brings into the frame issues of race and colonialism through Dido's look out the window as she contemplates her complex position as a wealthy woman of colour who desires heterosexual love and marriage, and a claim to citizenship – a longing for belonging – not afforded to her due to her status as a mixed-raced woman born to a slave mother. In this way, Asante inverts Pidduck's claim that heritage film's pervasive trajectory of female becoming is constructed '*against* [emphasis added] fraught backgrounds of class and colonial struggle' by demonstrating how Dido's strive for subjectivity plays out *within* these struggles.<sup>237</sup>

### **Rebellious Transgressions**

Indeed, Dido's subjecthood is associated with colonial struggles to the extent that the search for her literal and representative "place" in the house is limited. In order to stake her claim as a full legal subject, Dido involves herself in Lord Mansfield's ruling in the *Zong* case. Asante presents this through Dido's participation in various rebellious spatial transgressions. If 'limited character mobility or physical, social and corporeal constraint' marks the heritage film as 'quintessentially "feminine"', then Dido's bodily movement situates her alongside other "rebellious" women in Austen and heritage cinema.<sup>238</sup> Moreover, in doing so, Dido challenges de Laurenti's Oedipal narratives whereby only the male protagonist has access to a subjective position through his movements across time and space.

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<sup>236</sup> Pidduck, p. 27.

<sup>237</sup> Pidduck, p. 16.

<sup>238</sup> Pidduck, p. 16. See also Julianne Pidduck, 'Of Windows and Country Walks: Frames of Space and Movement in 1990s Austen Adaptations', *Screen*, 39.4 (1998), 381-400. This recalls Mulvey's argument regarding the gendering of genres through spatial configurations, namely that "feminine" genres are concerned with interiors and interiority – 'a female sphere of emotion within the female sphere of domesticity'. Mulvey, 'Pandora: Topographies of the Mask and Curiosity', p. 54.

In multiple scenes, Dido escapes from Kenwood in order to further her involvement in the *Zong* case (often aided by a cover from Mabel – another indication of the importance of cross-class black female solidarity in the film). In one key scene, occurring about halfway through the film, Dido breaks into Lord Mansfield’s study – rebellious in itself – to retrieve a piece of evidence relating to the case – a map showing the stops made by the ship where the water supplies could have been replenished. She then travels to London without a chaperone, where she makes this evidence known to Mr. Davinier in her carriage (for, of course, she needs a white male ally to make this evidence known in a court of law – her transgressions can only literally go so far).<sup>239</sup> As I have mentioned earlier, the carriage functions as a crucial gendered liminal space between white, patriarchal private domesticity and public social life, and a product and symbol of white colonial wealth and racial oppressions. Here, the carriage enables Dido to transgress class and gender decorum precisely through her economic privileges. As So Mayer [published as Sophie Mayer] argues: ‘The invisibility of her anomalous privilege allows her to move courageously around London, even as she works to undermine her own class, whose wealth rests – on this the film is very clear – on plantation slavery and colonial expansion.’<sup>240</sup> The film suggests throughout that Dido’s position is a complex oscillation between (hyper)visibility – she is too dark and “exotic” – and invisibility, where she is marginalised in wider political, social and legal life.<sup>241</sup> The carriage, then, offers her the privileges of wealth and invisibility, which enables her to simultaneously bypass and challenge the racial and colonial position in which she finds herself, even if Dido’s use of the carriage depends on these very class and colonial structures.

Moreover, when Dido steals the map from her uncle’s study and secretly meets Mr Davinier in her carriage, she not only defies Lord Mansfield’s wishes that she not involve herself in the *Zong* case, but also that she not involves herself with Mr Davinier. A later montage in the film shows Dido and Mr Davinier’s relationship developing as they continue to meet secretly in the carriage. Dido’s involvement in the case and her quest for

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<sup>239</sup> A recent article in the *Guardian* suggests that the political potential of *Belle* centralising a woman of colour in a heritage film is undermined by presenting British slavery in terms of its abolition by a white saviour. See Rose, ‘Lady Macbeth: how one took on costume drama’s whites-only rule’. However, as my argument makes clear, Asante offers Dido more agency than this article suggests through her rebellious spatial transgressions, and by making it clear that Dido needs a white *ally* not *saviour* in order to make evidence known in spaces which she cannot access such as the courthouse.

<sup>240</sup> Sophie Mayer, *Political Animals: The New Feminist Cinema* (London: I.B.Tauris, 2016), p. 102.

<sup>241</sup> Upon first seeing Dido, Lady Ashford comments: “Good Lord, the negro... I had no idea she’d be so black!” James Ashford then comments that he “finds her repulsive” and that “one does not make a wife of the rare and exotic” but “samples it on the cotton fields of the Indies”.

political and legal subjecthood narratively plays out alongside her desire her heterosexual love and marriage. Although critics have accused the film's romance plotline of undermining its political commentary, *Belle* suggests that these two things – romance and politics – are intertwined. Hill, for example, criticises the film for subsuming race and gender politics into the love story between Dido and Mr. Davinier, arguing that it 'neutralises the film's politics by reducing it down to a more "universal" commentary on love and marriage'.<sup>242</sup> She positions *Belle* alongside postfeminist heritage films where feminine identities are constructed through consumption, romance and marriage.<sup>243</sup> Related to this, the culmination of Dido's romantic fulfilment through her shared kiss with Mr. Davinier can also be read through contemporary representations of the mixed-race figure. As Ralina L. Joseph argues, these representations are split between the "tragic mulatto" (or "mulatta") and the "exceptional multiracial", where the latter is read through the mixed-race subject's 'metaphorical sloughing of blackness [as] the root cause of her success'.<sup>244</sup> Dido's confirmation into this white world via love and marriage to a white man (the film confirms their marriage in the postscript) could be read as the post-racial demand for the mixed-raced figure to "transcend" their blackness in order to arrive at this state of white, middle-class marital "success".<sup>245</sup>

However, the film also complicates this as it positions Dido's romantic narrative as crucial to and inseparable from Dido's political narrative. As Gugu Mbatha-Raw claims: '[In *Belle*], we still have Austen's world, that domestic, marriage market life. It may have the familiar Jane Austen feel of it, but there's something more at stake here than marrying

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<sup>242</sup> Hill, 'Young Femininity in Contemporary British Cinema', p. 223.

<sup>243</sup> Austen adaptations have been particularly identified with perpetuating postfeminism's "double entanglement". As Cobb argues, Austen is taken up as 'a lost feminist identity that signals a discontent with the strictures of postfeminist culture underneath the cover of her association with romance and "spaces where girls can be girls"'. Cobb, *Adaptation, Authorship and Contemporary Women Filmmakers*, pp. 114-155. For an explanation of postfeminism's "double entanglement", see Angela McRobbie 'Postfeminism and Popular Culture'. Vidal also identifies *The Duchess* as a key postfeminist heritage film. Vidal, *Heritage Film*, pp. 104-110.

<sup>244</sup> Ralina L. Joseph, *Transcending Blackness: From the New Millennium Mulatta to the Exceptional Multiracial* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), p. 2.

<sup>245</sup> Asante's latest film, *Where Hands Touch* (which, at that time of writing, has yet to have a UK release) has generated a large amount of controversy for its representation of an inter-racial relationship between a black girl and a white Nazi boy, which, in turn has generated broader criticism for why Asante 'loves making movies about black people falling in love with white people in particularly oppressive time periods'. Yasmin, 'Can someone ask Amma Assante [sic] why she loves making movies about black people falling in love with white people in particularly oppressive time periods' [Twitter post] (@yasminTBH 8 August 2018). See also Hunter Harris and Haaniyah Angus, 'A Short Conversation About What the Hell Is Going on in *Where Hands Touch*', *Vulture*, 4 January 2019 <<https://www.vulture.com/2019/01/amandla-stenberg-nazi-love-story-where-hands-touch-what-the-hell-happens.html>> [accessed 10 February 2019].

well.<sup>246</sup> This “something more” informs the political challenges of the film. As Asante details, ‘[the complexity of racism] is one of the hardest things to communicate in film – especially one in this kind of genre which is a love story’, a statement which recalls my earlier argument about the tensions produced when centring a mixed-race woman in a heritage film.<sup>247</sup> This also produces renewed pleasures in the heritage film as suggested by critical responses to the film. As Inkoo Kang writes, *Belle* ‘had a palpable emotional impact’ because ‘it’s still all-too-maddeningly rare to see a gentle romance about the loveliness or adorableness or winsome sweetness of black women... [Asante’s version of Austen] feels radical, even though the film is in many ways a comfortably familiar period piece primarily concerned with courtship and marriage’.<sup>248</sup> This response sheds light on the whiteness of heritage film’s postfeminist sensibility, as well as intimates the rarity of representations of non-white or interracial romances on screen.<sup>249</sup>

Crucially, I argue the film represents the integral link between romance and politics and challenges the depoliticised marriage script, through a spatial representation. During Lord Mansfield’s ruling on the *Zong* case, the climax of the film, Dido sneaks out of her home and travels to the courthouse where she breaks into the public gallery to listen to her uncle’s final statements (Figure 6). Asante continually cuts between shots of Lord Mansfield reading his verdict to the courtroom and shots of Dido making her journey to the courthouse, even overlaying the latter with a voiceover of Lord Mansfield’s verdict. Linking these moments inextricably, Asante positions Dido as a woman of colour for whom the verdict will have enormous implications for her own freedom. This is not to say there are not vast differences between Dido’s journey to the courthouse and the slaves’ transatlantic journey during the slave trade. For one, whereas the slaves’ journeys were brutal, enforced and inhumane as they were reduced to the status of cargo, Dido made her

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<sup>246</sup> Gugu Mbatha-Raw, interviewed by Roger Moore, *Movie Nation*, 30 April 2014 <<https://rogersmovienation.com/2014/04/30/belle-director-and-star-go-where-jane-austen-never-dared/>> [accessed 3 March 2017].

<sup>247</sup> Amma Asante, ‘Portrait of a Lady’, *Sight and Sound*, July 2014, 31-33 (p. 33).

<sup>248</sup> Inkoo Kang, ‘Athena FF: Amma Asante’s *Belle* Revisits Jane Austen through Black POV’, *IndieWire*, 10 February 2014 <<http://www.indiewire.com/2014/02/athena-ff-amma-asantes-belle-revisits-jane-austen-through-black-pov-207327/>> [accessed 3 March 2017].

<sup>249</sup> For a consideration on the relationship between postfeminism and race, see Jess Butler, ‘For White Girls Only? Postfeminism and the Politics of Exclusion’, *Feminist Formations*, 25.1 (2013), 35-58. For a discussion of the marginalisation of blackness in romance narratives, particularly romantic comedies, see Karen Bowdre, ‘Romantic Comedies and the Raced Body’, *Falling in Love Again: Romantic Comedy in Contemporary Cinema*, ed. by Stacey Abbott and Deborah Jermyn (London: I.B. Tauris, 2009), pp. 105-116. For an examination on the representations of interracial relationships in the contemporary media landscape, see Catherine R. Squires, *The Post-Racial Mystique: Media and Race in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: NYU Press, 2014).

journey, as she says later to Lord Mansfield, “absolutely of my own volition”. For another, after Harry, her carriage driver, refuses to take her to the courthouse, clearly tired of her rebellious antics and the risk it puts him in with Lord Mansfield, Dido boldly claims, “then let allow me to take the reins”; she is (almost literally) in control of her journey. Rather, I argue that this rebellious and transgressive journey is the crucial culmination of Asante’s challenge to the heritage drama, and a statement on the importance of Dido’s subjecthood in order for her to marry Mr. Davinier as his “equal”. Mayer argues that *Belle* reconfigures the courtroom as a place of celebration and marriage as a route to freedom. Citing Kara Keeling’s delineation of the doubled meaning of the word “representation” (meaning both “depicted”, for example as a visual or embodied representation, and “empowered to speak for”, such as in legal proceedings), Mayer observes that both meanings are at stake in *Belle*.<sup>250</sup> For just as the film centralises Dido’s position within a wider eighteenth-century society through the legal implications of Lord Mansfield’s deliberation and eventual ruling over the *Zong* case, it also counteracts to the lack of people of colour represented in heritage cinema through its depiction of Dido.



Figure 6: Dido in the courtroom

<sup>250</sup> Mayer, p. 102. See also Kara Keeling, *The Witch's Flight: The Cinematic, the Black Femme, and the Image of Common Sense* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).

## Conclusion

*Belle* reveals the difficulties and complexities when attempting to centralise a woman of colour's subjectivity in a British heritage film – a genre which depends largely on whiteness for its generic spatial verisimilitude. The country house is a key feature in heritage cinema, both for the familiar generic milieu it offers, and for the image of upper-class, patriarchal whiteness it maintains. However, in *Belle*, Asante foregrounds the house as a place where a challenge against this authority can be mounted, and a space in which a woman of colour's intersectional subjectivity can be explored and negotiated. Doing so within the “familiar” framework of the heritage film, particularly an Austenesque film, Asante interrogates the genre's role in the formation of British history and cultural memory and the representative “place” of people of colour, particularly women of colour. Asante's challenge to heritage cinema can be situated within a broader history of transnational women's filmmaking that re-examines national history and memory through race and colonialism, such as Jane Campion's *The Piano* (1993) and Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust* (1991). This also includes the British women-authored films already mentioned such as *Mansfield Park*, *Sense and Sensibility*, *Orlando*, *Viceroy's House*, *A United Kingdom* and *Wuthering Heights*. Indeed, Asante is vocal about the imperative for women, especially women of colour, to tell their stories, in a context where their stories are not represented: ‘When I'm sitting at my desk and I'm telling a story and there's a female – or a black female – at the centre of it, I feel really empowered. Make no mistake: the more we're able to tell our stories, the more it gives licence to other people to tell our stories.’<sup>251</sup> The growing number of these women-authored films perhaps suggests that the whiteness of (British) heritage films is being interrogated, and that women's filmmaking presents an acute example of what Stuart Hall calls ‘rewrit[ing] the margins into the centre’.<sup>252</sup> This spatial metaphor is apt for my analysis of *Belle*. After Dido's concern that “I do not know that I find myself anywhere”, Asante's intervention in the constructions and histories of mixed-raced womanhood opens up new spaces for explorations of race, gender and class in heritage cinema and beyond.

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<sup>251</sup> Asante, *Sight and Sound*, p. 33.

<sup>252</sup> Hall, ‘Whose Heritage?’, p. 31.



## CHAPTER TWO

### The Embodied Subject: Spaces of Pregnancy in *Prevenge* (Alice Lowe, 2016)

If Asante's central concern is with locating the “absent” subject within a genre that typically marginalises her, then Alice Lowe's *Prevenge* challenges the already established representations of women's subjectivities in a generic tradition. A horror-slasher film about a pregnant woman going on a murderous rampage, *Prevenge* follows a history of representations of pregnant women in horror cinema. While the politics of these representations are contentious in feminist theory, *Prevenge* explicitly draws on and reworks them to feminist ends. Specifically, Lowe attempts to foreground a pregnant woman's subjectivity.<sup>1</sup> As I will explore, numerous scholars have considered the fraught subjectivity of pregnant women in a philosophical tradition which depends on the individuality and autonomy of the subject. Julia Kristeva argues, in pregnancy:

Cells fuse, split, and proliferate; volumes grow, tissues stretch, and body fluids change rhythm, speeding up or slowing down. Within the body, growing as a graft, indomitable, there is an other. And no one is present within that simultaneously dual and alien space, to signify what is going on. “It happens, but I'm not there.” “I cannot realize it, but it goes on.”<sup>2</sup>

Kristeva comment speaks of pregnancy as a struggle over the body, as it grows, splits and changes for the developing foetus. The result for the pregnant woman is a feeling of alienation or removal from this embodiment; as Imogen Tyler puts it, ‘[s]uspended between the one and the other, I experience myself as an elusive gap between... discrete bodies’.<sup>3</sup> There is no bodily-spatial position from which pregnant subjectivity can be located. In this chapter, I explore spaces of pregnancy in *Prevenge*. Horror cinema often

<sup>1</sup> This chapter recognises that not all pregnant people are women. However, in keeping with this thesis' concern with female subjectivity, I will be discussing pregnancy in terms of cis-gender women. For important investigations into trans people's experiences of pregnancy, see the ESRC-funded research project *Trans Pregnancy* at the University of Leeds. See <https://transpregnancy.leeds.ac.uk/> [accessed 3 April 2019].

<sup>2</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, ed. by Leon S. Roudiez, trans. by Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine, Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), p. 237.

<sup>3</sup> Imogen Tyler, ‘Reframing Pregnant Embodiment’, *Transformations: Thinking Through Feminism*, ed. by Sara Ahmed, Jane Kilby, Celia Lury, Maureen McNeil, Beverly Skeggs (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 288-302 (p. 292).

plays out an “antagonism” between pregnant woman and foetus by mapping this internal corporeal struggle onto interior domestic spaces. As I will demonstrate this abject struggle has disastrous implications for the pregnant woman by “obliterating” her subjective position. *Prevenge*, by contrast, dislocates its pregnant protagonist, Ruth (Alice Lowe), from the domestic, positioning her in external city space to foreground the experience of pregnancy for the pregnant woman. This is particularly pertinent given that Lowe was pregnant during the time of writing, shooting and starring in the film; she authors these images in new and significant ways. Moreover, deploying two urban figures in this construction, the serial killer and the *flâneuse*, Ruth’s movements through the city produce complicated gendered performances (something that is further compounded by Lowe’s pregnancy), undermining conventional figures of the “passive” pregnant body. Furthermore, they work to convey her interiority, at once bearing witness to the complex constructions of pregnant embodiment and subjectivity for the pregnant women, while centralising her subjective position in a critical and cinematic tradition where her subjectivity is so often absent.

## The Pregnant Subject

Firstly, I will set up some of the conceptual difficulties of theorising pregnant women’s subjectivity before considering how these play out in *Prevenge* and horror cinema more broadly. As my introduction alludes to, pregnant women’s subjectivity has been a concern for many philosophers and theorists. As Erin Harrington argues: ‘[T]he dominant ontological framework of the self, which is predicated on autonomous implicitly masculine individuality that is presumed to be a fixed state of being, is incompatible with the subjectivity and lived state of pregnancy, which draws attention to mutability and modes of being.’<sup>4</sup> Kristeva suggests pregnancy is a ‘radical ordeal of the splitting subject’.<sup>5</sup> The “split” pregnant subject also concerns Iris Marion Young and Tyler’s considerations of pregnant embodiment. Young argues: ‘The pregnant subject is decentered, split, or doubled in several ways. She experiences her body as herself and not herself. Its inner

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<sup>4</sup> Erin Harrington, *Women, Monstrosity and Horror Film: Gynaehorror* (London: Routledge, 2018), p. 87. For a history of the ways in which the relationship between pregnant woman and foetus has been considered in medicine and culture, see Clare Hanson, *A Cultural History of Pregnancy: Pregnancy, Medicine and Culture, 1750-2000* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 9.

<sup>5</sup> Julia Kristeva, ‘Women’s Time’, trans. by Alice Jardine and Harry Blake, *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 7.1 (1981), 13-35 (p. 31).

movements belong to another being, yet they are not other, because her body boundaries shift and because her bodily self-location is focused on her trunk in addition to her head.<sup>6</sup> Tyler considers her own pregnancy within the history of philosophical conceptualisations of the subject, arguing, via Irigaray, that pregnancy challenges philosophy's dependence on the unified subject to the extent that it cannot be conceptualised within these terms at all:

It dawns on me that my pregnant embodiment is a topology which remains unmapped, unthought, indeed unthinkable, with a philosophical landscape of stable forms. Look: “*She is neither one nor two*. Rigorously speaking, she cannot be identified either as one person, or as two. She resists all adequate definition.” I am philosophically a freak.<sup>7</sup>

Feminists have attempted to offer alterative conceptualisations to this model. Kelly Oliver's model of the placenta as a system of exchange is an example of this, where the relationship between pregnant body and foetus is emphasised as ‘engage[d] in a mutually beneficial fluid exchange’, rather than as ‘an alien invasion which seeks to destroy each other’.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, the pregnant body as either a container for or in antagonism with the foetus remains a key imaginary in critical discourse, influencing the developing technologies surrounding pregnancy, legislation around women's bodies and women's access to reproductive care.<sup>9</sup>

The complex and slippery relationship between pregnant women and foetus in *Prevenge* reflects this difficult conceptual construction. The film's plot revolves around Ruth, a heavily pregnant woman, whose foetus urges her to go on a murderous vengeful rampage following the death of her partner on a climbing trip. As the body count grows,

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<sup>6</sup> Iris Marion Young, *On Female Body Experience: “Throwing Like a Girl” and Other Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 46.

<sup>7</sup> Tyler, p. 290. See also Irigaray, *This Sex Which is Not One*.

<sup>8</sup> Kelly Oliver, *Subjects Without Subjectivity: From Abject Fathers to Desiring Mothers* (Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 1998), p. 150.

<sup>9</sup> The primacy of foetal selfhood over the pregnant woman's selfhood, as particularly instigated by ultrasound imagery is critical to this. See Julie Roberts, *The Visualised Foetus: A Cultural and Political Analysis of Ultrasound Imagery* (New York: Routledge, 2016). This has also influenced the abortion debate, where pro-life arguments weaponise the foetus against the pregnant person's body, subjectivity and agency. See Lynn M. Morgan and Meredith Wilson Michaels (eds.), *Fetal Subjects, Feminist Positions* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999); Pam Lowe and Sarah-Jane Page, ““On the Wet Side of the Womb”: The Construction of “Mothers” in Anti-Abortion Activism in England and Wales”, *European Journal of Women's Studies* (2018), 1-16 <<https://doi.org/10.1177/1350506818785191>> [accessed 9 July 2018].

the film questions whether Ruth is carrying a demonic foetus: is Ruth suffering paranoid delusions either from her grief or a pregnancy-related mental illness or is Ruth the monster herself? The film culminates in the birth of Ruth's baby, who turns out to be "normal" and healthy. The film ends with Ruth on a clifftop – the site of her partner's death – as she sees visions of her late partner and his climbing instructor, Tom (Kayvan Novak) (who is still alive, making it difficult to determine whether this is an actual or imagined encounter).

Before the film cuts to the credits, Ruth appears to be ready to attack the climbing instructor; the film leaves ambiguous who is monster and who is victim in the film – foetus or pregnant woman/mother. Never clearly delineating the boundary between Ruth and the foetus or "monster" and "victim", the boundaries remain unstable throughout, reflecting the tension that is also never resolved in traditional masculine constructions of subjectivity. As H. Cooper argues, in actuality, pre-maternal and maternal identity is always unfinished.<sup>10</sup>

Throughout the film, the relationship between Ruth and her foetus is one of both connection and antagonism; they are embodied in a slippery dynamic that defies easy separation between the two. The relationship between Ruth and her foetus is presented as a power struggle, veering from ambivalent to downright hostile. At times, the relationship is deeply antagonistic. The foetus is most often presented as demonic and possessive. Claiming to be the "mastermind" behind the acts of revenge, the foetus appears to be the "monster" of the film, terrorising Ruth into putting the murderous plan into action and threatening to kill her if she does not comply. At one point, Ruth expresses her anxiety that she is merely a "container" for the foetus, telling the midwife (Jo Hartley): "I'm scared of [the foetus]. I mean, I'm not even in control. It's like I'm some crap, banged-out car and she's driving. I'm just the vehicle. Honestly, it's like a hostile take-over." Throughout the film, the audience hear the foetus' disembodied voice, often in conversation with Ruth. It says, "People think babies are sweet. But I'm bitter". It chastises Ruth for getting "too cocky" when she seems elated having completed one of the successful murders. It urges Ruth to be "ruthless" – the opposite of her namesake – an inversion of which Ruth seems aware as she tells the foetus "I think I'm changing into something else and it's because of you." At other times, Ruth suggests she has an emotional connection with her foetus. When the midwife threatens to alert social services of Ruth's aggressive behaviour, Ruth shouts, "this baby is attached to me with a fucking cord"; the physical connection of the

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<sup>10</sup> H. Cooper, 'Alice Lowe's *Prevenge*: A Response', *Studies in the Maternal*, 9.1 (2017), 1–6 (p. 3).

cord represents and facilitates the emotional connection between Ruth and the foetus. Furthermore, the identification of the foetus as the “monster” of the film is not so easy. After the baby is born, Ruth says to the midwife: “She’s just a normal little baby... I’ve done some really terrible things... I thought I was doing it all for her but I wasn’t. I was doing it all for myself... She’s not talking to me anymore.” The demonic conversations are lost – they appear to have been generated by pregnancy itself, rather than a monstrous baby – and the film suggests Ruth is the monster, something which is further implied at the end of the film when Ruth looks set to attack the climbing instructor.

This complex relationship between pregnant woman and foetus is also prevalent in the horror genre more broadly. Numerous horror films have taken pregnancy as a central narrative feature to generate fear and terror, including *Rosemary’s Baby* (1968), *It’s Alive* (1974/2008), *Demon Seed* (1977), *The Brood* (1980), *The Unborn* (1991/2009), *The Astronaut’s Wife* (1999) and *Grace* (2009). Harrington argues that the horror genre often deals with narratives that ‘concern themselves with the untidy nature of bodily boundaries and the integrity (or lack thereof) of the self’.<sup>11</sup> This is especially true of horror films about pregnancy, where the concern with bodily boundaries plays out as a narrative and conceptual struggle within ‘a complicated sometimes dichotomous relationship between the pregnant-self and the foetal-other’.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, perhaps the most famous and enduring analysis of women in horror cinema, Barbara Creed’s foundational text *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism and Psychoanalysis* regards the “untidy nature” of the cis-gender female body as central to horrifying images of women on screen.<sup>13</sup> Creed analyses these images through Kristeva’s theory of the abject, which Kristeva defines as ‘what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite.’<sup>14</sup> For Creed, then, women are so often represented as monstrous because of their “abject” mothering and reproductive function:

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<sup>11</sup> Harrington, p. 87. For other considerations of pregnancy in horror cinema, see Kelly Oliver, *Knock Me Up, Knock Me Down: Images of Pregnancy in Hollywood Films* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012); Sarah Arnold, *Maternal Horror Film: Melodrama and Motherhood* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

<sup>12</sup> Harrington, p. 87.

<sup>13</sup> Lowe cites Kristeva and Creed as influences on the film. Alice Lowe, ‘Kristeva and Barbara Creed [were] influences on the film’ [Twitter post] (@alicelowe 7 April 2018); Alice Lowe, ‘plus i wrote a paper at uni about Time and women and the female body, drawing on Kristeva! just remembered that!’ [sic] [Twitter post] (@alicelowe 7 April 2018).

<sup>14</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay in Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), p. 4.

Most horror films construct between what Kristeva refers to as “the clean and proper body” and the abject body, or the body that has lost its form and integrity. The fully symbolic body must bear no indication of its debt to nature. In Kristeva’s view the image of woman’s body, because of its maternal functions acknowledges its “debt to nature” and consequently is more likely to signify the abject.<sup>15</sup>

Horror cinema, then, plays out the “abject” relationship between foetus and pregnant woman due to this “improper” bodily-spatial construction.<sup>16</sup>

In the next section, I want to think more carefully about the connection between the pregnant woman’s body and space. Arguing that key horror films map pregnant women’s “ambiguous” body space onto interior domestic space in ways that are often disastrous for the pregnant woman’s subjectivity, I will suggest the ways in which *Prevenge*, by comparison, complicates this. Lowe is explicit in her challenge to representations of pregnant women in horror cinema. She claims: ‘I definitely set out to subvert [these representations]. I wanted to show that pregnant women are individuals, they don’t follow a particular pattern. It’s not like there’s a lot of pregnant women going out murdering people. It’s kind of an allegory, a fantasy, a wish-fulfilment about a frustration about being pigeonholed.’<sup>17</sup> The affective resonances of Lowe’s statement – fantasy, wish-fulfilment, frustration – are crucial to my argument as I argue that Lowe dislocates Ruth from the domestic to explore the experience of pregnancy by and for the pregnant woman. Ruth takes up the mobile, urban figures of the serial killer and the *flâneuse*, challenging the spatial and bodily passivity of the pregnant woman. Moreover, these figurations enable a reflection on the experience of the subjective “antagonism” between foetus and pregnant woman, which as I have highlighted is conceptualised as a slippery relationship for Ruth

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<sup>15</sup> Creed, p. 11. Since the 1990s, Kristeva’s theory of abjection has been widely taken up by feminist film criticism when discussing the ways in which the maternal body is a primary site/sight of cultural disgust. As well as Creed’s ‘monstrous-feminine, these also include ‘the abject mother’, ‘the monstrous womb’, ‘the archaic mother’, ‘the female grotesque’, and ‘gynaehorror’. See Rosemary Betterton, ‘Promising Monsters: Pregnant Bodies, Artistic Subjectivity and Maternal Imagination’, *Hypatia*, 21.1 (2006), 80-100; Christine Bousfield, ‘The Abject Space: Its Gifts and Complaints’, *Journal of Gender Studies*, 9.3 (2000), 329-346; Catherine Constable, ‘Becoming the Mother’s Monster’, *Alien Zone II*, ed. by Annette Kuhn (London: Verso, 1999), pp. 173-202; Rachel Gear, ‘All Those Nasty Womanly Things: Women Artists, Technology and the Monstrous-Feminine’, *Women’s Studies International Forum*, 24.3 (2001), 321-333; Kelly Oliver, *Reading Kristeva: Unravelling the Double Bind* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993); Mary Russo, *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess and Modernity* (New York: Routledge, 1994); Patricia Yaeger, ““The Language of Blood”: Toward a Maternal Sublime”, *Genre*, 25 (1992), 5-24.

<sup>16</sup> For a foundational reading of this “abject” relationship, see Creed’s argument about *The Brood*. See Creed, pp. 43-58.

<sup>17</sup> Anna Bogutskaya, ‘Natural Unborn Killers’, *Sight and Sound*, March 2017, 9 (p. 9).

and her baby. Finally, it enables a foregrounding of Ruth's emotional state more broadly, particularly her grief over losing her partner. If – as Young argues via Kristeva – discourses around pregnancy suggest pregnancy 'does not belong to the woman herself... [as they are not] "concerned with the subject, the mother at the site of proceedings"', then *Prevenge* offers a critical subjective centring of the pregnant woman.<sup>18</sup>

### **The Pregnant Subject in Horror Cinema: Interior Bodies, Interior Spaces**

Firstly, I outline the association between female bodily interiority and domestic interiority in horror cinema in order to contextualise the political importance of Lowe dislocating Ruth from the home space. As I outlined in my introduction, the female body has long been associated as a space for place for man via her maternal function: 'Men produce a universe built upon the erasure of the bodies and contributions of women/mothers and the refusal to acknowledge the debt to the maternal body that they owe.'<sup>19</sup> Grosz argues that men's fantasy for self-production relegates women to the position of *chora*. Plato theorises *chora* as a passage between the world of the forms and the material world. It is formless and has no attributes of its own; its only quality is as the nurturer of transition, existence and becoming.<sup>20</sup> *Chora*, then, is a space insofar as it provides conditions for material to come into being: it is the dimension between spaceless forms and spatialised materiality. *Chora* has so often been linked to the woman's womb – a "spaceless space", that enables other materialities to come into being.<sup>21</sup> For Kristeva, the *chora* corresponds to the receptacle that constitutes the debt representation owes to what it cannot name or represent, specifically its maternal and spatial origins. The *chora* thus denotes the feminine and especially the maternal via her/its qualities of nurturing and gestation.<sup>22</sup> Yet, as critics note, women's association with *chora* evacuates her from the realm of the symbolic, problematically reducing her to an essentialised corporeality, and offering her no agency nor subjectivity.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Young, *On Female Body Experience*, p. 46.

<sup>19</sup> Grosz, p. 121.

<sup>20</sup> Grosz, p. 114.

<sup>21</sup> As Grosz argues, '*chora* resembles the characteristics...long attributed to femininity'. Although *chora* 'is not directly identified as the womb, nonetheless, it does seem to borrow many of the paradoxical attributes of pregnancy and maternity'. Grosz, pp. 116-177.

<sup>22</sup> Quoted in Annie Potts, *The Science/Fiction of Sex: Feminist Deconstruction and the Vocabularies of Heterosex* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 164.

<sup>23</sup> See Birgit Schippers, *Julia Kristeva and Feminist Thought* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011).

By consequence, as Annie Potts argues, Western culture depicts female sexual embodiment via tropes of interiority, containment and domesticity.<sup>24</sup> Following Freud's statement from *Civilisation and Its Discontents* that 'the dwelling-house was a substitute for the mother's womb', woman collapses into her maternal function as her body is imagined as a house: her vagina is a receptacle for the penis; her uterus is a vessel for the child.<sup>25</sup> Harrington argues that the association of female bodies and domestic space is a key trope through which the subjectivity of the pregnant woman is both constructed and displaced in horror cinema.<sup>26</sup> She identifies *Rosemary's Baby* and *Demon Seed* as horror films which read the metaphorical use of houses as proxies for women's minds and bodies. In both films, the boundaries of both the house and the woman's body are invaded – even obliterated. Both Rosemary and Susan, the protagonists in *Rosemary's Baby* and *Demon Seed* respectively, become pregnant via rape, and are largely confined to the house throughout the film, covertly in the case of *Rosemary's Baby* and overtly in the case of *Demon Seed*. *Rosemary's Baby* takes place in New York City where young couple, Rosemary and Guy Woodhouse, buy a new apartment in the Bramford, a prestigious building. Rosemary befriends her elderly neighbours, the Castavets, who appear interfering but not invasive. At first, the apartment seems open and welcoming to Rosemary as she moves freely about the space and redecorates the apartment in light and breezy yellow and white colours. After Rosemary becomes pregnant, however, the mood changes and the apartment seems oppressive and overwhelming.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, the boundaries of the apartment seem uncertain: Rosemary and Guy can often hear their neighbours through their partition wall; the Castavets often invite themselves round unannounced; and, at the end of the film, Rosemary discovers a secret door between both of their apartments.<sup>28</sup> After Rosemary's difficult and painful pregnancy, the film culminates in the reveal: Guy made a

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<sup>24</sup> Potts, p. 152.

<sup>25</sup> Potts, p. 161. See also Irigaray, *The Ethics of Sexual Difference*.

<sup>26</sup> Harrington, p. 97.

<sup>27</sup> Harrington examines one such moment where Rosemary sits hunched in a new-foetal position as rain pours down outside. The now dark furnishings combined with the shot's low angle and the dim, cool, low-key lighting seem to engulf and overwhelm Rosemary. Harrington, p. 103.

<sup>28</sup> Katherine Shonfield also examines the "leaky" boundaries of Rosemary's apartment. Identifying "smearing" as the most fundamental of architectural boundaries between "inside" and "outside", she argues that *Rosemary's Baby* evokes the primal fear of smearing through an analogy between the interior space of Rosemary's body and the interiors of the apartment where she lives. See Katherine Shonfield, *Walls Have Feelings: Architecture, Film and the City* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 55. Furthermore, Lucy Fischer also argues that the geographical proximity between the Woodhouse's apartment and the Castavet's apartment doomed Rosemary's pregnancy. See Lucy Fischer, 'Birth Traumas: Parturition and Horror in *Rosemary's Baby*', in *The Dread of Difference: Gender and the Horror Film*, ed. by Barry Keith Grant, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Austin: University of Texas, 2015), pp. 439- 458 (p. 443).

deal with the Castevels, who are part of a coven of witches, to allow them to impregnate Rosemary with the spawn of the Devil in exchange for the fame and wealth of a successful acting career.<sup>29</sup>

*Demon Seed*, meanwhile, physically confines Susan in her home. Susan's estranged husband, Alex, is a scientist who has installed a super-computer, Proteus, in their home (although he is in the process of leaving the home following the breakdown of his marriage with Susan). Proteus is programmed with artificial intelligence and, once Alex leaves, begins to take over the house. It begins by voyeuristically watching Susan as she sleeps and showers – as Harrington explains 'an invasion of her personal space before the literal invasion of her physical space'.<sup>30</sup> Proteus then violently imprisons Susan in her own space, eventually raping and inseminating her so that she will give birth to a child who can experience tactile pleasures while possessing all the cerebral knowledge that Proteus possesses. Harrington concludes that both films violate women's interiority through these bodily/home invasions:

In both *Demon Seed* and *Rosemary's Baby*, home-as-sanctuary and the apparent safety of interiority are fragile fictions. If we are to consider a house as a metaphor for the woman's body, then such forceful penetrations could be considered a home invasion. However, in these two films these invasions are facilitated by the houses themselves, directly or indirectly, and in a patriarchal culture where a woman's rape may be considered, (l)awfully, the violation of one man's property this pattern of assault and domination becomes recursive. One property is invaded which leads to the invasion of the body within it; a woman's body is able to be raped *because of* its inscription of interiority and penetrability. Rosemary and Susan are literally and figuratively trapped in their houses while themselves housing (that is, being made

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<sup>29</sup> As some critics and reviewers have pointed out, it is unclear whether Rosemary's experiences of pregnancy, particularly towards the end when she seeks help from Dr. Hill, are based on "reality" or whether she is hallucinating, dreaming or fantasising. See Beverly Houston and Marsha Kinder, 'Rosemary's Baby', *Sight and Sound*, 38 (Winter), (1968-1969), 17-19 (p. 17), and Oliver, *Knock Me Up, Knock Me Down*, p. 118. *Rosemary's Baby* then both suggests that the pregnant woman is unstable, unreliable and hysterical (with hysteria being a key discourse surrounding pregnancy, particularly monstrous pregnancy as the etymology of the word crystallises. See Creed, pp. 56-57). The film also positions Rosemary as trapped within institutional and paternalistic institutions, literally in the case of her husband and doctor and figuratively in the witch's coven.

<sup>30</sup> Harrington, p. 104.

to house) a foetus, but it is their female openness itself that *allowed* this intrusion and violation.<sup>31</sup>

The houses in both *Rosemary's Baby* and *Demon Seed* function more than just as a metaphor or symbol of the penetration and violation of women's body space; the two collapse into each other. The pregnant woman's body is the home and vice versa; her body is a "receptacle" for man and "home" for foetus.<sup>32</sup>

The political stakes are high. Collapsing women's interior body space and interior domestic space reiterates misogynistic constructions of the (pregnant) woman's body as abject, porous and vulnerable, always ready to receive and provide space for man, often to dangerous ends. In fact, to borrow Grosz's term, this collapse "obliterates" women. As Harrington argues:

[In *Rosemary's Baby* and *Demon Seed*], the house collapses in *upon itself*, invalidating its own boundaries and border, thus annihilating its own interior, such that women are complicit in their both their initial containment and their ultimate obliteration. This visually depicts not only how the conceptualisation of feminine corporeality as interior space offers women no place – that is no place of belonging, nor of "safe" space inviolable embodiment – but it bluntly indicates that for women this conceptualisation is dangerous, unsustainable and horrific.<sup>33</sup>

Collapsing women's bodies into the analogy of the house not only constrains her within space, nor only suggest her boundaries are permeable and erasable. It objectifies her to the point where it eliminates her subjectivity, leaving women no space nor place at all. As I will now argue, Lowe positions her pregnant protagonist in a complex spatial positioning

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<sup>31</sup> Harrington, p. 105

<sup>32</sup> More generally, Creed argues that the symbolisation of the womb as a house/room/cellar or any other enclosed space is central to the iconography of the horror film. Creed, p. 55. As Doane argues in relation to the woman's film, the relation between the uncanny and the house becomes the analogue of the human body. See Doane, *The Desire to Desire*, pp. 72-73. The uncanny womb, both familiar and unfamiliar, links to the haunted house, where the secrets are only half seen until they are revealed in their full horror. The house plays out the individual's quest to discover the secret, which is so often linked to origins and, by extension, the primal scene, and is marked by the shadowy presence of the mother. Examples include *Psycho* (1960), *Carrie* (1976), and *The Amityville Horror* (1979). See also Doane, 'The Woman's Film'.

<sup>33</sup> Harrington, p. 106. As a feminist scholar, it is difficult to consider the violated female body of *Rosemary's Baby* without also thinking about Roman Polanski's sexual offences against 13-year-old, Samantha Geimer (née Gailey), including rape and sodomy, for which he was charged in 1977. I will consider Polanski's authorship in more detail later in the chapter.

that primarily conceives her as *in* space (as opposed to be conceived of *as* space). Although, at times, Lowe does draw on the link between interior space and women's interior bodies, this is compounded by Ruth's principal presentation in external city space. Here, Lowe creates this space as strange and "alienating" for Ruth, foregrounding the subjective experience of the pregnant woman and refusing the "obliteration" of pregnant women's subjectivities in horror cinema.

### **Exterior City Spaces**

Unlike most horror films about pregnancy, *Prevenge* dislocates its pregnant protagonist from the home. Ruth is never shown in her house, instead residing in a hotel during the duration of her acts of revenge. She stalks the city, day and night, planning her next murder, and intrudes into other people's homes or workplaces to kill them. Before I consider the gendered implications of these violent and transgressive movements, I want to demonstrate how Lowe constructs the city as a hostile and alien space for Ruth. In doing so, I remain mindful of the fact that public spaces including city spaces are not always welcome, comfortable or safe spaces for pregnant and non-pregnant women.<sup>34</sup> As Robyn Longhurst argues, the pregnant body is produced and consumed in public spaces as a matter of public concern as they are treated as containers for unborn children: pregnant bodies are subject to a public gaze and touch; their body space is frequently invaded by other people including strangers; and certain forms of consumption such as food, alcohol and smoking are often unwelcomingly monitored by members of the public.<sup>35</sup> Moreover, postfeminism interpellates the pregnant body ambivalently through public spaces. The pregnant body is now hyper-visible; as Tyler notes, the landmark *Vanity Fair* cover photograph of a naked and pregnant Demi Moore in 1991 provided 'the catalyst for a new visibility which demands a reassessment of the supposed taboo surrounding the

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<sup>34</sup> See Yasminah Beebejaun, 'Gender, Urban Space, and the Right to Everyday Life', *Journal of Urban Affairs*, 39.3 (2017), 323-334; Tovi Fenster, 'The Right to the Gendered City: Different Formations of Belonging in Everyday Life', *Journal of Gender Studies*, 14.3 (2005), 217-231; Rebecca Kukla 'Pregnant Bodies as Public Spaces', *Motherhood and Space: Configurations of the Maternal Through Politics, Home and the Body* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), pp. 283-305; Robyn Longhurst, *Bodies: Exploring Fluid Boundaries* (London: Routledge, 2001); Robyn Longhurst, *Maternities: Gender, Bodies, Space* (New York: Routledge, 2008); Elizabeth Wilson, *The Sphinx in the City: Urban Life, the Control of Disorder, and Women* (London: Virago, 1991).

<sup>35</sup> Longhurst, *Bodies*, p. 55.

representation of the pregnant body in contemporary Western cultures'.<sup>36</sup> Since then, pregnant bodies have become more visible in the media landscape through the hyper-photographed and documented pregnancies of celebrities such as Kate Middleton, Kim Kardashian and Beyoncé.<sup>37</sup> Moreover, the rise of documenting pregnancies on social media platforms such as Instagram and Pinterest also makes visible the pregnant bodies of non-celebrities.<sup>38</sup> Therefore, whereas pregnancy was once a 'passive, abject and ordinary physical state to be stoically borne in private' where women were compelled 'to conceal their pregnant bodies in public, the new visual culture of pregnancy is a site of pleasurable identifications and consumption and is imagined as a new freedom'.<sup>39</sup> Although the extent to which pregnant women perform similar spectacular versions of pregnancy in their everyday public lives is questionable, the new modes of pregnancy mediate women's everyday experiences.<sup>40</sup> Pregnant bodies are constructed as "active", "capable" and "invulnerable", even if the kinds of freedoms and agency offered to the pregnant subject is uneven, highly monitored and dubious.<sup>41</sup> Furthermore, in suggesting the city space as a significant representative space for the pregnant woman in horror cinema, I do not wish to further denigrate the feminised domestic space in opposition to the masculinised city space. Rather, I argue that Lowe uses the city space to reflect Ruth's interior state, enabling a foregrounding, rather than obliteration of, a pregnant woman's subjectivity.

<sup>36</sup> Imogen Tyler, 'Skin-Tight: Celebrity, Pregnancy and Subjectivity', in *Transformations: Thinking through the Skin*, ed. by Sara Ahmed and Jackie Stacey (London: Routledge, 2001), pp. 68- 83 (p. 68).

<sup>37</sup> See Erin Meyers, 'Gossip Blogs and "Baby Bumps": The New Visual Spectacle of Female Celebrity in Gossip Media', *The Handbook of Gender, Sex and Media*, ed. by Karen Ross (Chichester: John Wiley and Sons, 2012), pp. 53-70; Anne Helen Petersen, *Too Fat, Too Slutty, Too Loud: The Rise and Reign of the Unruly Woman* (New York: Plume, 2017). Even Kylie Jenner's more recent pregnancy in 2018, which drew intense media interest and speculation, despite the pregnancy never been seen or even confirmed until three days after her daughter's birth, continues to construct pregnancy as "visible", even if the pregnant body is absent or privately enacted. Anna Leszkiewicz, 'Kylie Jenner's Pregnancy Film and the Public Performance of Privacy', *New Statesman*, 5 February 2018 <<https://www.newstatesman.com/culture/tv-radio/2018/02/kylie-jenner-pregnancy-baby-travis-scott-privacy-kardashian>> [accessed 19 April 2018].

<sup>38</sup> Amanda Rossie, "'Pinning' Down Time: Post-Feminist Pregnancies on Pinterest', *Feminist Media Studies* (2018) <DOI: 10.1080/14680777.2018.1500928> [accessed 10 March 2019].

<sup>39</sup> Imogen Tyler, 'Pregnant Beauty: Maternal Femininities under Neoliberalism', *New Femininities: Postfeminism, Neoliberalism and Subjectivity*, ed. by Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff (Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), pp. 21-36 (pp. 23-24).

<sup>40</sup> Robyn Longhurst claims 'most of the women in this study would not dream of making such public statements [as Demi Moore]', despite her study being undertaken a decade after the photograph and the relatively sharp increase in the visibility pregnant bodies in the postfeminist landscape from the 1990s onwards. Her conclusion speaks to the uneven ways the discursive construction of pregnancy applies to bodies, with privileged women – white, thin, rich, famous, beautiful, able-bodied – being able to participate in the (hyper?)visible performance of pregnancy in the public sphere more easily and readily than other kinds of bodies. Longhurst, *Bodies*, p. 36. For considerations of how these images mediate women's everyday experiences, see Meredith Nash, *Making "Postmodern" Mothers: Pregnant Embodiment, Baby Bumps and Body Image* (New York: Palgrave, 2014).

<sup>41</sup> Tyler, for example, calls this mode of pregnant embodiment a new kind of confinement for women. Tyler, 'Pregnant Beauty', p. 29.

## I. The Internal and External

Although Ruth is dislodged from domestic interior space, Lowe still draws on constructions of internal space to suggest pregnancy as a claustrophobic experience for Ruth. Two scenes shot in an underpass suggest the slippery boundary between internal and external, interior and exterior. In the first scene, Ruth walks away from an unsuccessful attempt to kill the climbing instructor. Her foetus appears to attack her from inside her body for not completing this task. When Ruth reaches the far-end of the underpass, she doubles over in pain and shouts, “you fucking do it then”. The audience cannot hear the voice of the foetus – a rarity in the film, as we are often privy to Ruth and the foetus’ conversations – and instead hear the crescendo of a tense musical soundtrack.<sup>42</sup> The tension of this moment lies in the unknown internal threat in Ruth’s body, which is played out through spatial imagery. The scene is shot in wide long-shot with Ruth in the background, emphasising both the wide space of the underpass, but also its claustrophobic borders (Figure 7). Underpasses are usually partially-hidden, semi-enclosed external spaces. Associated with drug dealers, attackers, rapists and the homeless, underpasses are often (at times, problematically) identified as unsafe and “unsavoury” urban areas, especially for women. The claustrophobia of this semi-internal space is signalled by the tight physical and cinematic framing of the underpass and the following scene, where we see an extreme close-up of the inside of (presumably) Ruth’s body. This simultaneous interior and exterior space both constructs and reflects the foetus as an ambiguous monstrous threat to Ruth.

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<sup>42</sup> Given that we do not hear the foetus side of the conversation in this instance, this moment could be read as an imagined attack by Ruth of the foetus attacking her. Her pain could be from her pregnancy, rather than the foetus itself.

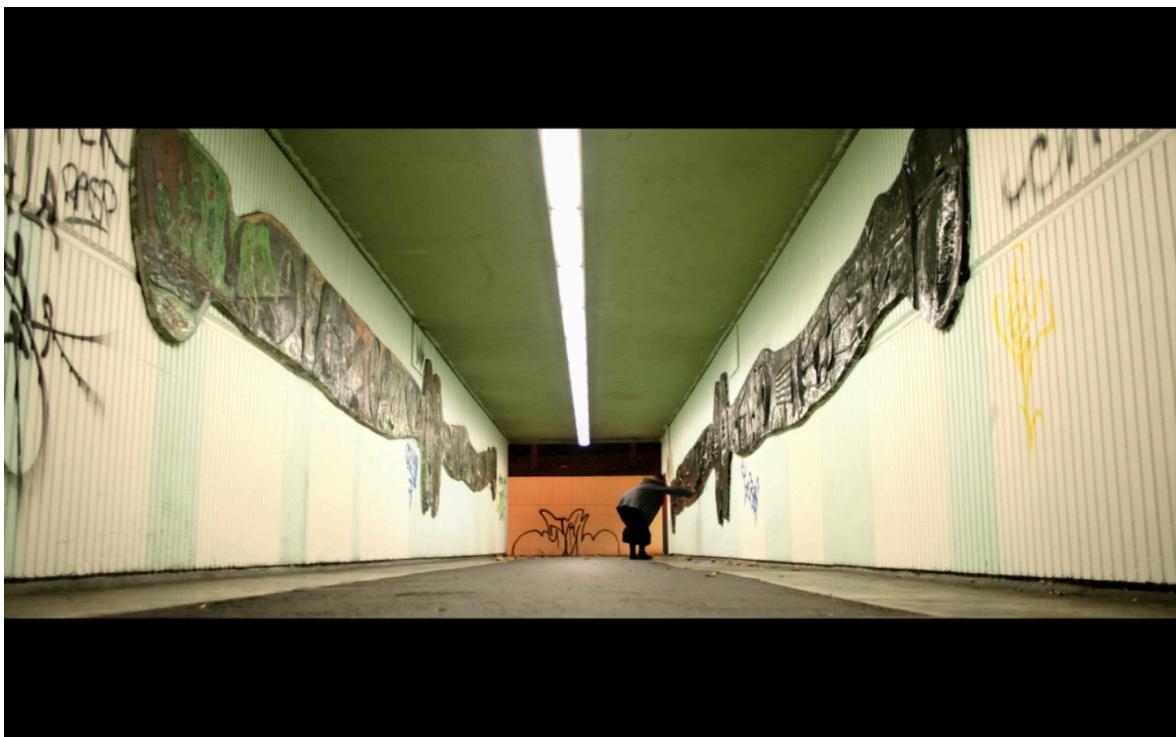


Figure 7: The first scene in the underpass

In the second, Ruth walks to a Halloween party, where she plans to carry out her final murder, and a man dressed as a skeleton walks past her. The internal threat of the foetus is inverted in this scene, where the threat is externalised through the figure of the man dressed as a skeleton. Again, this scene is shot in a wide long-shot (Figure 8). Ryan Eddleston, the film's director of photography, claims that the framing in this scene is very considered as they wanted to capture the vibrant colours of the walls, but to also see the figure of the skeleton walk pass 'as a metaphor for death'.<sup>43</sup> The walls of this underpass are predominately red and yellow. Red is a key colour in the film's cinematography and promotional material, often symbolising the threat and realisation of bloody violence on both Ruth and her victim's bodies. Yellow, meanwhile, adds a visual accent which, as I will detail later, signals the "alien" environment created by the lights of the city. Together these colours suggest the terror of the violence and mortality, something which is also literally embodied by the man, dressed like a representation of death. Again, however, the monster of this scene, the originator of this threat, is not quite clear. The film builds to two *dénouements* – the apparent murder of the climbing instructor at the hands of Ruth and the birth of Ruth's (possibly monstrous) baby – again suggesting the connection between birth

<sup>43</sup> 'Postnatal Confessions' [DVD Special Feature]. Available on *Prevenge*, dir. Alice Lowe (Western Edge Pictures, 2016) [DVD].

and death. Not only do these two scenes furthermore complicate the originator of the danger in these scenes (is the danger posed by the foetus, the city or Ruth herself?); they also suggest the dynamic relationship between inside and outside, and external and internal, both in terms of the body and the city. Ruth is positioned in a complex spatial configuration where her fraught experiences of pregnancy tacitly plays on both the internal and the external.



Figure 8: The second scene in the underpass

## II. Alien Territories

After Ruth walks out of the underpass in this second scene, she walks through a city centre towards her intended destination: the Halloween party. She walks through a city, dressed in her Halloween costume while holding a knife, her weapon of choice for her final murder. Lowe and her crew shot this scene “on the hoof”, using unplanned and improvised footage from actual Halloween night in Cardiff.<sup>44</sup> As Lowe/Ruth walks through the city centre, the crew film people’s reactions to her and the energy of the city. People in Halloween masks and costumes walk close to the camera or Lowe/Ruth. Again, it is uncertain who the threat is here: is it Ruth or is it the monstrous-looking people around her? The camera is loose

<sup>44</sup> ‘Postnatal Confessions’.

and hand-held as it follows Ruth, adding to the impression that she is being stalked. The camera cuts between over-the-shoulder shots of Ruth and the people around her, and wide anamorphic shots of people on the streets. While the wide shots display the other (monstrous?) people in this bright, alien environment, with the anamorphic frame stretching the image so its content looks bigger and more threatening, the over-the-shoulder shots create an intimate relationship between Ruth and the city: we become acutely aware of those around her and their potential threat.<sup>45</sup> At times, people look into and jeer at the camera. A man, with his face painted in a similar skull design to Lowe's, squares aggressively up to Ruth. The handheld camera shows this in a close-up shot which is repeated with a soft focus, blurring the image and adding to the surreal nightmare effect created in this scene.

This scene encapsulates the construction of the external city spaces more generally in the film: the city as a strange, hostile and “alien” territory for Ruth. Apart from a few key scenes set in natural environments (which I will discuss later in this chapter), Ruth spends most of the film in an anonymous British city.<sup>46</sup> Lowe claims she set large parts of *Prevenge* in a city as she wanted the bright lights of the urban environment, particularly when shot at night, to turn this space into a “new alien territory”.<sup>47</sup> The film is interspersed with establishing shots of the city at night, with the cinematography emphasising the lighting’s contrast between shadows and highlights, making the bright lights of the city glow almost neon yellow (Figure 9). The environment looks unfamiliar and strange. Lowe cites *Blade Runner* (1982) as an inspiration for the construction of this urban space and, indeed, the neon lights certainly recall the “alien” surroundings of Ridley Scott’s 2019 Los Angeles, albeit on a much smaller scale given the budget constraints.<sup>48</sup> Another reference here is Scott’s other more literal alien environment: the derelict alien spacecraft in *Alien*

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<sup>45</sup> Filming “on the hoof”, executive producer Vaughan Sivell speaks of feeling “terrified” that people “wouldn’t know that Alice was really pregnant and that her bump was real”. ‘Postnatal Confessions’. His comments speak to some of the issues raised with Lowe and Ruth’s shared body, where the pregnant body is constructed as both active and capable, and vulnerable and in need of monitoring. I will discuss the significance of this for Lowe’s authorship later in the chapter.

<sup>46</sup> The exterior shots of *Prevenge* were shot in London and Cardiff, although no overt visual cues alert the audience to this as the film’s setting.

<sup>47</sup> ‘Postnatal Confessions’.

<sup>48</sup> ‘Postnatal Confessions’. Much has been written about with regards to *Blade Runner* and the city. See Giuliana Bruno, ‘Ramble City: Postmodernism and *Blade Runner*’, in *Alien Zone: Cultural Theory and Contemporary Science Fiction Cinema*, ed. by Anette Kuhn (London: Verso, 1990), pp. 183-195; Timothy Yu, ‘Oriental Cities, Postmodern Futures: *Naked Lunch*, *Blade Runner* and *Neuromancer*’, *MELUS*, 33.4 (2008), 45-71; Marcus A. Doel and David B. Clarke, ‘From Ramble City to the Screening of the Eye: *Blade Runner*, Death and Symbolic Exchange’, in *The Cinematic City*, ed. by David B. Clarke (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 140-167.

(1979) and Mother Alien's birth chamber in the sequel, *Aliens* (1986). The *mise-en-scène* and cinematography of both these films contrast the dark interiors of these settings with the neon glows of the alien eggs. Whereas, as Creed argues, both the settings of *Alien* and *Aliens* 'suggest a nightmare vision of what Kristeva describes as "the fascinating and abject inside of the maternal body"', *Prevenge* constructs the city – the setting – as an "alien" space for the pregnant woman herself.<sup>49</sup>

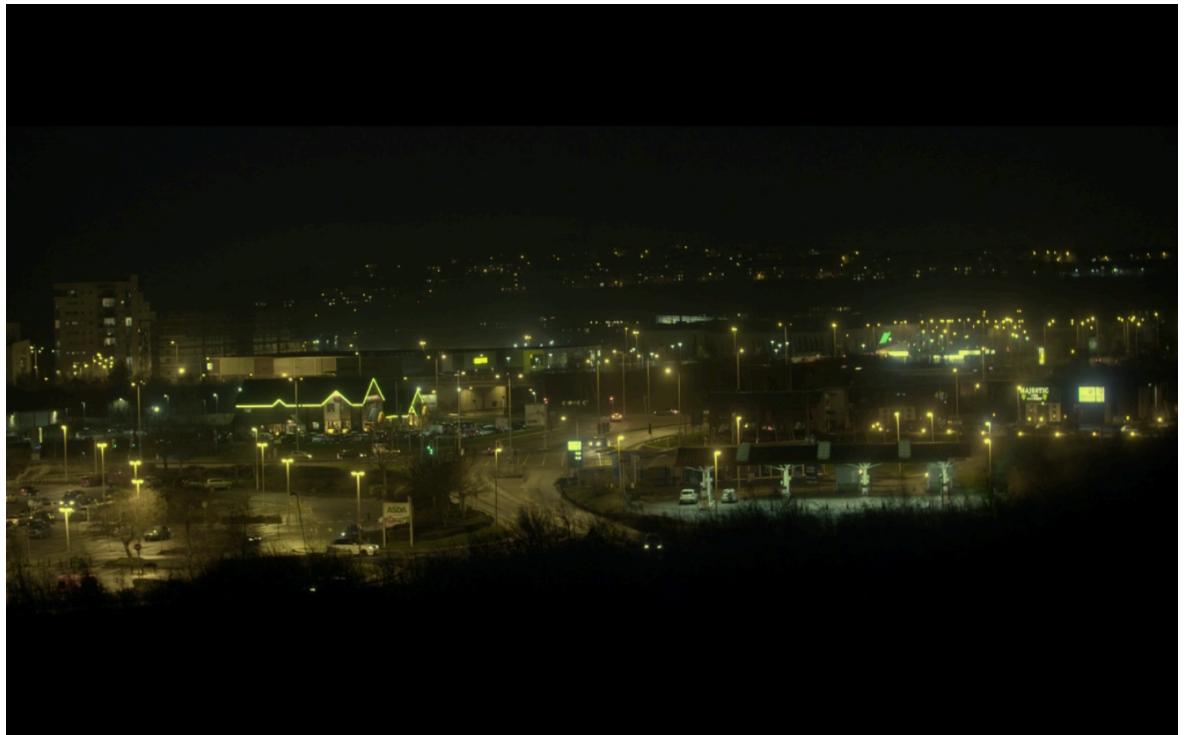


Figure 9: An establishing shot of the city at night

Lowe often shoots Ruth contemplating and seeming overwhelmed by this space. Early in the film, a close-up shot of Ruth in taxi looking out the window (perhaps thinking about the murder she is about to commit) picks up the glaring lights of the city behind her, overwhelming her image before receding into a soft focus into the background. In a later moment, Ruth looks out of her hotel window, the bright lights of the city blurred in front of her, as she draws a smiling and then frowning face in the condensation on the glass. Ruth also walks through this neon yellow city, the camera stalking her from behind, as her foetus in voiceover tells her that, even though Ruth feels lonely, "you'll never be alone because you've got me". Again, the lighting is bright – yellow saturates the frame – but the soft focus adds a surreal and nightmarish atmosphere to the image and the space (Figure 10). Combined with the hostile voice of the foetus, who, once again, emphasises the dread

<sup>49</sup> Creed, p. 53.

of the pregnant woman's body not really being her own, this city space becomes a strange and unwelcoming – even threatening – place for Ruth.



Figure 10: Ruth shot in nightmarish yellow lighting

### III. Unnatural Environments

The neon yellow of the city also works to “de-naturalise” Ruth’s immediate surroundings. As well as looking unfamiliar and nightmarish, the yellow lights of the city highlight the manufactured buildings and materials of the urban environment – concrete carparks, lamp-posts and mid-rise buildings, steel cranes, glass windows – and disguise any surrounding natural matter such as trees and grass by throwing them into shadow.<sup>50</sup> Using the “de-naturalised” city space to construct and reflect Ruth’s experiences of pregnancy, Lowe undermines pregnant as a wholly “natural” construction. In her book on the cultural history of pregnancy, Clare Hanson argues that the trope of “nature” has dominated Western discussions and representations of pregnancy since the 1750s.<sup>51</sup> She asks whether, in medical terms, pregnancy is a natural or pathological state. Hanson divides pregnancy into

<sup>50</sup> Although glass is a natural fibre unlike steel and concrete, which are both reinforced with synthetic materials, the windows of the buildings shown in the establishing shot all glow bright neon yellow, positioning them as part of this “de-naturalised” environment.

<sup>51</sup> Hanson, p. 10.

the categories of normal and abnormal, with normal pregnancy being considered non-pathological. *Prevenge*'s narrative overtly plays on this as the film asks us to question whether this is a pathological or monstrous pregnancy and, if so, where does this monstrosity lie: with the foetus or the pregnant woman? Moreover, for Hanson, the divide between normal and abnormal pregnancies informs the kinds of medical treatment women receive. Hanson argues that normal pregnancies can become abnormal very quickly, resulting in a strong case for medical monitoring of all pregnancies. But, on the other hand, this monitoring can become intrusive and demeaning for the pregnant woman.

*Prevenge* explicitly highlights these contradictions during one of the scenes where Ruth visits the midwife. In a comically patronising tone, the midwife tells Ruth that, later on in pregnancy, "you can just start spurting milk from your boobs" as "you no longer have any control over your mind or your body... [the baby] has all the control now". The foetus, called a "force of nature" by the midwife, will transcend any prior or existing knowledge Ruth has or will have over her body. Hanson makes explicit the problem of pregnancy as wholly natural, linking it 'with the conventional assignation of woman to the sphere of nature and man to that of culture'.<sup>52</sup> By consequence, the pregnant woman's alignment with "nature" 'serves to align her with the bodily and undermine her status as a rational subject and social agent.'<sup>53</sup> Lowe explicitly criticises this contradiction through irony and comic absurdity.<sup>54</sup> After all, the midwife, a representative of the medical institution, suggests that the pregnant body is beyond reason, rationality or scientific explanation. Yet, in a later scene, the midwife also suggests that the pregnant body needs to be under constant surveillance. Upon hearing that Ruth hasn't been sleeping well, the midwife insists that this is affecting Ruth's "mind and rationality" and the midwife may need to report it to social services unless she makes "good choices". The midwife, then, collapses the construction of pregnancy as both "natural" and "pathological"; the pregnant body, she suggests, is in a contradictory bind as it needs medical monitoring, even if it

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<sup>52</sup> Hanson, p. 11.

<sup>53</sup> Hanson, p. 12.

<sup>54</sup> Speaking of her own experiences of pregnancy, Lowe says: 'What I really wanted to channel was that it's an incredibly individual experience, whether that means you're a happy earth mother or a hellbent tool of vengeance. I feel like the earth mother cliché has been fully explored, and we could all benefit from seeing something else.' Alice Lowe, interviewed by Nikki Baughan, *British Film Institute*, 5 June 2017 <<http://www.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/news-bfi/interviews/kubrick-kate-bush-alice-lowe-influences-prevenge>> [accessed 19 April 2018]. Lowe's comments suggest that, in *Prevenge*, she wants to both interrogate pregnancy as a "natural" construction (the pregnant woman as an "earth mother"), and foreground pregnancy as an individual experience with individual emotional and medical needs, such as a Ruth who is going through an intense period of grief.

“transcends” this very need through its very status as a carrier of a “force of nature”. Ruth explicitly vocalises this criticism when she calls out the midwife’s presumptive and patronising behaviour by telling her “you don’t actually know me, do you?” and by calling nature “a bit of a cunt”.

Lowe’s use of city space works to construct and reflect the experiences of pregnancy for Ruth: the claustrophobic embodied experiences of pregnancy, particularly intensified by carrying a possibly demonic foetus; the city space as alien and alienating, reflecting the uneasy monstrosity of her pregnancy; and this space as “de-naturalised”, further undermining pregnancy as wholly “natural” state. I now want to look more carefully at the kinds of movements Ruth takes up within these spaces, arguing that they further work to reflect on the experiences of pregnancy for Ruth. Deploying the figure of the serial killer and the *flâneuse*, two figurations of mobility with complex relationships to gender, Lowe both further challenges conventional representations of pregnant women. Crucially, these both work to foreground Ruth’s interiority and, therefore, subjectivity.

### **Urban Movements: The Serial Killer**

In *Prevenge*, Ruth, perhaps paradoxically, embodies both the figure of the *flâneuse*, where her movements around the city are aimless and observational, and the figure of the serial killer, where her movements are purposeful and decisive. Beginning with the latter, Ruth can be directly identified as a serial killer as she plans her murders carefully and methodically before moving decisively towards killing her victims. When considering the specifics of the *female* serial killer, both in cinema and the wider social and cultural landscape, the spatial and gendered dynamics they elicit are fraught and complex. With violence generally attributed as a masculine trait, comparatively, ‘killing by women’ violates norms of femininity, such as nurturance, gentleness and social conformity. It disturbs culturally held notions not only of how women should behave, but also of what a woman is.<sup>55</sup> Lisa Downing concurs, arguing that women killers are doubly othered because they deviate from moral and legal societal codes and their social, gendered role as a woman.<sup>56</sup> Kumarini Silva and Danielle Rousseau argue that fictional media typically

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<sup>55</sup> Lizzie Seal, *Women, Murder and Femininity: Gender Representations of Women Who Kill* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 1.

<sup>56</sup> See Lisa Downing, *The Subject of Murder: Gender, Exceptionality, and the Modern Killer* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

portrays male serial killers.<sup>57</sup> A notable exception is Patty Jenkins' critically-acclaimed 2003 film, *Monster*, a film about serial killer Aileen Wuornos, who killed six men in Florida in the late 1980s to early 1990s, before being executed in 2002. Silva and Rosseau argue that *Monster* defies common representations of female violence by moving it out of domestic spaces: 'Most often, in both practice and representation, the domestic/private space – a feminine space – rather than the public/masculine space becomes the locus of female violence.'<sup>58</sup> Indeed, discussing the real-life case of Wuornos, Kyra Pearson argues that the case threw into relief the social imagination's predication on the domestic for making legible women's violence: 'If, as Lynda Hart argues, "passion and pathology are the key historical constructs for explaining and containing women's aggression," the dominant spatial construct encoding female violence is domesticity, circumscribing it within familial intimacy.'<sup>59</sup> In fact, so engrained is domesticity to criminology's classification of female killers that Wuornos 'stumped serial killing expert Robert Ressler because she acted violently in a non-domestic space and with strangers. "When there is violence involving women," he asserts, "it's usually in the home, with husbands and boyfriends. It's a close [sic] in, personal crime.'<sup>60</sup>

Moving out of the domestic enacts complex gendered performances. Serial killing usually depends on going outside the home to "hunt" your victims before eventually killing them. Taking place outside of domestic space, serial killing is often codified as predatory, aggressive and, therefore, masculine. This comes into conflict with the figure of the female serial killer. As Silva and Rosseau explain:

When female serial killers become media and public fodder, their purported rejection of conventional female traits – such as caring and compassion – are

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<sup>57</sup> Kumarini Silva and Danielle Rosseau, 'Defining Deviance: The Rearticulation of Aileen Wuornos in *Monster*', *Murders and Acquisitions: Representations of the Serial Killer in Popular Culture* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), pp. 67-83 (p. 68).

<sup>58</sup> Silva and Rosseau, p. 68.

<sup>59</sup> Kyra Pearson, 'The Trouble with Aileen Wuornos: Feminism's "First Serial Killer"', *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies*, 4.3 (2007), 256-275 (p. 259). For clarity, I will use "Wuornos" when referring to the actual figure of Aileen Wuornos, and "Aileen" when referring to her fictional representation in Jenkins' film.

<sup>60</sup> Pearson, p. 259. It is important to note, however, that women are still far more likely to experience domestic abuse than men. Accurate statistics are difficult to collect since domestic abuse often goes unreported but reports suggest in England and Wales from 2014-1017, two women died from domestic abuse a week, and made up 73% of all domestic homicides. Office for National Statistics, 'Domestic Abuse in England and Wales: Year Ending March 2018' (2018) <<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/bulletins/domesticabuseinenglandandwales/yearchangingmarch2018>> [accessed 2 April 2019].

constructed as a “masculine” performance that (re)presents their violence as a socially deviant anomaly located outside the discursive sensibilities of patriarchal femininity. Furthermore, within this reinscribed conflation of masculinity and violence on the “deviant” female body, the female serial killer is redeployed as “male like”.<sup>61</sup>

Both Silva and Rousseau’s chapter and Pearson’s essay identify Aileen/Wuornos as engaged in a gendered performance that highlights the cultural ascription of violence with “masculinity” and “maleness”, and speaks to the social constructions of gender and sexual deviance (something that is further mediated in the film by the performance of “transformed” Hollywood beauty Charlize Theron).<sup>62</sup> Aileen/Wuornos was not only a serial killer but also a queer person, a sex worker and a “damsel in distress” who “lured” men into picking her up on the highway, speaks to the flexibility with which gender identities are deployed with reference to her. These gender identities also intersect with class, race and sexuality: the “butch lesbian”, as particularly contrasted in the film by her “femme” partner played by petite and doe-eyed Christina Ricci; the “white trash” prostitute, an urban figure so often associated with contagion and pity; and the “damsel in distress” where Wuornos displayed heterosexual womanhood and normative femininity in order to motivate her male victims to help/hire her, even if this was eventually re-codified as dangerous and predatory.

Ruth similarly moves out of the domestic to track down her victims, sometimes stalking them in the city, and intruding into their homes, workplaces or private events. Yet, in contrast to Aileen, Ruth remains legible as explicitly “female”, despite this violent foray into outside spaces as her pregnancy explicitly signals her cis-gender womanhood. However, rather than reasserting essentialist gender binaries (which this argument appears to presuppose), I argue that Ruth’s pregnancy functions as part of a broader gendered performance that calls into question such binaries in a different way to Jenkins’ *Monster*. To dupe her victims, Ruth performs roles coded as conventionally feminine such as the

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<sup>61</sup> Silva and Rousseau, pp. 67-68.

<sup>62</sup> Multiple critics have identified the ways in which Aileen’s gendered performance is compounded and complicated by Charlize Theron’s performance, and her “transformation” from Hollywood glamour and beauty to the “beastly” character of Wuornos. Theron’s stardom, here, offers a reminder of the “real” and “authentic” feminine woman who further reiterates Wuornos’ gendered deviancy. For considerations of Theron’s performance, see Tanya Horeck, ‘From Documentary to Drama: Capturing Aileen Wuornos’, *Screen*, 48.2 (2007), 141-159; Bryan J. McCann, ‘Entering the Darkness: Rhetorics of Transformation and Gendered Violence in Patty Jenkins’s *Monster*’, *Women’s Studies in Communication*, 37.1 (2014), 1-21.

dotting mother, the sexually attractive and sexually available party-goer, and the charity worker concerned with “the children”.<sup>63</sup> Her pregnancy functions as a further performative legitimisation of her status as a “good” woman – that is until the ironic twist when Ruth murders her deceived victim.<sup>64</sup> At times, this performance appears as a masquerade as suggested when Ruth goes shopping for a new outfit in which to sexually entice DJ Dan (Tom Davis), choosing a hyper-feminine pink and glittery top.<sup>65</sup> Considering Judith Butler’s foundational work on gender performativity is instructive here:

[A]cts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this *on the surface* of the body, through the play of signifying absences that suggest, but never reveal, the organizing principle of identity as a cause. Such acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are *performative* in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means [emphasis in original].<sup>66</sup>

Gender, in other words, is discursively produced/Performed on and through the body. Pregnancy acts as a corporeal sign, not as evidence of an essentialist and “natural” definition of femininity or femaleness, but as a further bodily materiality which

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<sup>63</sup> The history of cinema is familiar, of course, with the figure of the deceptive feminine woman. The classic example is the figure of the *femme fatale* from film noirs and erotic thrillers, who uses her sexual prowess to manipulate men, often luring them to their deaths. However, I do not read Ruth as a *femme fatale* figure. Firstly, not all her victims are men. Secondly, she does not always use her sexuality to dupe her victims. And, thirdly, in the film, Ruth is a knife-wielding, methodical serial killer, codifying the film much more in terms of the slasher-horror film.

<sup>64</sup> This gendered dupe also recalls another representation of female violence in Lowe’s oeuvre: her role as Tina in *Sightseers* (Ben Wheatley, 2012), which she also co-wrote. As J. M. Tyree argues, *Sightseers* uses comedy to challenge ‘textbook serial-killer profiles and the clichés of traditional gender roles – especially the idea of the careless, sloppy, hormonally driven woman’ as Chris (Steve Oram), her murderous accomplice underestimates her (as the audience do too), leading to his unfortunate demise at the hands of Tina. J. M. Tyree, ‘Murder, considered as one of the fine arts of Women’s Liberation: Notes on *Sightseers*’, *Critical Quarterly*, 58.1 (2016), 36-40 (p. 37).

<sup>65</sup> For Joan Riviere, “womanliness” is a mask assumed by women ‘to hide the possession of masculinity and to avert the reprisals expected if she was found to possess it’. As I mentioned earlier, Ruth can be read in these Freudian terms. Her knife perhaps, functions as her phallic instrument, and her murders literalises the anxieties of the castration complex. However, a more productive reading, I argue, is through her status as a violent pregnant woman who demonstrates the performance of gender more broadly. See Joan Riviere, ‘Womanliness as a Masquerade’, *Formations of Fantasy*, ed. by Victor Burgin, James Donald and Cora Kaplan (London: Methuen, 1986), pp. 35-44.

<sup>66</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 136.

performatively produces, constitutes and compels regulatory gender norms.<sup>67</sup> In fact, as Tyler claims, pregnant embodiment defies the logic of classic ontology as it undoes the signifying system upon which sexual difference is built.<sup>68</sup> Ruth's pregnancy, rather than (re)embodiment within essentialist gender binaries or precluding her from such a flexible gender play, becomes (re)figured in the film as something which is also constructed and performed. Therefore, whereas, as Silva and Rousseau argue, the transgressive violence of *Monster*'s Aileen is "non-feminine" to the extent that it becomes rearticulated as psychopathic, monstrous and "male-like", in *Prevenge*, Ruth's gendered performance stretches the possibilities of aggressive and violent femininity and "femaleness".<sup>69</sup>

Indeed, *Prevenge*'s gender play problematizes patriarchal anxieties around maternal violence. Ruth's murders realise the long-standing fear in patriarchal societies of women's simultaneous generative and destructive powers: 'Women who kill confirm this archetypal feminine power, reinforcing the terrible antithesis to the myth of the good mother, reminding us that where creativity is located so too is destructiveness.'<sup>70</sup> Maternity more broadly appears to have an 'uneasy proximity to death' as 'being born can act as an uncanny reminder that once upon a time you were not here, and one day you will be no more'.<sup>71</sup> The pregnant woman's "embodiment" of both birth and death also further designates her as abject as the "unclean" maternal body is linked to the decaying body through the act of childbirth, which is construed as a 'violent act of expulsion'.<sup>72</sup> Ruth's murders appear to play into this anxiety. She kills her victims by cutting or stabbing them:

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<sup>67</sup> For a sustained discussion of the materiality of bodies, and for an explanation as to why bodies are still performatively produced through that materiality, see Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (London: Routledge, 1993).

<sup>68</sup> Tyler, 'Rethinking Pregnant Embodiment', p. 292.

<sup>69</sup> Carol Clover's important and influential work on the gender performativity of the final girl in the slasher film circulates around this argument. However, whereas the slasher films she discusses such as *Halloween* (John Carpenter, 1978) have 'very little to do with femaleness and very much more to do with phallocentrism', *Prevenge* departs from this by explicitly centring a legibly "female" and "feminine" performance. Clover, p. 53.

<sup>70</sup> Belinda Morrissey, *When Women Kill: Questions of Agency and Subjectivity* (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 2.

<sup>71</sup> Jacqueline Rose, *Mothers: An Essay on Cruelty and Love* (London: Faber and Faber, 2018), pp. 24-25. Rose also reminds us of the large number of women who die in childbirth, the risks of which vary dramatically across race and class. In the UK, the risk of dying in pregnancy for black women is seven times higher than for their white, British born counterparts. Travellers and newly-arrived refugees are also observed to be at significantly increased risk. See Charles Anawo Ameh and Nynke van den Broek, 'Increased Risk of Maternal Death among Ethnic Minority Women in the UK', *The Obstetrician & Gynaecologist*, 10 (2008), 177-182.

<sup>72</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 182. Creed also develops this arguing that the woman's 'ability to give birth links her directly to the animal world and to the great cycle of birth decay and death. Awareness of his links to nature reminds man of his mortality and of the fragility of the symbolic order'. Creed, p. 47.

two across the throat, one in the eye, one in the stomach and one in the testicle. The cuts are often shown in close-up shots and created through convincing special effects (SFX) in camera. Violent and visceral, these shots act as a reminder of the body's precarious boundaries and always potentially-abject nature.<sup>73</sup> The theme of cutting in the film extends beyond the body's boundaries. One of Ruth's victims – a business woman – talks about the professional workplace as a “cut-throat business” where she has to make difficult “cuts” when it comes to size of her workforce. Cutting her across the throat, Ruth literalises this metaphor to fatal ends.

However, the spectre of the “cut” and its closeness to death also permeates and is mapped onto Ruth's body. As Lowe explains: ‘Instead of being all about birth, [Ruth's] all about death and destruction. She doesn't have much hope for the future. She's all about the past.’<sup>74</sup> In one scene of the film, Ruth tells Tom, the climbing instructor, whose partner is also pregnant: “Your baby is born of pleasure. My baby is born of pain. I found out [I was pregnant] on the day [my partner] died.” Life and death are interlocked for Ruth through her pregnancy, something which is doubly emphasised later in the scene when Ruth goes into labour while dressed in her Halloween costume that is inspired by the Mexican holiday *Día de Muertos* (Day of the Dead). Ruth delivers her baby via an emergency caesarean following an unexpected and dangerous labour. Although this is a medically-controlled “cut”, as opposed to Ruth's chaotic stabbings, the death also troubles this bodily perforation; as the midwife says, “when it's life or death, you have to make that cut”. Moreover, the cut has affective resonances for Ruth. Ruth's partner died after being cut from a climbing rope, and the image of the severed red rope swaying in the wind (redness, again, signalling death) recurs throughout the film, mirroring the way it haunts Ruth. The cut of the umbilical cord between Ruth and her (monstrous?) foetus is a ‘cut that is impossible during pregnancy if it is to be preserved’, but one in which ‘the mother may fantasise about...in moments of ambivalence towards the foetus which takes up residency in her body’.<sup>75</sup> The cord and its eventual cut signal the uneasy physical and emotional connection between Ruth and her foetus. Finally, as I will discuss in more detail later, the

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<sup>73</sup> One of Ruth's victims, DJ Dan, is castrated as Ruth cuts off one of his testicles, and another victim is figuratively castrated as he is stabbed in the eye (for an analysis on the link between eyes and castration, see Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny*, trans. by David McLintock (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 139). We could read Ruth here as the Freudian castrating mother-monster – a continuation of the monstrous-feminine roles identified by Creed. However, Lowe complicates this as DJ Dan is a tragic, deluded and sleazy figure, suggesting our sympathies should be with Ruth in their scenes.

<sup>74</sup> ‘Postnatal Confessions’.

<sup>75</sup> Cooper, p. 4.

“cut” also refers to the cinematic cut, and the urgency to finish the film for the expectant mother.

The affective aspect of Ruth’s serial killing is crucial to Lowe’s challenge. Rather than displaying these murders as a realisation of patriarchal anxieties surrounding pregnant women’s reproductive/destructive potentialities, Lowe makes them legible as motivated by and enactments of Ruth’s grief and ambivalence towards her pregnancy. In the next section, I will demonstrate how another spatialized figure – the *flâneuse* – facilitates this legibility by offer an insight into Ruth’s interiority. This works in opposition to Wuornos where ‘ascriptions of mobility, both spatial and gender, were invoked to pathologize and eventually criminalize her’.<sup>76</sup> *Monster*, meanwhile, makes female violence legible to the audience through the film’s generic deployment of both the melodrama and the road movie. Using both generic frameworks to suggests a breakdown of the home makes “intelligible” Aileen’s violence by providing a motivation for her crimes (which further compelled her into outside spaces) and an emotional participation in and access to the story (in the romance plot, for example, Aileen promises to provide a home for her partner).<sup>77</sup> Although Aileen/Wuornos’ gender identity is flexibly constituted and deployed, the feminist and queer potentials in this are contained in both the film and the actual case by the heteronormative spatial tropes that “made sense” of her. *Prevenge* also constructs outside spaces through a breakdown in the home or, rather, an *absence* of the home as it ceased to exist following the death of her partner. Ruth is now only seen in outside and transitory spaces, such as the hotel or the train.<sup>78</sup> These, too, “make sense” of Ruth’s crime, but they do so by becoming spaces of observation and contemplation for Ruth, enabling access to her interior life. If *Monster*’s new spatial frameworks ultimately work to

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<sup>76</sup> Pearson, p. 269.

<sup>77</sup> Victoria L. Smith argues that *Monster* breaks down the distinction between the home of the melodrama and the open spaces of the road movie as the “homes” of the film are motels, ‘another version of the desolation of the liminal highway’, or the highway itself (*Monster* suggests Aileen is homeless at the beginning of the film). Smith’s argument presumes the audience for this film do not come from or live in the violent and abject spaces of the film: trailer parks, motels, the highway. *Monster*, then, needs to be “legible” for an audience with a high to middle socioeconomic status. Victoria L. Smith, ‘Highways of Desolation: The Road and Trash in *Boys Don’t Cry* and *Monster*’, *South Central Review*, 32.3 (2015), 131-150 (pp. 136-137).

<sup>78</sup> The specifics of geography should not be forgotten here. After all, *Monster* is set in the of the highways in Florida, USA. As Pearson argues, Wuornos’ transience, afforded by the highway, was inscribed as part of her identity as a serial killer by Sergeant Munster of the Marion County Sheriff’s department who claimed that the Florida is a haven for serial killers because of the large transient population. See Pearson, p. 261. Britain, in contrast, lacks the expansiveness and “mystique” of American highways or the same histories of road movies. For a summary of the cultural legacy of British roads and the history of the British road movie, see Peter Merriman, *Driving Spaces: A Cultural-Historical Geography of England’s M1 Motorway* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007).

discipline Aileen's unruly gender and spatial transgressions, *Prevenge*'s spatial constructions work to "flesh out" Ruth's comparatively normative (if still transgressive and performative) gender identity.

### **Urban Movements: The *Flâneuse***

Outside spaces not only function as Ruth's stalking ground where she "hunts down" her victims. They also function as a spaces for Ruth to wander aimlessly, observe her surroundings and contemplate her grief, pregnancy and murders. Lowe explains she 'pitched the film as a female *Taxi Driver* [1976], that element of a maverick, roaming character that is lonely – we don't think of female characters as having the capacity for that existential angst'.<sup>79</sup> Who gets to be a lonely roamer? According to Lowe, it is not female characters who 'are always mothers or girlfriends who provide some sort of network for the hero, who then goes out and does whatever he wants'.<sup>80</sup> After all, Jodie Foster's character in *Taxi Driver*, Iris, is a runaway but she is not a wanderer in the same way as Travis Bickle. She may linger on street corners, but, as a sex worker, this is all under the instruction and gaze of the pimp (and, in cinematic terms, Travis and the spectator) who literally turn her into a commodity. In cinema, men are the wanderers; as I laid out in my introduction, they conventionally conceptualised as the ones who traverse time and space.<sup>81</sup> The broader history of wanderers belongs also to men. The term "*flâneur*" refers to 'a lounger or saunterer, an idle "man about town"'.<sup>82</sup> The figure, as many critics point out, comes from early nineteenth-century Paris, and refers only to men.<sup>83</sup> Laura Elkin, however, makes the case for the female *flâneur*: the *flâneuse*.<sup>84</sup> She is different to the prominent women in the streets – the "streetwalker" or sex worker – who, as Elkin points

<sup>79</sup> Alice Lowe, 'The Prevenge Diaries: Alice Lowe on Murder, Cardiff and Making a Human', *Raising Films* <<https://www.raisingfilms.com/prevenge-diaries-alice-lowe-on-murder-cardiff-making-a-human/>> [accessed 4 April 2019].

<sup>80</sup> Alice Lowe, interviewed by Katie Puckrik, *Guardian*, 14 February 2017 <<https://www.theguardian.com/film/2017/feb/14/alice-lowe-on-violent-british-horror-comedy-prevenge>> [accessed 4 April 2019].

<sup>81</sup> De Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't*, pp. 118-119.

<sup>82</sup> Oxford English Dictionary [online], 'Flâneur', <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/71073?redirectedFrom=flaneur#eid> [accessed 13 April 2018].

<sup>83</sup> See Massey, 'Flexible Sexism'; Deborah Parsons, *Streetwalking in the Metropolis: Women, the City, and Modernity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Griselda Pollock, 'Modernity and the Spaces of Femininity', in *Vision and Difference*, pp. 50-90; Janet Wolff, 'The Invisible Flâneuse: Women and the Literature of Modernity', *Theory, Culture and Society*, 3 (1985), 37-46.

<sup>84</sup> Laura Elkin, *Flâneuse: Women Walk the City in Paris, New York, Tokyo, Venice and London* (London: Chatto and Windus, 2016), pp. 11-13.

out and my example of *Taxi Driver* demonstrates, does not have the same freedom of movement as the *flâneur*.<sup>85</sup> It is crucial, Elkin argues, to examine the figure of the *flâneuse* because women *do* walk the streets of the city.<sup>86</sup> To ignore their histories, experiences and responses to it is to limit the ways women interact with the city and the ways we conceptualise these urban spaces more broadly.

Likewise, women do walk in cinema. Becca Voelcker considers the history of women walkers in cinema, arguing that compared to her idle male counterparts, the woman walker has a more complex relationship to space. Examining the female pedestrians in *Wanda* (1970), *Vagabond* (1985), *Blessed* (2001) and *News from Home* (1976), Voelcker argues the films 'present women's experiences walking and occupying public space as ambivalent modulations of vulnerability and liberation, necessity and personal expression'.<sup>87</sup> It is through this history that I read Ruth's wanderings. In *Prevvenge*, Lowe presents Ruth's walking as a means for the character's observation and reflection, deploying the figure of the *flâneuse* in a different way to the traditional conceptualisation of the bourgeois, metropolitan, male *flâneur*.<sup>88</sup> Although the *flâneur* is a figure of leisure, pleasure and privilege, idly observing the city and fellow walkers (and, indeed Elkin also positions her *flâneuse* in a similar way, even if this functions for her as a deviant and political act), Ruth's *flânerie* functions as an expression of her interiority, particularly her grief towards her late partner and ambivalences towards her pregnancy.<sup>89</sup> The film sheds light on further extended meanings of the term, where Ruth's *flânerie* work to articulate and explore Ruth's inner emotional life. At one point, Ruth walks through a children's play park, stopping to watch a father and daughter play on the swings. The scene cuts between mid-shots of Ruth sitting on a bench watching the parent and child, and a wide-shot of the family in the foreground and Ruth in the background. The mid-shot reveals Ruth's intensely sad gaze at the family, while the wide-shot provides an out-of-focus foreground,

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<sup>85</sup> Elkin, pp. 8-9.

<sup>86</sup> Working-class women, for example, have always walked the city. Elkin, p. 13.

<sup>87</sup> Becca Voelcker, 'Point of View: Wanderlust', *Sight and Sound*, March 2018, 14-15 (p. 14).

<sup>88</sup> Although there is some focused academic attention towards the *flâneuse* in individual films, there has yet to be a broad investigation into this figure. For an indication of some of the existing academic work on the *flâneuse* in cinema, see Sarah Edwards, 'Flâneuse or Fallen Woman? Edwardian Femininity and Metropolitan Space in Heritage Film', *Journal of Gender Studies*, 17.2 (2008), 117-129; Margaret Flinn, 'Flâneuses and the Unmaking of Place' in *The Social Architecture of French Cinema 1929-1939* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2014); Janice Mouton, 'From Feminine Masquerade to *Flâneuse*: Agnès Varda's *Cléo in the City*', *Cinema Journal*, 40.2 (2001), 3-16.

<sup>89</sup> Elkin claims: '[The *flâneuse*] is a figure to be reckoned with, and inspired by, all on her own. She voyages out, and goes where she's not supposed to... She is determined, resourceful individual keenly attuned to the creative potential of the city, and the liberating possibilities of a good walk.' Elkin, p. 22.

blurring the family, and ensuring that the focus of the scene remains on Ruth watching them in the background (Figure 11-12). The framing and editing of the shots work to convey and emphasise Ruth's grief over the loss of her partner and father of her child.



Figure 11: A mid-shot of Ruth watching the family



Figure 12: A wide-shot of the family, with Ruth in focus in the background

Nature is foregrounded in this moment for, as Ruth watches the family, she is surrounded by green leaves of a bush. Although the film primarily takes place within the “alienating” neon-saturated city, natural environments occur at key moments. The film is bookended by the images of rugged cliffs, with the sea splashing violently against the rocks, and the sound of the rushing wind and breaking waves emphasised in the soundscape. Nature is violent and dangerous in the film, something which is literalised when we come to realise these cliffs were the site of Ruth’s partner’s death. Lowe hints at this violence in the initial depiction of the cliffs when we see a close-up shot of blood and other bodily matter strewn against the rocks. Later, in the film, we discover how this got there as Ruth imagines her partner’s death, envisioning the cutting of the climbing rope and her partner’s fatal head wound as he fell from the cliffs. The severed red rope mirrors the messiness of the strewn blood – a visceral reminder of how precarious and fragile our careful ordering and management of the natural world is. Therefore, although the children’s playpark is a semi-natural suburban environment, filming Ruth observing this family in a mid-shot which thoroughly surrounds her with nature, overlaying her grief with further intensity.

In tension with the urban figure of the *flâneur* who gazes at the ‘teeming city’, natural environments are foregrounded in moments of Ruth’s *flânerie*.<sup>90</sup> Indeed, the association of nature and death in the film is signalled at other moments during Ruth’s *flânerie* to reflect her interiority. Nature literally signals her grief at one point when she visits her partner’s grave and lies in the grass next to the tombstone to get physically and emotionally closer to him. The film then cuts to close-up shots of leaves and cobwebs in the surrounding trees before we see Ruth walking through a green and leafy suburban street, again emphasising the natural materials in this semi-urban space (Figure 13). The film then cuts between these scenes of Ruth walking and scenes of Ruth taking part in a yoga class. We are not sure where Ruth is walking to; perhaps, again, in keeping with the *flâneuse*, this is an aimless walk. But given the already established connection between nature and death, which was made explicit in the previous scene, this moment provides an intense rendering of Ruth’s interiority. This is compounded by the intercutting of the scenes in the yoga class where Lowe offers an explicit depiction of Ruth’s interiority. As Ruth meditates at the end of the class, we see a montage of her memories of her partner and the murders she has committed so far, and her imaginings of what happened to her

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<sup>90</sup> Pollock, ‘Modernity and the Spaces of Femininity’, p. 51.

partner on his last climbing trip. Again, there is an emphasis on the natural as we see images of the cliffs and extreme close-up shots of the insects and reptiles in the pet shop.<sup>91</sup> Lowe and her editor explicitly focused this montage on ‘the character [of Ruth] and her journey’.<sup>92</sup> Combined with the brief moments of Ruth as a *flâneuse*, where she walks through “natural” (albeit suburban) environments, we can see that these movements take on significance in expressing Ruth’s interior emotional life.



Figure 13: Close-up shots of nature

If, as I argued earlier, the pregnant woman’s alignment with “nature” ‘serves to align her with the bodily and undermine her status as a rational subject and social agent’,

<sup>91</sup> Kelly Oliver identifies a recent trend associating insects with pregnancies in horror films. She argues that the association plays into anxieties that what is harboured in women’s wombs could be inhuman and, furthermore, that women’s wombs could become asexual and with a short gestation time like many insects’ reproductive systems and so overrun humanity. She also quotes Braidotti, who considers links between women, spiders and insects more broadly and argues that insects represent “a generalized figure of liminality and in-between-ness which shares a number of structural features with the feminine.” Although *Prevenge* has an intense focus on insects, spiders and reptiles in the montage sequence, I argue that this moment does not play into broader social anxieties about pregnancy, but rather Ruth’s specific anxieties. This montage, after all, focuses on Ruth’s memories, imaginations and fears; it is a depiction of her interiority and so, by extension, it is a depiction of *her* anxieties. See Oliver, *Knock Me Up, Knock Me Down*, pp. 137-138.

<sup>92</sup> Matteo Bini, the film’s editor, suggests that this montage was intentionally constructed as an insight into Ruth’s interiority: ‘With the dream sequence...we were focusing on the character and her journey. We don’t really question whether we should cut this more with this kind of genre, style or whatever.’ Interestingly, his comments also imply that certain genres (which here means the horror genre as, earlier in the comment, he cites *Don’t Look Now* (1973) as inspiration for this sequence) make difficult revealing a person’s interiority. This is illuminating when considering my analysis of pregnant women’s “obliterated” interiority and subjectivity in horror cinema. ‘Postnatal Confessions’.

then Lowe's use of nature to signal Ruth's interiority both "rationalises" her murders (or at least makes her motivations apparent) and works to foreground her subjectivity.<sup>93</sup> As I outlined in my introduction, rendering women's interiority "visible" is a crucial way in which women's subjectivities can be represented in cinema. As Lucy Bolton argues:

[T]hrough an immersion in the sensory and sensual, and through a feminization of the language and space of the films – also through the acknowledgement of a woman's history... the life of a woman is more fully represented, rather than as a sketch or abstraction. In this mode of filming it appears that the spectator is privy to the interiority of the female characters.<sup>94</sup>

Creating space, literally and metaphorically, for Ruth to explore her grief and the ambivalences towards her pregnancy, Lowe offers both a 'visual language of female subjectivity' and 'a vision of a possible alternative way of being for women in cinema'.<sup>95</sup> This is particularly significant given that this Ruth is a pregnant woman in a *horror* film. If pregnant women are "impossible" and "absent" in philosophical accounts of subjectivity and if her subjectivity is "obliterated" in horror cinema, then *Prevenge*'s representation of a complex pregnant woman with an interior emotional life offers an alternative image where pregnant women's subjectivity can be imagined.

## Pregnant Productions

Finally, I want briefly to indicate the importance of Lowe's (pregnant) authorship to this foregrounding of a pregnant woman's subjectivity. As I mentioned earlier, Lowe was pregnant when she wrote and shot the film. The film's production history speaks to the unique demands this generated. Being pregnant necessitated a short shoot. Concerned that she might fall ill, go into early labour or that the shape of her bump might drastically change, Lowe wrote the script in a couple of weeks and shot the film in eleven days.<sup>96</sup> Certain formal and aesthetic practices had to be adopted, such as short scenes and scenes made up of "two-handers", to avoid changing locations and the lighting set up.<sup>97</sup> What we

<sup>93</sup> Hanson, p. 12.

<sup>94</sup> Bolton, p. 3.

<sup>95</sup> Bolton, p. 35.

<sup>96</sup> Lowe, interviewed by Puckrik.

<sup>97</sup> Bogutskaya, p. 9.

might call a resulting pregnancy aesthetic also informs the film's temporality. As H. Cooper argues:

The pace of the film, as well as its feverish light-scape and its soundtrack of eerie and rhythmic electronic music, like a heartbeat, seem to gesture towards this sense of the shortness of time... [This] gives the film its intensity and its sense of a focused directorial mind, driving towards that final cut with the ruthless creativity that perhaps only a firm boundary or dead-line can bring about.<sup>98</sup>

The urgency on the part of the foetus for Ruth to complete the murders and to "finish the job" mirrors, Cooper argues, the mother-to-be's fears of being deprived of creative work and a career following the baby's arrival.<sup>99</sup> In opposition to contemporaneous postfeminist representations of pregnancy, where the pregnant woman is offered cultural permission to slow down and savour time, *Prevenge*'s on-screen and off-screen pregnancies pose an urgency both to finish the murders and finish the film.<sup>100</sup> Lowe confirms her personal feelings towards this in an interview saying: 'As a freelancer, having a baby, you feel like you will never work again. There is no support network really. As an actress you feel like you will never work again.'<sup>101</sup>

Even though Lowe describes her pregnancy as "liberating" and her experience of making the film as largely positive, as the above quote suggests, the film also indicates and anticipates the systemic discrimination of pregnant women and mothers in precarious creative industries. Research continues to point to pregnant women's structural inequalities in the film industry. *Raising Films*, a campaign group for parents and carers in the film industry, suggests that, even though the Equality Act of 2010 rules that it is unlawful to discriminate against anyone based on 'protected characteristics' including gender or pregnancy and maternity, this legislation is not always understood, adopted or practiced

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<sup>98</sup> Cooper, p. 5.

<sup>99</sup> Cooper, p. 5.

<sup>100</sup> Diane Negra argues the postfeminist womanhood is temporary regulated by certain life events: coming-of-age (such as the "sweet sixteenth" birthday), engagement, marriage and children. The single woman or "career" woman is a time-beset woman as she risks failing to participate in this lifecycle of idealised femininity. The pregnant women as participating in a "slowed down" time, then, is constructed in fraught opposition to the "career" woman. Negra, p. 63.

<sup>101</sup> Alice Lowe, interviewed by Kaleem Aftab, *Independent*, 7 February 2017

<<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/films/features/prevenge-alice-lowe-interview-sightseers-beehive-the-mighty-boosh-horrible-histories-a7567076.html>> [accessed 19 April 2018].

across the industry.<sup>102</sup> In addition, filmmakers speak of the various ways they have been discriminated against while pregnant (although it can be a bonus, as director and cinematographer Reed Morano experienced with her handheld shots, as she could rest her elbows on her unborn son's head!).<sup>103</sup> However, as noted above, Lowe's urgency to make the film while pregnant was also in anticipation of impending motherhood. She says: 'I spent the first three months in bed because I felt really crap, but that scared me into doing as much as I can afterwards, in case I can't for the next three years.'<sup>104</sup> Scholars point out that motherhood remains a key discriminatory barrier for women in the film industry.<sup>105</sup> The ramifications of this are numerous and disastrous. One such implication, as Natalie Wreyford argues, is that 'without a balance of female voices it appears that many portrayals of female experience might be missing from our screens and certain gender stereotypes may be upheld and indeed reinforced'.<sup>106</sup>

Lowe's authorship is crucial, then, for the representation of pregnancy it incites. Lowe explicitly describes the film as a response to her own experience of pregnancy: '[*Prevenge*] was more born of frustration and bafflement, and feeling like an outsider to the shiny tourist version of pregnancy.'<sup>107</sup> At times, Lowe draws on her biographical experiences to explore the lived experience of pregnancy in the film, such as when Ruth gets on a train and pulls out a girly and childish-looking book called "Baby's First Steps", revealing a terrifying-looking drawing of her as a vengeful, knife-wielding pregnant woman, and a confused look from a fellow passenger.<sup>108</sup> More broadly, Lowe claims the film is informed by her fears of pregnancy and impending motherhood: '[P]regnant women are people with their own goals, hopes, dreams and motivations, and that doesn't have to be swallowed up by pregnancy. That was one of my fears: that my identity would

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<sup>102</sup> Raising Films, 'Raising Our Game: Next Steps for the UK Film and Television Industry', 2017 <<https://www.raisingfilms.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Raising-our-Game-report-2017.pdf>> [accessed 19 April 2018].

<sup>103</sup> Jane Borden, 'You Can Direct a Movie while Pregnant. But Hollywood's Not Going to Make it Easy', *Washington Post*, 15 March 2018 <[https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/you-can-direct-a-movie-while-pregnant-but-hollywoods-not-going-to-make-it-easy/2018/03/15/02b8e0b2-222d-11e8-86f6-54bfff693d2b\\_story.html?noredirect=on&utm\\_term=.48c1c8e003dd](https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/you-can-direct-a-movie-while-pregnant-but-hollywoods-not-going-to-make-it-easy/2018/03/15/02b8e0b2-222d-11e8-86f6-54bfff693d2b_story.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.48c1c8e003dd)> [accessed 4 April 2019].

<sup>104</sup> Lowe, 'The *Prevenge* Diaries: Alice Lowe on Murder, Cardiff and Making a Human'.

<sup>105</sup> See Natalie Wreyford, 'The Real Cost of Childcare: Motherhood and Flexible Creative Labour in the UK Film Industry', *Studies in the Maternal*, 5 (2), 2013 <[www.mamsie.bbk.ac.uk](http://www.mamsie.bbk.ac.uk)> [accessed 1 February 2019]; Raising Films, 'Making it Possible: Voices of Parents and Carers in the UK Film Industry', 22 June 2016 <<https://www.raisingfilms.com/resources/making-it-possible-survey-results/>> [accessed 19 April 2018].

<sup>106</sup> Wreyford, p. 15.

<sup>107</sup> Lowe, interviewed by Baughan.

<sup>108</sup> On Twitter, Lowe admitted that she really had a baby diary which she began defacing on the train to the concern of the other passengers. Alice Lowe, 'this kill book started from a genuine baby diary I started defacing on a train. The other passengers were concerned... #Prevenge' [Twitter post] (@alicelowe, 31 October 2017).

disappear... I turned the fear of violence against my own body outside of myself, as it were.<sup>109</sup> In a broadly political sense, then, Lowe's film is an important intervention in representations of pregnant women in cinema. This has crucial ramifications for pregnant women's subjectivity. As Imogen Tyler argues, in order to reconceptualise pregnant women's embodiment, subjectivity and representation, '[i]t is time to let the object – the subject matter – speak... [I]n order to let the object speak, pregnant embodiment needs to be thought and written, at least in part, from the embodied position of the subject matter'.<sup>110</sup> If pregnant embodiment is, as I quoted earlier, 'unmapped, unthought, indeed unthinkable, with a philosophical landscape of stable forms', then speaking from the subject's position (or filming from the speaker's position) makes pregnant embodiment and, by extension, pregnant subjectivity visible in a philosophical tradition that is sustained by the pregnant woman's absence.<sup>111</sup>

That Lowe does so within the horror genre makes this feminist intervention more timely and potent. For not only have male directors in horror cinema largely authored what is primarily a woman's experience (often to disastrous ends), but the most famous representation of a pregnant woman in horror cinema, Mia Woodhouse from *Rosemary's Baby*, was directed by Roman Polanski, who pleaded guilty to unlawful sexual intercourse with a minor.<sup>112</sup> Interest has been renewed in Polanski's case following the reports of sexual assault and harassment in Hollywood by Harvey Weinstein and others.<sup>113</sup> Given both the violation of women's autonomy and bodily boundaries, and the willed systemic ignorance of these crimes, which continue to prop up Polanski (and other's) authorial/auteurial positions, my chapter's re-evaluation of representations of women's sexual and maternal functions through women's authorship is urgent. Indeed, questioning what we do with the art of men following allegations of sexual harassment and assault, Claire Dederer distinguishes between the "monstrous" male artist, who committed these crimes, and the "monstrous" female artist, who is usually designated as such when she is a

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<sup>109</sup> Lowe, interviewed by Baughan.

<sup>110</sup> Tyler, 'Rethinking Pregnant Embodiment', p. 298.

<sup>111</sup> Tyler, 'Rethinking Pregnant Embodiment', p. 290.

<sup>112</sup> Lowe herself recognises the importance of this claiming: "There are still things that are new and taboo and open to being told by women... I like to be positive about it. I think, could a man have made this film? And I don't think so." Lowe, interviewed by Puckrik.

<sup>113</sup> See Cobb and Horeck; Hadley Freeman, 'What does Hollywood's Reverence for Child Rapist Roman Polanski Tell Us?', *Guardian*, 30 January 2018 <<https://www.theguardian.com/film/2018/jan/30/hollywood-reverence-child-rapist-roman-polanski-convicted-40-years-on-run>> [accessed 1 April 2019]; Marghitu.

mother who “ignores” her children to complete her work.<sup>114</sup> Given that both these figurations marginalise, or at least make difficult, representations of female subjectivity, *Prevenge*’s exploration of the “monstrous” mother-artist and the insertion of the maternal voice in these representations offers a timely renewed look at these “monstrous” positions. I position Lowe’s authorship as an urgent intervention in women’s authorship over the representative experience of pregnancy and women’s stories more broadly, and a call for systemic change to enable women, especially pregnant women and mother’s work to get made and their voices to be heard in an industry where they have so often been shut out.

## Conclusion

At a time when women’s reproductive rights, particularly access to abortion, are under threat (such as in the US), or legislation is so stringent that it contravenes the European Convention on Human Rights (such as the strict abortion laws in Northern Ireland), it is crucial to examine representations of pregnant women.<sup>115</sup> These representations mediate the relationship between the pregnant woman and the foetus, the conceptualisation of pregnant embodiment and the construction of pregnant subjectivity in the social and cultural consciousness, which in turn feeds into political and legal discourse. Centring pregnant people’s experiences and voices offers an important counter to their marginalised subjectivities. Debbie Tucker Green’s powerful film *Second Coming* (2015) refracts this representation through the intersection of race, exploring a fantastical experience of pregnancy for a black woman. Although I have considered the cis-gender woman’s experience of pregnancy, documentaries such as *Seahorse* (2019) and *A Deal with the Universe* (2018) expand this gendered interrogation by exploring the experience of pregnancy for transgender men. In this chapter, I considered pregnant women’s complex – even impossible – position in traditional masculinist constructions of subjectivity. While horror cinema, I argue, often extends this impossibility by “obliterating” the pregnant

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<sup>114</sup> Claire Dederer, ‘What do we do with the Art of Monstrous Men?’, *Paris Review*, 20 November 2017 <<https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2017/11/20/art-monstrous-men/>> [accessed 3 April 2019].

<sup>115</sup> As I write this, Alabama has become the latest state to propose a ban on abortion in an attempt to overthrow the Supreme Court decision of Roe v. Wade. See The Associated Press, ‘Alabama Bill Would Outlaw Abortion as Lawmakers Aim at Roe’, *New York Times*, 2 April 2019 <<https://www.nytimes.com/aponline/2019/04/02/us/ap-us-xgr-abortion-ban-.html>> [accessed 2 April 2019]. See also Owen Bowcott, ‘Northern Ireland abortion law clashes with human rights, judges say’, *Guardian*, 7 June 2018 <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jun/07/supreme-court-dismisses-bid-to-overturn-northern-ireland-abortion-laws>> [accessed 2 April 2019].

woman's subjectivity by collapsing her (interior) body into (interiorised) domestic space, *Prevenge* offers an alternative representation. Imagining the pregnant protagonist in space, rather than as space, *Prevenge* explores the experience of this pregnancy by/for Ruth. Not only does Lowe construct the city as a strange and alienating space for Ruth, but she also deploys the figures of the serial killer and the *flâneuse* to represent these experiences further. This both presents a complex image of pregnant embodiment, one which is performative, "de-naturalised" and transgressive, and presents an intense insight into Ruth's interior emotional life. Lowe's representation of pregnancy, then, is significant not only because this was authored by a pregnant woman herself, but because it also offers an important working-through of pregnant women's embodiment and subjectivity in cinema, particularly horror cinema, and wider philosophical and theoretical constructions.



## CHAPTER THREE

### The Affective Subject: Spaces of Interiority in *We Need to Talk about Kevin* (Lynne Ramsay, 2011)

If *Prevenge* explores the philosophical, spatial and generic difficulties of conceptualising a pregnant woman's subjectivity, Lynne Ramsay's *We Need to Talk about Kevin* (2011) considers what happens to a woman's subjectivity after she gives birth. Based on Lionel Shriver's 2003 novel of the same name, the film tells the story of Eva (Tilda Swinton) as she reflects on her experience as a mother to Kevin (played first by Jasper Newell and then, when a teenager, by Ezra Miller), with her husband, Franklin (John C. Reilly). A difficult child, the film hints at a terrible event involving Kevin before eventually revealing at the end of the film that Kevin killed his father, sister Celia (Ashley Gerasimovich) and several of his schoolmates. *Kevin* explores the fraught subjectivity of the mother. As Lisa Baraitser suggests, the mother is the impossible subject, par excellence:

Caught in an ever widening gap between her idealization and denigration in contemporary culture, and her indeterminate position as part object, part subject within the Western philosophical tradition, the mother has always been left hopelessly uncertain, with all the death-like and dreadful connotations that the abject possesses. In some senses she is everywhere, our culture saturated with her image in its varied guises, and yet theoretically she remains a shadowy figure who seems to disappear from the many discourses that explicitly try to account for her.<sup>1</sup>

Consequently, as Alison Stone argues, it is 'relatively difficult for us to recognize mothers as subjects, and...for mothers to regard themselves as subjects or to exercise their capacities for subjectivity'.<sup>2</sup> In this chapter, I explore how *Kevin* represents a mother's subjectivity in relation to space. I argue that, through an attention to spatial cinematic parameters, both the formal construction of filmic space and the representative transformation of extra-diegetic spaces into diegetic spaces, Ramsay offers a representation

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<sup>1</sup> Lisa Baraitser, *Maternal Encounters: The Ethics of Interruption* (London and New York: Routledge, 2009), p. 4.

<sup>2</sup> Alison Stone, *Feminism, Psychoanalysis and Maternal Subjectivity* (New York: Routledge, 2012), p. 1.

of Eva's inferiority. Significantly, I argue that Ramsay foregrounds Eva's affective response to her "receding" subject-position as a mother, paradoxically constructing a cinematic space through which a woman's subjectivity can be represented. I will firstly consider how Ramsay makes Eva's affective response to this "loss" of subjectivity legible as one of maternal ambivalence through an attention to the film's formal construction of spatiality and temporality. Secondly, I examine how Ramsay links this affectively-rendered "loss" to the representation of diegetic spaces, such as the home, the workplace, public spaces and travel spaces. Ultimately, by representing a woman and a mother's affective spaces on screen, Ramsay offers a significant cinematic representation of female subjectivity.

### **The Maternal Subject: Text and Theory**

Firstly, I outline some key considerations of motherhood both in film studies and critical discourse, arguing that she occupies a difficult subject-position within both. In her important 1992 book, *Mother and Representation: The Mother in Popular Culture and Melodrama*, E. Ann Kaplan argues that the mother is, in a sense, everywhere but 'always in the margins'.<sup>3</sup> Kaplan's argument stems not so much from a lack of attention from filmmakers or scholars, but from the position from which she is interrogated: 'Few scholars had been interested in understanding her positioning or her social role from *inside* the mother's discourse, in whatever context, of whatever type.'<sup>4</sup> One of the most productive places where the mother has been interrogated in film studies, particularly with reference to her subjectivity, is the maternal melodrama. As Lucy Fischer argues in another significant survey of maternal representations from the 1990s, the maternal melodrama offers a privileged terrain to examine representations of mothers in cinema, a logical tendency 'given that the "woman's picture" has been one of the few commercial paradigms to authorize a complex female protagonist'.<sup>5</sup> *Kevin*, with its complex mother protagonist, has been identified as a maternal melodrama by critics, making this a key generic framework to consider in relation to its representation of Eva.<sup>6</sup> However, the film also crosses over with other genres, such as the horror film and the suspense film, a common

<sup>3</sup> E. Ann Kaplan, *Mother and Representation: The Mother in Popular Culture and Melodrama* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 3.

<sup>4</sup> Kaplan, *Mother and Representation*, p. 3.

<sup>5</sup> Lucy Fischer, *Cinematernity: Film, Motherhood, Genre* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), p. 6.

<sup>6</sup> See Sue Thornham, "A Hatred So Intense"; Radner, p. 95.

generic hybrid within the broader category of the woman's film.<sup>7</sup> As I will demonstrate later in the chapter, this generic cross-over is important to consider in relation to the construction of maternal subjectivity in *Kevin*.

Whether the maternal melodrama offers a place from which the mother's subjectivity can be positively constructed has been intensely debated by feminist film critics. Examining *Stella Dallas* (King Vidor, 1937), a key maternal melodrama in the cycle of films from the 1930s and 1940s, Kaplan argues that the film 'perpetuat[es]...oppressive patriarchal myths'.<sup>8</sup> Despite some of the film's "resisting elements", the film 'pulls the spectator towards dominant patriarchal class and gender ideology'.<sup>9</sup> Linda Williams takes issue with Kaplan's argument. While she argues that the 'device of devaluing and debasing the actual figure of the mother while sanctifying the institution of motherhood is typical' of the maternal melodrama in general, she challenges Kaplan's argument that *Stella Dallas* satisfies patriarchal demands for the repression of the active and involved aspects of the mother's role.<sup>10</sup> Williams reads the film's subject positionings as 'multiply identified', resulting in a complex representation of a mother's subjectivity: 'For all its masochism, for all its frequent devaluation of the individual person of the mother (as opposed to the abstract ideal of motherhood), the maternal melodrama presents a recognisable picture of woman's ambivalent position under patriarchy that has been an important source of realistic reflections of woman's lives.'<sup>11</sup> Kaplan and Williams' complex and, at times, contradictory readings of maternal subjectivity in *Stella Dallas* can be situated alongside Mary Ann Doane's argument regarding the difficulties of constructing female subjectivity in the broader genre of the woman's film, as I outlined in my introduction.<sup>12</sup>

More recent considerations of the figure of the mother emphasise the increased visibility she is afforded in contemporary media culture.<sup>13</sup> Pervasive ideologies of "good mothering" inform these representations: 'Popular culture and the media are instrumental in propagating images of selfless mothers who sacrifice their time, energy, careers and

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<sup>7</sup> Doane, 'The "Woman's Film"', p. 284.

<sup>8</sup> Kaplan, quoted in Fischer, p. 14.

<sup>9</sup> Kaplan, p. 173.

<sup>10</sup> Linda Williams, "'Something Else Besides the Mother': *Stella Dallas* and the Maternal Melodrama', in *Home is Where the Heart is*, pp. 299-325 (p. 300).

<sup>11</sup> Williams, "'Something Else Besides the Mother'", p. 320.

<sup>12</sup> Doane, *The Desire to Desire*, p. 13.

<sup>13</sup> See Elizabeth Podnieks, 'Introduction: Popular Culture's Maternal Embrace', in *Mediating Moms: Mothers in Popular Culture*, ed. by Elizabeth Podnieks (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2012), pp. 3-32.

even their individuality in the name of raising the next generation of “good citizens”.<sup>14</sup> “Good mothers” predominantly embody the “ideal” subject position: white, middle class, able-bodied, heterosexual, appropriately-aged and married.<sup>15</sup> Heather Addison, Mary Kate Goodwin-Kelly and Elaine Roth argue that cinematic mothers are often demonized or deified, offering a limited range of maternal representations that often serve misogynistic and conservative ends.<sup>16</sup> Despite a recent diversification of roles available to mothers in contemporary Hollywood cinema that go outside the traditions of the nuclear family, such as the working mother, single mother and the lesbian mother, as Claire Jenkins argues, the mother is still not always afforded full subjectivity: ‘[W]hile Hollywood is representing motherhood as diverse, and recognizes the pressures felt by contemporary mothers, its narratives are also limiting. There is no satisfactory conclusion to the films that offer – within the confines of the nuclear family – female freedoms and subjectivity.’<sup>17</sup> The mother still occupies a difficult subject position in contemporary Anglophone cinema and culture; she is still relegated to the margins as Kaplan argued nearly 30 years ago.

The difficulties of representing maternal subjectivity in cinema can be situated alongside broader difficulties in conceptualising maternal subjectivity in philosophical and critical discourse. As Stone argues, in Western civilisation the mother has been understood in opposition to the “self” from ancient Greece and Judeo-Christianity to the present day.<sup>18</sup> While not excluding a consideration of the socially and culturally-produced position of the mother, Stone, along with several other influential scholars in motherhood studies, invest in psychoanalysis via Julia Kristeva as the place where maternal subjectivity can arise.<sup>19</sup> However, Kristeva and psychoanalysis more broadly has proved contentious in motherhood studies. As Baraitser damningly argues: ‘Kristeva’s position seems to destroy

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<sup>14</sup> Valerie Heffernan and Gay Wilgus, ‘Introduction: Imagining Motherhood in the Twenty-First Century—Images, Representations, Constructions’, *Women: A Cultural Review*, 29.1, (2018) 1-18 (p. 2).

<sup>15</sup> Heffernan and Wilgus, p. 4.

<sup>16</sup> Heather Addison, Mary Kate Goodwin-Kelly and Elaine Roth, ‘Introduction’, in *Motherhood Misconceived: Representing the Maternal in U.S. Films*, ed. by Heather Addison, Mary Kate Goodwin-Kelly and Elaine Roth (Albany: SUNY Pres, 2009), pp. 1-13 (p. 4).

<sup>17</sup> Claire Jenkins, *Home Movies: The American Family in Contemporary Hollywood* (London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2015), p. 10.

<sup>18</sup> Stone, p. 10.

<sup>19</sup> Stone, p. 6. See also Alison Stone, ‘Against Matricide: Rethinking Subjectivity and the Maternal Body’, *Hypatia*, 27.1 (2012), 118-138; Kristeva, *Desire in Language*, p. 238. Jessica Benjamin’s work on intersubjectivity has been influential here. See ‘A Desire of One’s Own: Psychoanalytic Feminism and Intersubjective Space’, in *Feminist Studies/Critical Studies*, ed. by Teresa de Lauretis (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), pp. 78-101; *Shadow of the Other: Intersubjectivity and Gender in Psychoanalysis* (New York: Routledge, 1998). See also Susan B. Kraemer, “‘Betwixt the dark and the daylight’ of Maternal Subjectivity: Mediations on the Threshold”, *Psychoanalytic Dialogues*, 6.6 (1996), 765-791; Alcira Mariam Alizade (ed.), *Motherhood in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Routledge, 2018).

the potential for maternal subjectivity at the point that it appears to rescue mothers from their silence.<sup>20</sup> In keeping with this thesis' broader move away from psychoanalysis, I consider the mother-subject as a discursive formation, particularly in terms of what Ruth Quiney terms the "new capitalist mother".<sup>21</sup> A dominant iteration of motherhood in the twenty-first century, the new capitalist mother struggles 'to delineate an active, expressive maternal subject in the contemporary West' as she becomes 'the focus of acute anxieties about (re)productivity in the context of advanced global capitalism'.<sup>22</sup> Usually a white middle-class mother, the woman once had expectations of high personal productivity placed on her as an affluent, aspirational capitalist subject. Now she must contend with the "low-status" occupation of motherhood, where her productivity is transferred and deferred onto the child: 'For the "successful" late-capitalist woman, to become a mother is to be suddenly and incomprehensibly charged with the production of the cultural and national future and with the expectation that one's own productive future (not only one's 'career', but also the right to signify as an individual or 'real person' politically and socially) will gracefully adapt to or make way for it.'<sup>23</sup>

The ambivalent contemporary subject-position of the capitalist mother can be situated alongside the postfeminist mother. The postfeminist celebration of motherhood as the most redemptive, transformative and enriching mode of femininity, as argued by Diane Negra, is justified by the central ideology of "new momism".<sup>24</sup> As Susan J. Douglas and Meredith W. Michaels extrapolate, "new momism" is 'the insistence that no woman is truly complete or fulfilled unless she has kids, that women remain the best primary caretakers of children, and that to be a remotely decent mother, a woman has to devote her entire physical, psychological, emotional, and intellectual being, 24/7, to her children'.<sup>25</sup> Negra, Douglas and Michaels argue that the call for mothers to be dedicated wholly to their child, at the expense of their own sense of selfhood, recuperates them with a retreatist narrative of (hyper)domesticity.<sup>26</sup> Since the financial crash in 2008, the mother has been

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<sup>20</sup> Baraitser, p. 6. See also Rosalind Mayo and Christina Moutsou (eds.), *The Mother in Psychoanalysis and Beyond: Matricide and Maternal Subjectivity*, (New York: Routledge, 2017).

<sup>21</sup> The term comes from Kathy Pitt, 'Being a New Capitalist Mother', *Discourse and Society*, 13.2 (2002), 251-267.

<sup>22</sup> Ruth Quiney, 'Confessions of the New Capitalist Mother: Twenty-First-Century Writing on Motherhood as Trauma', *Women: A Cultural Review*, 18.1 (2007), 19-40 (p. 20).

<sup>23</sup> Quiney, p. 30.

<sup>24</sup> Negra, p. 65; Susan J. Douglas and Meredith W. Michaels, *The Mommy Myth: The Idealization of Motherhood and How It Has Undermined All Women* (New York: Free Press, 2004), p. 24.

<sup>25</sup> Douglas and Michaels, p. 4.

<sup>26</sup> Negra, pp. 15-46; Douglas and Michaels, p. 24.

interpellated within the private and public spheres in new ways.<sup>27</sup> Angela McRobbie details these new modes of mediated maternalism, arguing that mothers are encouraged to stay in the labour market, often taking up a feminised domesticated wage labour role such as “mumpreneur”, to ‘confirm and enhance the core values of the neoliberal project’.<sup>28</sup> Through careful individualised financial planning and family management, the mother is compelled to “balance” work and home life. The investment in marriage, motherhood and domestic life as the benchmark of successful femininity is not only in marked contrast to the “mismanaged lives” of the “abject mother” – working-class, single, welfare-dependent, young – but also legitimizes “intensive” and “pleasurable” mothering as ‘a mode of investment in the human capital of infants and children, while also countering any presumed loss of status on the part of the stay-home mother who now directs her professional skills to ensuring the unassailable middle class status of her children’.<sup>29</sup> Although the image of the “happy housewife” has not disappeared from the public imagination, and some mothers do “stay at home”, ‘the “supermom” or “career mother” has assumed centre-stage in the Western cultural media landscape’.<sup>30</sup>

The contemporary white, middle-class mother subject occupies a complex position within contemporary postfeminist and neoliberal culture, with her subjectivity tied up with her intense caregiving role to the child, domesticity, professional work and consumption. I will consider her difficult spatial configuration, particularly as it relates to domesticity and waged work, in more detail later in the chapter. Firstly, I examine the dominant emotional dimensions of postfeminist motherhood as one of intense pleasure, arguing that *Kevin* offers a significant departure from these representations through Swinton’s performance of “negative” emotional states. I argue that Ramsay also creates affective meaning by constructing a “feminised” cinematic space. Through the film’s framing, *mise-en-scène*,

<sup>27</sup> Diane Negra and Yvonne Tasker, ‘Introduction: Gender and Recessionary Culture’, *Gendering the Recession: Media and Culture in an Age of Austerity*. ed. by Diane Negra and Yvonne Tasker (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), pp. 1-30 (p. 7).

<sup>28</sup> Angela McRobbie, ‘Feminism, The Family and the New “Mediated” Maternalism’, *New Formations*, 80 (2013), 119-137, (p. 121). For a consideration of the “mumpreneur” as a figure of neoliberal, post-recessionary maternal femininity, see Jo Littler, *Against Meritocracy: Culture, Power and Myths of Mobility* (New York: Routledge, 2018), pp. 179-211.

<sup>29</sup> McRobbie, ‘Feminism, The Family and the New “Mediated” Maternalism’, p. 130. For considerations of the “abject” working-class mother, see Imogen Tyler’s discussion of the “chav” mum and Sara De Benedictis’ discussion of the “feral” mum. See Imogen Tyler, ‘Chav Mum, Chav Scum: Class Disgust in Contemporary Britain’, *Feminist Media Studies*, 8.1 (2008), 17-34; Sara De Benedictis, ‘Feral’ Parents: Austerity Parenting under Neoliberalism’, *Studies in the Maternal*, 4.2, (2012), <[www.mamsie.bbk.ac.uk](http://www.mamsie.bbk.ac.uk)> [accessed 13 March 2019].

<sup>30</sup> Shani Orgad, ‘Incongruous Encounters: Media Representations and Lived Experiences of Stay-at-Home Mothers’, *Feminist Media Studies*, 16.3 (2016), 478-494 (p. 479).

production design, cinematographic design and temporality, Eva's emotional state can be read as one of maternal ambivalence. Ramsay not only challenges dominant iterations of postfeminist motherhood as pleasurable and joyful, but also foregrounds a cinematic representation of Eva's subjectivity via this attention to Eva's interiority.

### **The Maternal Subject: Interiority and Spatiality**

Eva's experience of motherhood is primarily presented through a series of flashbacks interspersed with scenes of Eva's life in the present day as she recalls memories of her adult life. Multiple scenes show Eva remembering her difficult experience as a mother to Kevin, often sitting, standing or lying in repose as she reflects on key moments. Her expression as she reflects on her memories is for the most part ambivalent. Likewise, her emotional response to significant mothering moments in these memories, such as when pregnant and post-partum, is also ambivalent. This juxtaposes with moments of legible joy and pleasure in her pre-maternal life such as her ecstatic experience at La Tomatina festival, or in the early heady days of her romance with Franklin. Jackie Stacey considers Tilda Swinton's performances of 'styles of underperformed emotion' across her career, which Stacey reads through Lauren Berlant's theory of "flat affect".<sup>31</sup> Stacey argues that Swinton's performance of "flatness" brings a quality that contradicts conventional expectations of feminine emotional expressiveness; Swinton's flat affect 'unmakes and remakes conventionalised femininities especially as articulated through popular genres in which women's interiority is so frequently the register of affective intensity'.<sup>32</sup> I am compelled by the implications of Stacey's argument, which suggest that Swinton's performance of flatness 'places centre stage the history of cinematic femininity as a cluster of stylized conventions, as something which has to keep being made up, worked on, approximated, achieved and reinvented'.<sup>33</sup> However, I use Stacey's argument as a point of departure in order to read Swinton's affective performance in *Kevin* more specifically as a performance of socio-political maternal ambivalence.<sup>34</sup> As I will argue, maternal

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<sup>31</sup> Jackie Stacey, 'Crossing Over with Tilda Swinton – the Mistress of "Flat Affect"', *International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society*, 28 (2015), 243-271 (p. 245).

<sup>32</sup> Stacey, 'Crossing Over with Tilda Swinton', p. 252.

<sup>33</sup> Stacey, 'Crossing Over with Tilda Swinton', p. 258.

<sup>34</sup> As part of this thesis' move away from psychoanalysis, I do not undertake a psychoanalytic reading of ambivalence. For a psychoanalytic reading, see Erica D. Galioto, 'Maternal Ambivalence in the Novel and Film *We Need to Talk About Kevin*', *Psychoanalysis, Culture and Society* (2019), 1-19 <<https://doi.org/10.1057/s41282-019-00116-w>> [accessed 7 March 2019].

ambivalence is an important gendered affect which critiques the governing affective registers in dominant images of motherhood. This reading as much suggests the cultural “constructedness” of motherhood as a gendered role, positioning my reading of Swinton’s performance as another facet of Swinton’s gender play in cinema.<sup>35</sup> By paying attention to how Ramsay spatially frames these moments, I argue that the film further contributes to constructing a cinematic space of female interiority and subjectivity.

Ramsay makes Eva’s emotional state legible as one of ambivalence through external formal and spatial cues. Eva’s ambivalent expression as she recalls memories, for example, is often supplemented with a formal excess of colour and sound (Figure 14). She is often doused in red light as she recalls these memories, and the sounds from the past and present bleed into each other, creating, as Bolton argues, ‘an inescapably visual’ penetration of Eva’s psyche, suggesting her ‘psychological overwhelm through colour and form’.<sup>36</sup> Moreover, the production design and *mise-en-scène* create a diegetic space which often reflects Eva’s emotional state, such the hospital room after she has given birth to Kevin. The whiteness of this space – the walls, bed, blanket, gown and equipment – with its overt, expressionist design supplements Eva’s despondent expression, creating affective meaning and making legible her emotional state as one of ambivalence towards new motherhood (Figure 15). This contrasts with Eva’s moment of joyful mothering as suggested by the yellow, softly lit hospital room in which she gives birth to Celia, the child with whom she has a loving relationship.<sup>37</sup> Eva’s distressed response at spontaneously meeting the mother of one of Kevin’s victims at the supermarket is also supplemented

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<sup>35</sup> Stacey’s argument also draws on the extra-textual discursive construction of Swinton’s stardom as one of queerness, androgyny and otherworldliness to suggest that Swinton presents an “off-gender” performance across multiple films. Stacey, ‘Crossing Over with Tilda Swinton’, pp. 267-268. Although this is significant (and I do not doubt that many audiences bring this expectation of Swinton’s star image to *Kevin*), I do not discuss this in this chapter. For one, *Kevin* does not draw on Swinton’s “off-gender” stardom in an explicit intertextual way. For another, in extra-textual discourses surrounding the film, Swinton is careful to position herself as a legibly “good” mother within normative gender roles. She stresses that she never hated her children ‘because I lucked out in the chemical-reaction department’, and that she ‘liked them, and not just loved them, but...was *really* into them’. See Tilda Swinton, interviewed by Andrew Goldman, *New York Times Magazine*, 2 December 2011 <<https://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/04/magazine/tilda-swinton.html>> [accessed 24 February 2019]; Tilda Swinton, interviewed by Kira Cochrane, *Guardian*, 11 October 2011 <<https://www.theguardian.com/film/2011/oct/11/tilda-swinton-we-need-kevin>> [accessed 24 February 2019].

<sup>36</sup> Bolton, p. x.

<sup>37</sup> Scholars have identified the hospital as a contentious place for pregnant women and mothers as the medical institution “manages” the maternal body in ways that often “disempower” her. See Barbara Katz Rothman and Wendy Simonds, ‘The Birthplace’, in *Motherhood and Space*, pp. 87-104. In *Kevin*, the hospital is also represented as a fraught place for Eva as a mother as it fails to diagnose and thus provide answers to Kevin’s non-normative behaviours. Moreover, after Kevin breaks his arm and injures Celia’s eye, the hospital becomes a hostile institutional space as Eva is threatened with being labelled a state-sanctioned “bad mother”.

affective intensity through the excessive redness of the soup cans behind the close-up shot of Eva's face. (Figure 16). The shot's use of anamorphic format renders a shallow depth of field and pushes Eva's face to the foreground of the frame. As the film's cinematographer, Seamus McGarvey argues, this format is particularly suited 'to express[ing] interiority or what is in someone's mind'.<sup>38</sup> Although I am wary of, as Stacey warns us, over-reading the body that is unforthcoming, I suggest that reading Eva's emotional state as one of maternal ambivalence offers a flexible model where multiple conflicting emotional states can exist.<sup>39</sup>

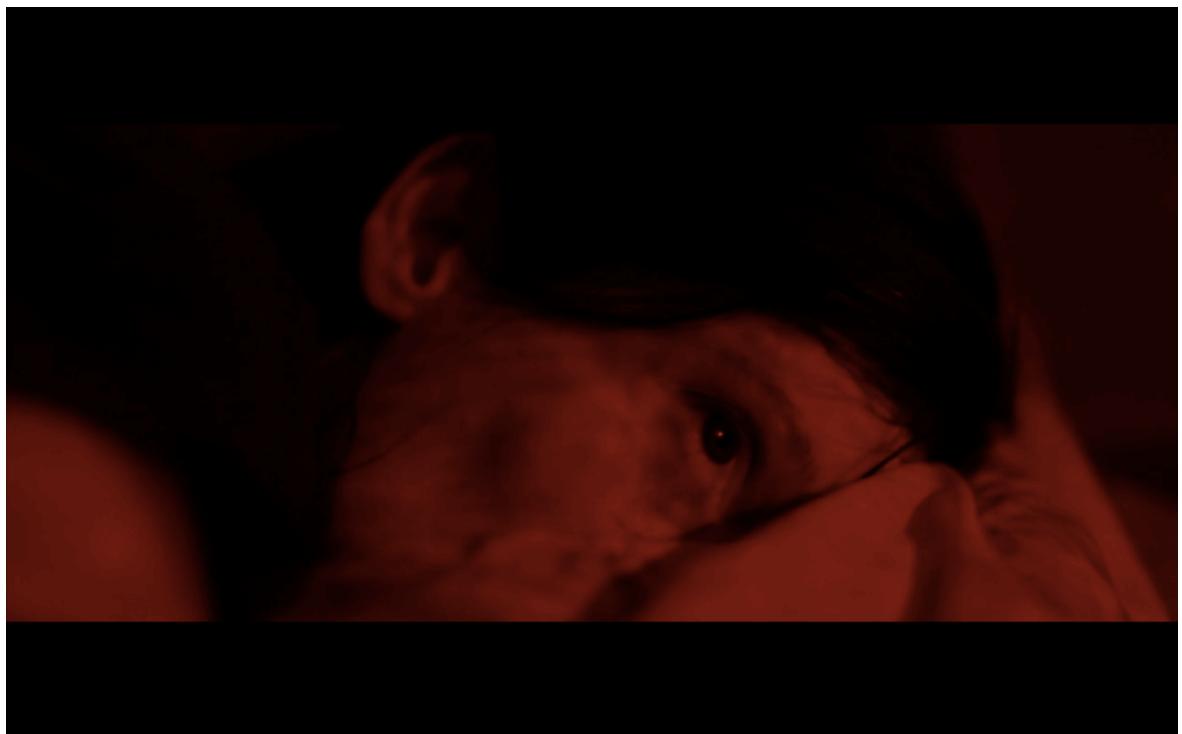


Figure 14: Eva recalling memories doused in red light

<sup>38</sup> Seamus McGarvey, interviewed by Mandy Hegarty, *The Irish Film and Television Network*, 20 October 2011 <<http://www.iftn.ie/news/?act1=record&aid=73&rid=4284370&tpl=archnews>> [accessed 20 July 2017].

<sup>39</sup> Stacey, 'Crossing Over with Tilda Swinton', p. 253.



Figure 15: Swinton's performance of despondence supplemented by the "whiteness" of the space



Figure 16: Swinton's performance of distress supplemented with affective intensity by the "excessive" soup cans and the anamorphic format

Ambivalence, after all, as a term encompasses uncertainty, contradiction, fluctuation and inconsistency; as Rozsika Parker identifies maternal ambivalence as 'not an

anodyne condition of mixed feelings, but a complex and contradictory state of mind, shared variously by all mothers, in which loving and hating feelings for children exist side by side.<sup>40</sup> I am less interested in taking up Parker's definition of maternal ambivalence in terms of Eva's individualised feelings of love or hate for Kevin, but to consider ambivalence as a response to the conflicting cultural expectations set up by the dominant contemporary discursive image of the "good mother". I take up maternal ambivalence as a feeling registered not *towards* an emotion but *away* from an emotion. If, as Sara Ahmed argues, happiness is an affective orientation towards certain objects that promise happiness, then ambivalence is a resistance towards this orientation.<sup>41</sup> Although the "good mother" has always been 'basically content, and children are, essentially, wonderful repositories of nothing but joy for those who bear and look after them', critics of postfeminism point out that traditional affective dimensions of motherhood have been intensified within the contemporary moment.<sup>42</sup> Considering the development of a postfeminist sensibility since her foundational essay, 'Postfeminist Media Culture: Elements of a Sensibility' in 2007, Rosalind Gill argues that:

a postfeminist sensibility is both intensifying and becoming hegemonic. It is also becoming increasingly dependent upon not simply an individualized register but also a *psychologized* one built around cultivating the 'right' kinds of dispositions for surviving in neoliberal society: aspiration, confidence, resilience and so on... Postfeminist culture.. increasingly 'favours' happiness and 'positive mental attitude', systematically outlawing other emotional states, including anger and insecurity.<sup>43</sup>

This includes the mother who, like other subjects, is "called forth" by postfeminist culture, 'incited to work on her character and psychic dispositions' through postfeminism's attempts 'to shape what and how women are enabled to *feel* and how their emotional states should be presented'.<sup>44</sup> Hyper-visible "good" postfeminist mothers in the twenty-first

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<sup>40</sup> Rozsika Parker, 'The Production and Purposes of Maternal Ambivalence', in *Mothering and Ambivalence*, ed. by Wendy Hollway and Brid Featherstone (London: Routledge, 1997) pp. 17-36 (p. 17).

<sup>41</sup> Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, p. 54.

<sup>42</sup> Ann Oakley, *From Here to Maternity* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986), p. 6.

<sup>43</sup> Gill, 'The Affective, Cultural and Psychic Life of Postfeminism', p. 610. This essay is a response to and development of Gill's earlier essay 'Postfeminist Media Culture: Elements of a Sensibility', *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 10.2 (2007), 147-166.

<sup>44</sup> Gill, 'The Affective, Cultural and Psychic Life of Postfeminism', p. 618.

century ‘inevitably appear blissfully happy, to “have it all together” and to love every moment of their motherhood’.<sup>45</sup>

Maternal ambivalence offers a significant affective departure from this interpellation. As Tatjana Takseva develops, maternal ambivalence is not only a personal, individual and emotional response to parenting but ‘is borne out of and situated within the broader social, cultural, and political contexts in which mothers live’, particularly via postfeminist ideologies of “new momism”.<sup>46</sup> Ramsay makes this challenge explicit in certain scenes via a spatial-formal rendering of Eva’s interiority. One such example is during a visit to Kevin in prison when Eva reflects on a moment during her pregnancy. Ramsay frames Eva in a mid-shot with a door blocking half her face and body while a guard runs a metal detector over her (Figure 17). The framing suggests Eva’s split and alienated subjecthood, with the guard’s surveillance evoking the intense scrutiny of Eva as a mother – her “bad mother” identity now well-known due to Kevin’s infamous crime.<sup>47</sup> This evocation of alienation from a maternal identity carries over to the next scene – a flashback of Eva in a pre-natal exercise class. In a changing room, surrounded by other pregnant women, Eva is immediately visibly set apart from the other pregnant women through her clothing; her baggy smock top and sweatpants contrast with the tight exercise clothes of the other women, with many exposing their baby bumps in crop tops and sports bras. Through her costume and lack of bodily display, Eva refuses to embody the postfeminist ideal of maternal femininity: she is neither the neoliberal “pregnant beauty”, whose ‘tight, white, youthful body’ with its “perfect little bump” is on spectacular display; nor is she the “yummy mummy” – a ‘type of mother who is sexually attractive and well groomed, and who knows the importance of spending time on herself’.<sup>48</sup> Ramsay frames Eva in such a way as to suggest her “out-of-placeness” in relation to these idealised pregnant women through an increasing feeling of claustrophobia (Figure 18). The camera reveals several close-ups of the “baby bumps” of the other women, parodying the hyper-visibility of the pregnant body in the last few decades, before zooming in on Eva’s face as

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<sup>45</sup> Heffernan and Wilgus, p. 4.

<sup>46</sup> Tatjana Takseva, ‘Mother Love, Maternal Ambivalence, and the Possibility of Empowered Mothering’, *Hypatia*, 32.1 (2017), 152-168 (p. 154).

<sup>47</sup> This is particularly suggested in the film when Eva leaves the courtroom and is hounded by paparazzi.

<sup>48</sup> Tyler, ‘Pregnant Beauty, p. 25; Jo Littler, ‘The Rise of the “Yummy Mummy”: Popular Conservatism and the Neoliberal Maternal in Contemporary British Culture’, *Communication, Culture and Critique*, 6 (2013), 227-243 (p. 227).

another pregnant woman begins stretching close to her.<sup>49</sup> Invading her personal space, the camera registers and intensifies an atmosphere of claustrophobia.



Figure 17: Eva framed to suggest her “split” subjectivity



Figure 18: Eva framed to register feelings of claustrophobia

<sup>49</sup> Tyler argues that, since Demi Moore’s landmark *Vanity Fair* cover in 1991, where she displayed her nude pregnant body, pregnancy has become a desirable visible spectacle. See Tyler, ‘Pregnant Beauty’, p. 24.

Moreover, placed in the centre of the frame, Ramsay ensures Eva's emotional response to this overwhelming representation of postfeminist maternal femininity is central to the spectator's attention. Swinton's performance of Eva's emotional state is clearly not one of postfeminist maternal bliss. That this performance is one of maternal ambivalence is made legible when pregnant Eva leaves the changing room and walks down corridor followed by a gaggle of young girls dressed in pink ballet leotards and tutus who run ahead of her, bumping into her and preventing her path as they go. Ramsay's use of back-lighting and the black tiles in the diegetic space of the corridor cast Eva into shadow in contrast with the pink-clad, brightly lit girls (Figure 19). This external space positions Eva outside of images of idealised postfeminist femininity as embodied in the youthful hyper-girlishness of the young ballet dancers, and makes legible Swinton's affective performance as one of ambivalence towards her identity as a pregnant woman and soon-to-be mother within a postfeminist landscape.<sup>50</sup>

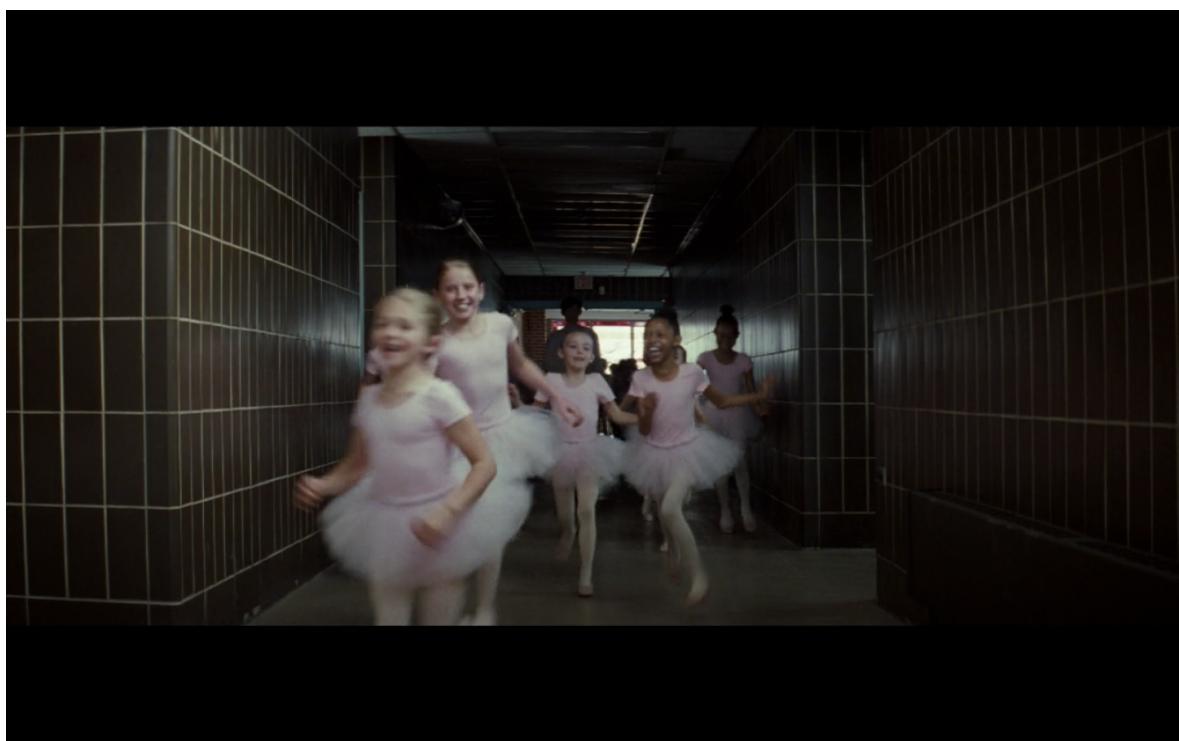


Figure 19: A long-shot of Eva walking through a corridor cast in shadow

Takseva stresses that maternal ambivalence is particularly felt by white, educated, middle-class women 'with careers or commitment to work outside the home, whose sense

<sup>50</sup> Postfeminism's idolisation of youth is discussed in Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra, 'Introduction: Feminist Politics and Postfeminist Culture', *Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), pp. 1-26; McRobbie, 'Postfeminism and Popular Culture'; Gill, 'Postfeminist Media Culture: Elements of a Sensibility'.

of self prior to having children has been defined in relation to a more public and professional identity'.<sup>51</sup> Eva's "resistance" to dominant affective maternal discourses, then, is a particularly white, middle-class, Anglo-American response. Nevertheless, maternal ambivalence can imbued with political potency as it functions as an affective counter to the dominant constructions of postfeminist and neoliberal mothering. As Takseva argues, maternal ambivalence is key to challenging dominant discourses of motherhood and empowering mothers themselves: '[A]mbivalence is a powerful force propelling mothers into a "distinctly maternal subject-position" from within which they actively make meaning of their own past, their own identity demands as well as the subject-positions of their children.'<sup>52</sup> In foregrounding Eva's feelings of maternal ambivalence, Ramsay enables an interiorised space to emerge. As I outlined in my introduction, representing interiority is a key cinematic mode which enables female subjectivity to be rendered on screen. Ramsay's depiction of Eva's affective state enables a cinematic mother subject position to be represented.

### **The Maternal Subject: Interiority and Temporality**

The representation of Eva's interiority is also anchored to the film's representation of temporality. As I argued in my introduction, time is significant to the spatially-constructed subject because, as de Lauretis details, women often cannot be figured in space because they cannot be figured within the temporality of Oedipally-driven narratives of cinema. *Kevin* explicitly constructs a woman's time (and, by extension, a woman's space) through its use of flashbacks, which cut between Eva in the present day and Eva's memories as a mother to Kevin. Doane suggests that devices such as the flashback, as well as dreams, hallucinations, and memories, are crucial narrative mechanisms used in the woman's film to construct the female protagonist's temporality.<sup>53</sup> However, Doane argues these devices fail to be sustained in the woman's films, which in turn fail to sustain a specific female subjectivity. *Kevin* makes a significant departure from this by explicitly constructing and sustaining a woman's subjectivity through the device of flashbacks. Doane warns us about the instability of the flashback as a mode of narration, arguing that, after its point of introduction, 'the flashback effectively erases the subject of the enunciation' in a similar

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<sup>51</sup> Takseva, p. 157.

<sup>52</sup> Takseva, p. 164.

<sup>53</sup> Doane, *The Desire to Desire*, pp. 34-35.

manner to the apparently narrator-less unfolding of events in conventional narrative cinema.<sup>54</sup> However, *Kevin's* insistence on the flashback – its repeated use throughout the film as the primary mode of narration – keeps “the subject of enunciation”, Eva, to the fore.

That Eva is also a mother makes this temporality further significant. Rendering a mother's point of view – her memories, her history, her feelings – through a temporal framework that constructs ‘the immediacy of the past in the present’, suggests an alternative representation and experience of time.<sup>55</sup> For, although the temporal representation of Kevin's childhood and Eva's mothering of him generally unfolds in a linear fashion, the framing of this history through Eva's memories, punctuated by Eva's present day experiences, collapses the past and the present temporalities. Kristeva famously distinguished between linear clock time as male time – the forward thrust of ‘teleology, linear and prospective’ time – and cyclical time as female time – ‘cycles, gestations, the eternal recurrence of a biological rhythm’.<sup>56</sup> Since then, motherhood studies have suggested the complex and various ways in which mothers often experience alternative temporalities to the dominant temporal register of masculinised, Western capitalism.<sup>57</sup> One such temporality is, as Baraitser describes, the ‘the pitilessness of the present tense... These periods of time, no longer governed by circadian rhythms, like one long cinematic take act to obliterate the passing of time from what is to come, to what is, to what has been’.<sup>58</sup> Baraitser's use of cinematic metaphor uncannily gestures to the collapsed temporality in *Kevin*, which mirrors, as Mariana Thomas argues, the prevalence of the maternal experience represented as ‘existing in the infinite present, an “ongoingness”’, in which past, present, and future temporalities become blurred.<sup>59</sup> That Eva is a mother experiencing a doubled crisis of loss, with one child murdering the other before being sent

<sup>54</sup> Doane, *The Desire to Desire*, p. 56.

<sup>55</sup> Doane, *The Desire to Desire*, p. 56.

<sup>56</sup> Kristeva, ‘Women's Time’, pp. 16-17.

<sup>57</sup> For a detailed consideration of everyday maternal temporalities as it relates to and conflicts with capitalist time, see Karen Davies, *Women and Time and the Weaving of the Strands of Everyday Life* (Alabaster: Coronet, 1989). Although the mother is often positioned outside of this masculinised time, Lisa Baraitser and Ruth Quiney both complicate this, arguing that the middle-class capitalist mother is ambivalently recruited back into the capitalist mode of productivity. She often participates in waged labour outside the home, and she prepares the child for futurity, autonomy and independence. See Lisa Baraitser, ‘Time and Again: Repetition, Maternity and the Non-Reproductive’, *Studies in the Maternal*, 6.1, (2014), <www.mamsie.bbk.ac.uk> [accessed 26 February 2019]; Quiney, ‘Confessions of a New Capitalist Mother’. However, as Baraitser further argues, capitalist time makes meaningless other maternal temporalities such as repetition, interruption and boredom. See Baraitser, *Maternal Encounters*, pp. 57-77.

<sup>58</sup> Baraitser, *Maternal Encounters*, p. 57.

<sup>59</sup> Mariana Thomas, ‘The Mother Becomes Time: Exploring Altered Temporality in Contemporary Motherhood Memoirs’, *Journal of the Motherhood Initiative*, 9.1 (2018), 71-81 (p. 79).

to prison, makes this past-present-future temporality particularly acute, as it appears to be not only collapsed but ‘suspended’.<sup>60</sup> This is no more suggested than in the gesture to the time of the future at the end of the film when we see Eva continuing to make Kevin’s bed, iron and put away his clothes after he has been sent to prison, recalling Baraitser’s argument that ‘the maternal subject bears the suspension of time, a kind of impossible waiting which is the time the child’s futurity requires of her’.<sup>61</sup>

The construction of this temporality via flashbacks enables both a foregrounding of Eva’s subjectivity through cinematic means, and a reflection back of Eva’s “loss” of subjecthood as a mother. This is most prominently represented at a moment where Eva’s subjectivity is particularly fraught. Eva recalls her pregnancy with Kevin as she photocopies papers at work. The film shows an extreme close-up of the zygote rapidly dividing, before cutting to an image of the scanner photocopying a page, followed by a close-up shot of Eva’s expressionless face. As I mentioned in my chapter on *Prevenge*, pregnant subjecthood is often conceptualised as a fraught battle between foetus and pregnant person. As multiple scholars have pointed out, the development of scientific technology, such as ultrasound and foetal photography (of which Lennart Nilsson’s photographs for *Life* magazine in 1965 are a prominent example), exacerbated this conceptualisation as the visibility of the foetus bestowed it with subjectivity, often at the expense of the pregnant person:

The power of [Nilsson’s photographs] stimulated anti-abortion discourse and a concern for the foetus that once again marginalizes the mother: the foetus now takes her place at the center of things, while the mother’s body and subjectivity recede. Indeed the foetus is seen not only as a being *in its own right*, but a being *with its own rights*, which are often in opposition to (and privileged over) those of the mother. It is discursively constructed as if it already were a *subject*, and one which once again superseded the *mother’s* subjectivity; “mother” is literally reduced to a holding vessel – the non-subject that makes possible the child’s subjectivity – in a bitterly ironic exaggeration of the way patriarchal culture has

<sup>60</sup> As Baraitser argues in relation to Denise Riley’s essay *Time Lived, Without its Flow*, in which she discusses the loss of a child: ‘[O]ne’s relation to everyday life that goes through a dramatic shift, one in which time can no longer unfold predictably or reliably as a crisis has occurred in the reliability that the future will unfold. In one sense, time is ‘crystalline’...in which nothing flows because nothing can be expected, whilst at another it continues as a form of daily engagement with ‘timelessness’. Time doesn’t stop, but it doesn’t develop either. It is simply suspended.’ Baraitser, ‘Time and Again’, p. 6

<sup>61</sup> Baraitser, ‘Time and Again’, p. 6.

*always positioned the mother (whether or not she in fact took up, or resisted, this position) [emphasis in the original].*<sup>62</sup>

The link between the extreme close-up of these cells and the photocopier through this scene's editing evokes the technologically-rendered visibility of the foetus. The comparative technology of reproduction through the photocopier and the ultrasound (but crucially *not* the reproductive capacities of the pregnant body) enables the foetus' subjecthood to take primacy over that of the pregnant person.<sup>63</sup> Ramsay presents Eva's emotional response to this memory of early pregnancy through a close-up shot of her still and controlled face. This contrasts with 'the alien stickiness of cells dividing and reproducing, [which] insists on the *disorder*, the uncontrollability and the strangeness of the embodied'.<sup>64</sup> It recalls Kristeva's comment on pregnancy as a split between the bodily activity of pregnancy and the pregnant person's sense of self, resulting in a feeling of alienation from their own body: 'Cells fuse, split, and proliferate; volumes grow, tissues stretch, and body fluids change rhythm, speeding up or slowing down... "It happens, but I'm not there." "I cannot realize it, but it goes on".'<sup>65</sup> This ambivalent response to this alienation is reiterated in the following scene where Eva looks at her swelling pregnant body in a mirror. Registering Eva's ambivalence both at her pregnancy and at the memory of it, Ramsay presents Eva as reflecting back on her "receding" and "alienated" subjectivity as a pregnant woman and as an impending mother.

This temporality, paradoxically, offers a significant cinematic rendering of Eva's subjectivity; recalling the affective dimensions of a "lost" sense of selfhood enables Eva's cinematic subjecthood to emerge. Combined with Ramsay's construction of an alternative (maternal) temporality, sustained through the narrative mode of flashback, this cinematic temporality offers a significant formal rendering of a woman, and a mother's, space. As Bolton argues, in order to create 'a feminization of the language and space of the films', there needs to be a consideration of a woman's history, in other words, a woman's temporality.<sup>66</sup> Representing women with personal histories and memories enables a

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<sup>62</sup> Kaplan, *Mother and Representation*, p. 14.

<sup>63</sup> For a consideration of the representation of foetuses in cinema, as related to the anxieties surrounding its technologically-rendered visibility, see A. Robin Hoffman, 'How to See the Horror: The Hostile Fetus in *Rosemary's Baby* and *Alien*', *Lit: Literature Interpretation Theory*, 22.3 (2011), 239-261.

<sup>64</sup> Thornham, "A Hatred So Intense...", p. 15.

<sup>65</sup> Kristeva, *Desire in Language*, p. 237.

<sup>66</sup> Bolton, p. 3.

rendering of a woman's interiority with 'a more psychologically complex dimension.'<sup>67</sup> By representing Eva as a woman with a complex history, and by representing this history through a series of memory recollections, we appear to have a privileged view into her interiority; 'the life of a woman', in this case Eva, 'is more fully represented, rather than as a sketch or abstraction.'<sup>68</sup> Through this attention to interiority, constructed by Ramsay through a formal-spatial construction of framing, *mise-en-scène*, production and cinematographic design and flashbacks, Ramsay (re)constructs the experience of motherhood for Eva, enabling a reflection of the "loss" of subjectivity felt by her. As I outlined in my introduction, an attention to interiority is crucial to constructing a cinematic "space" of female subjectivity on screen, unlocking her from the frozen space of erotic contemplation as proposed by Mulvey. Through this formal-spatial construction, then, Ramsay reinserts the subjectivity of the woman and the mother.

With this framework set up, I want now to look more carefully at the construction and representation of Eva's maternal subjectivity in relation to the diegetic spaces of the film. As I detail, the film represents, or alludes to, several spaces and places considered fraught or hostile for the (white, Western, middle-class) mother: the suburban bourgeois home, the workplace, public spaces, travel spaces. These spaces are often critically framed as a place of subjective "loss" for this mother. Bringing Ramsay's formal-spatial representation of Eva's interiority to bear on the representation of these diegetic spaces, I will demonstrate the ways in which Ramsay further articulates Eva's affective response to her "loss" of subjectivity as a mother, paradoxically enabling a foregrounding of Eva's cinematic subjectivity.

### **The Mother and the Home**

*Kevin* represents Eva's relationship to the home in multiple and conflicting ways; her emotional response to the domestic shifts as her maternal identity changes. The film primarily explores two domestic temporalities: the plush, suburban family home of the past, and Eva's comparatively modest home in the present day. Represented through Eva's perspective, both these domestic spaces take on affective dimensions. Ramsay represents the suburban house as a space of emotional entrapment, recalling second-wave feminists'

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<sup>67</sup> Bolton, p. 13.

<sup>68</sup> Bolton, p. 3.

critique of the home as a cage, trap or prison for the (white, middle-class) mother. Betty Friedan and Simone de Beauvoir both famously cited the home as an emotionally oppressive space for the woman/housewife/mother.<sup>69</sup> Franklin's suggestion that the family move to the suburbs is presented through conventional heteronormative understandings of domestic and familial safety and bliss in opposition to the "dangerous" space of New York City, where they currently live. He tells Eva: "The elevator's a death trap. [Kevin] needs a yard, somewhere he can toss a ball, fill a pool." Despite Eva's protestations that she's not leaving the city, the family move, which Ramsay frames through symbols of emotional and physical confinement. In the next scene, Eva rides down the "death trap" elevator where the lighting casts a shadow on her face resembling prison bars. Through voice over, we hear Franklin describing the new house: "You've got a family room here, master bedroom back there with two huge walk-in closets. The bathroom is amazing." Despite the promised vast size of the house, Ramsay emphasises that this is not a space of expansive freedom. The "trap" of the elevator no longer becomes a symbol of danger for child Kevin, but foreshadows Eva's sense of entrapment in the new suburban, bourgeois home.

Once inside the house, Ramsay confirms the home as a space where Eva feels emotionally and physically trapped. Eva's first experience in the house is compared to a prison. After Eva and Kevin sit on the floor, mirroring each other's body language, Ramsay cuts to a shot of them both sitting in a prison visitation room, their body language mirroring each other again (Figure 20-21), imbuing the literal space of confinement (the prison) with a symbolic affective representation of entrapment in the house for Eva. Eva's literal/symbolic entrapment in the suburban space is also suggested by the film's use of the archery target. Eva is positioned explicitly as Kevin's "target", "trapping" her within this environment, when Kevin shoots his toy arrow at her.<sup>70</sup> Moreover, the film's colour palette of red, yellow, blue, black and white, which features prominently in the cinematography

<sup>69</sup> See Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (London: Penguin, 2010); Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. by H. M. Parshley (London: Vintage, 1997). For a survey of other second-wave feminist response to the home as a trap, cage or prison for (white, middle-class) women, wives and mothers, see McDowell, p. 88. It is important to note, however, that these responses have been critiqued for ignoring the intersections of race and class as the home is often figured as a haven for the working-class and/or woman of colour. bell hooks points to the ways in which the home becomes a place of restoration, affirmation and healing for the black mother and her family from the poverty, hardship and deprivation of white supremacist society. Moreover, Joan Williams argues that domesticity can be figured as a haven for working-class mothers who are faced with low-paying jobs and, by consequence, often low-quality childcare. See bell hooks, 'Homeplace', p. 42; Joan Williams, *Unbending Gender* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

<sup>70</sup> That Eva is Kevin's "target" is further reiterated when the timeframe jumps forward after Kevin shoots his toy arrow at Eva and we see teenage Kevin practicing archery. The camera shows an extreme close-up of his eye, where we can see the archery target reflected in it, foreshadowing the horrors that are to come.

and *mise-en-scène*, represent the colours of an archery target, broadly signalling Eva's "trapped" position in the film. Significantly, however, the colour and production design of the suburban house is minimalist and bare. Ramsay wanted the house to feel like a set, rather than a comfortable family home.<sup>71</sup> The white walls and minimal furniture emphasise the emotional familial barrenness of the space. This contrasts with Eva's study – her Woolfian "room of her own" – where she attempts to resist the sterile confinement of the suburban home by decorating it with maps and souvenirs from her travels, the textured materials signifying Eva as "out of place" as it contrasts with the rest of the house's décor. Moreover, they gesture to Eva's pre-maternal identity as a professional travel writer. Eva's attempts to carve out an individualised space for professional work within the suburban home gestures to the centrality of waged work to the postfeminist and neoliberal capitalist middle-class mother, where the traditional dichotomy between public and private spaces become blurred.<sup>72</sup> Feminists have long criticised the discursive gendered division of the separate spheres, and the resulting figure of the "angel in the house" – a pervasive image of sacred, loving, maternal domesticity in nineteenth-century Britain and the US. For one, this is a white, middle-class construction which fails to account for the women who do undertake waged work, such as women of colour and/or working-class women.<sup>73</sup> For another, such a distinction erases the unpaid and reproductive labours done by mothers in the home.<sup>74</sup> However, for Eva, professional waged work and domesticity seem at odds,

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<sup>71</sup> Lynne Ramsay, interviewed by Hannah McGill, *Sight and Sound*, November 2011, 16-19 (p. 18).

<sup>72</sup> A recent figure such as "mumpreneur" particularly muddies this dichotomy as 'a mother who establishes her own business from the kitchen table whilst her children crawl beneath it'. Littler, *Against Meritocracy*, p. 179.

<sup>73</sup> McDowell highlights the history of working class women, particularly women of colour, who did participate in paid labour either outside or within the home during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. McDowell, pp. 75-87. Women of colour, particularly immigrant women of colour, continue to undertake a large proportion of paid and unpaid domestic work, particularly for white families, problematizing conventional classed, racialized and gendered assumptions about "private" domesticity and women's labour. See for example, Bridget Anderson, *Doing the Dirty Work? The Global Politics of Domestic Labour* (London: Zed Books, 2000); Barbara Ehrenreich and Arlie Russell Hochschild (eds.), *Global Woman: Nannies, Maids and Sex Workers in the New Economy* (London: Granta Books, 2003); Susanna Rosenbaum, *Domestic Economies: Women, Work, and the American Dream in Los Angeles* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017). Patricia Hill Collins similarly complicates the white, capitalist construction of the nuclear family and household by situating black motherhood as often existing within large women-centred networks, where childcare responsibilities are distributed across communities. See Patricia Hill Collins, 'Black Women and Motherhood', in *Motherhood and Space*, pp. 149-159.

<sup>74</sup> Catherine Hall and Leonore Davidoff point to the multiple kinds of work undertaken by middle-class housewives in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, complicating the history of women's domestic labour. See Catherine Hall and Leonore Davidoff, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class 1780-1850*, revised edition (London and New York: Routledge, 2002); Catherine Hall, *White, Male and Middle-Class: Explorations in Feminism and History* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992). Furthermore, second-wave feminists and feminist Marxists point to the importance of women's reproductive labour to the history of capitalism, both in terms of paid and unpaid domestic work and the reproduction of human beings. See Silvia Federici, *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction, and Feminist Struggle* (Oakland: PM

which is explicitly signalled by Kevin's destruction of her study; splattering paint all over the walls foreshadows his violent crime and reiterates that Eva has no "place" of her own within this environment. As I will demonstrate in more detail in my section on travel space, *Kevin* sets up Eva's waged work as active, mobile and fulfilling, and crucial to her sense of selfhood, working in contradistinction to the suburban environment where she appears to be physically and emotionally trapped.



Figure 20: A low wide-angle shot of Eva and Kevin in their new suburban home

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Pres, 2012); Zillah Eisenstein, *Capitalist Patriarchy and the Case for Socialist Feminism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1979); Sylvia Walby, 'Theorising Patriarchy', *Sociology*, 23 (1989), 213-234.



Figure 21: Kevin and Eva mirror each other's body language in prison

This domestic-spatial construction contrasts considerably with Eva's home in the present day. Although Eva's emotional register can still be read as ambivalent as she sits alone in the dark and dingy house, the home offers her respite from increasingly hostile public spaces. Her place of work (having had to sell her travel business to cover Kevin's legal costs) opens her up to sexual assault from a colleague who, after Eva rejects his advances, asks her, "Where do you get off you stuck up bitch? You think anyone else is going to want you now?" Eva is also physically and verbally assaulted by a woman on the street who recognises her as Kevin's mother. The supermarket likewise becomes a place of tension after Eva sees one of the mothers of Kevin's victims, who smashes Eva's eggs in response to their meeting. The house's boundary between the public and private space is always precarious as gestured by the red paint violently splattered across the outside walls, and the children banging on the windows in demand of treats on Halloween night. However, Eva's status as a "bad mother" is now writ large within the community's consciousness; it is involuntarily and continuously inscribed on her body as she moves through these public spaces, intensifying Baraitser's claim that motherhood produces and is produced by the public.<sup>75</sup> The domestic offers Eva relief from these increasingly hostile public spaces; it recalls Iris Marion Young's valuing of the home as a potential space of

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<sup>75</sup> Lisa Baraitser, 'Mothers who Make Things Public', *Feminist Review*, 93 (2009), 8-26.

safety, individuation and privacy.<sup>76</sup> In opposition to second wave feminism's understandings of motherhood and domestic space, the home also offers Eva a temporary moment of voluntary solitary confinement away from her public identity as a "bad" mother.

### **The Mother and the Home: "Lost" Subjectivity**

Returning to the suburban home of Eva's past, *Kevin* connects Eva's feelings of entrapment intimated in and by this spatial construction to a horrific loss of a sense of a bounded and stable subjectivity. The house itself is often represented as horrific. Early in the film, an unknown presence creeps through the house. The ideal bourgeois familial domestic image signalled by the clean, modern and expensive furniture and appliances, and cute, blond Celia singing to herself is juxtaposed with the creeping hand-held camera moving towards Celia and the slow, sinister-sounding soundtrack plays subtly underneath the sounds of her playful, childish song. The house as a place of suspense, as suggested by this scene, anticipates the reveal of the terrible secret first suggested by a white sheer curtain in the house swaying in the breeze during the film's opening scene. The sound of sprinklers play overhead, with their loud, staccato rhythm evoking gun shots, transforming a benign domestic consumer product into something more sinister, heightening the promise of the horrific reveal behind the curtain.<sup>77</sup> As the camera moves closer, the sound mixes with ghostly screams, imbuing the spectral image of the curtain with a further eerie aura. The scene is highly evocative, but holds off on (literally) unveiling what is behind the curtain until the end of the film, when Franklin and Celia's dead bodies are revealed in the garden. The mystery recalls Doane's reading of the "paranoid woman's film", where the female detective-protagonist attempts to uncover the house's mystery.<sup>78</sup> For Thornham, what Eva confronts on the other side of the curtain is not "an aspect of herself" but 'a realization not only of loss but also of the horror and absurdity at the heart of the narratives

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<sup>76</sup> Iris Marion Young, 'House and Home: Feminist Variations', *Motherhood and Space*, pp. 115-147.

<sup>77</sup> This is something deliberately created by the sound designer, Paul Davies who, in an interview, says: '[The sprinkler sound] does occur at the beginning of the film, and is used at various times in the film but only resolves itself near the very end of the film at the emotional climax, where one realises with horror the awful significance of this every day and otherwise unremarkable sound.' Paul Davies, interviewed by Peter Albrechtsen, *Designing Sound*, 16 September 2011, <<http://designingsound.org/2011/09/paul-davies-special-the-lynne-ramsay-collaboration-exclusive-interview/>> [accessed 25 July 2017].

<sup>78</sup> Doane, 'The "Woman's Film"', p. 286.

within which such losses are usually framed'.<sup>79</sup> However, the horror of the house is also evoked through Eva's sense of a loss of stable subject position.

The loss is most explicitly rendered and sustained through Kevin's abject behaviours in the house. Kevin attempts to destroy any semblance of ordered, controlled domesticity: he throws and smears food across the house, the oozing jam of his abandoned sandwiches eventually attracting ants (which perhaps signals Eva and Franklin's abandonment of futile cleaning, as much as Kevin's abject behaviour); he wilfully refuses to toilet train but defecates at will in his recently changed nappy; as a teenager, he displays a discomforting ease at being caught masturbating by Eva. Ramsay foregrounds Eva's emotional reaction to Kevin's actions: her ambivalent look at the rotting jam, her frustration at her ruined study or Kevin's defecation, her shock at his blatant masturbatory habits. In this way, the film refuses to position the mother as abject as designated by Kristeva via Lacan.<sup>80</sup> As Thornham argues:

In a reversal of conventional gender assumptions, it is Kevin who represents the anarchic excesses of the body... Kevin denies [Eva] control, refusing her transformation of the unknown into an exercise of mapping, of motherhood into a teaching relationship. Instead, his behavior insists on the messiness of the body, on the flashy, the organic, the abject – and insists that Eva recognize this, together with her own rage and fear at her entrapment.<sup>81</sup>

Kevin's behaviours "trap" Eva within this abject construction of mother-child relations, the emotional and embodied modes of confinement overlaying the domestic with further symbols of restriction.

In some ways, Kevin's behaviour gestures to the ordinary and mundane labours of childcare performed by the parent, usually the mother – cleaning, wiping, feeding, bathing. Beauvoir speaks of the monotonous, endless and oppressive work of women's domestic labour, arguing that this material work supports man's subjectivity, depriving the woman a subjectivity of her own.<sup>82</sup> Not all childcare is presented as oppressive in the film, with a

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<sup>79</sup> Thornham, "A Hatred So Intense...", p. 23.

<sup>80</sup> For Kristeva, the mapping of the clean and unclean body, and the closeness with which the mother's keeps the child to her maternal body, refusing to let them enter the symbolic order is what designates her as abject. See Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*.

<sup>81</sup> Thornham, "A Hatred So Intense...", pp. 16-17.

<sup>82</sup> Young, 'House and Home: Feminist Variations', p. 129.

tender moment between Eva and Kevin after Kevin is sick being such an example. Moreover, Beauvoir's argument risks devaluing the crucial work done particularly by mothers as well as domestic workers and nannies, including the pleasures that might be had in doing said work. However, *Kevin* certainly registers the negative affects of maternal work for Eva. In a powerful moment in the film, after Eva cannot get baby Kevin to stop crying, she takes him for a walk in the pram – a prominent moment of being forced to leave the house. She meets stares from a passer-by and only eventually finds relief from the sounds of Kevin crying when she stops next to a loud road drill. As Baraitser argues, public space (as well as domestic space) is a place of maternal work, whether the child is comforted, soothed, disciplined or stimulated according to “appropriate” standards of sociability.<sup>83</sup> Eva is the “bad” mother-subject who fails to quell the baby, and even seeks relief from him. Blurring the public and the private as both spaces of Eva’s difficult and frustrated mothering emphasises the relentlessness of this work, and the extent of Eva’s “failure” to take up the “proper” position of “good” mother.

On the other hand, Kevin’s behaviour is strange and exceptional, construing Eva’s “entrapment” in suburban domesticity as horrifyingly abject. Eva’s coercion into this abject mother-child relation plays out broadly in the film through an uneasy and slippery merging of Eva and Kevin’s identities. Multiple scenes show images of Eva and Kevin merging or blurring into each other such as a close-up shot of Eva plunging her face into water which then merges into an image of Kevin (Figures 22-24). In another moment, Ramsay frames Eva’s reflection as superimposed on Kevin’s image in the television. Kevin’s act of picking out fingernails from his mouth and laying them on the table parallels Eva’s habit of picking egg shells out of her mouth and arranging them on her plate. Moreover, the casting of Tilda Swinton and Ezra Miller draws on a physical similarity through their sharp cheekbones and long, sinewy bodies, contrasting with John C. Reilly’s soft and round physicality. Thornham reads the blurred relationship between Eva and Kevin as a monstrous double, a trope she identifies in feminist mother writing and horror films.<sup>84</sup> The relationship between mother and child as constituting (or preventing) maternal subjectivity has long been a point of contention for motherhood studies. As

<sup>83</sup> Baraitser, ‘Mothers who Make Things Public’, p. 20.

<sup>84</sup> Thornham highlights Adrienne Rich’s feelings of dread of giving birth to monsters and Phyllis Chesler’s naming of her unborn child as “my monster, myself”. Thornham also argues that ‘the sense of maternal splitting and alienation that in the horror film generates the monstrous child has also been a key but repressed part of women’s experience of maternity’. Thornham, “A Hatred So Intense...”, p. 20. See also Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born* (London: Virago, 1977); Phyllis Chesler, *With Child* (London: Four Walls Eight Windows, 1998).

Baraitser points out, how do you theorise ‘a notion of subjectivity that comes into being through our relation of obligation to an inassimilable otherness in the figure of the child’?<sup>85</sup> For Baraitser, maternal subjectivity is premised on being both for herself and for another; it comes back from the encounter with the child and arises ‘out of the paradox of the one who sees the world from the point of view of there being two, which in its turn retroactively produces the one’.<sup>86</sup> However, to be a maternal subject, Stone argues, ‘one must not only have or live through experience, one must also *author* the meaning of that experience , and one must exercise some *autonomy* in doing so, departing from given horizons of meaning to regenerate new meanings adapted to one’s own situation and history [emphasis in original]’.<sup>87</sup> Eva’s “entrapment” in this abject relationship impedes this autonomy and agency. Although the ultimate “loss” of selfhood ends up being Franklin, with the house eventually facilitating and revealing his Oedipal demise, the film moves away from representing this as a patriarchal anxiety around the breakdown of the family home that are prevalent across horror films.<sup>88</sup> Foregrounding the horror of the home as focused on Eva’s feeling of ambivalence and entrapment, Ramsay presents the house as disturbingly replicating Eva’s loss of a bounded, autonomous sense of self as a mother to Kevin.

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<sup>85</sup> Baraitser, *Maternal Encounters*, p. 7.

<sup>86</sup> Baraitser, *Maternal Encounters*, p. 14.

<sup>87</sup> Stone, *Feminism, Psychoanalysis, and Maternal Subjectivity*, p. 2.

<sup>88</sup> Examining the horror film, science fiction film and family melodrama from the 1960s to 1980s, Vivian Sobchack argues that the monstrous child “invading” the family home reflects the “crisis” of the “disintegration” and “transfiguration” of the traditional American white, patriarchal, bourgeois family during this time. Vivian Sobchack, ‘Bringing it all Back Home: Family Economy and Generic Exchange’, *The Dread of Difference: Gender and the Horror Film*, ed. Barry Keith Grant, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2015), pp. 171-191 (p. 171). This is reiterated in a more recent survey on monstrous children in contemporary horror cinema. See Dominic Lennard, *Bad Seeds and Holy Terrors: The Child Villains of Horror Film* (New York: SUNY Press, 2014).



Figure 22: Eva's image merging into Kevin's image



Figure 23: Eva's image merging into Kevin's image



Figure 24: Eva's image merging into Kevin's image

### Women's Travels, Women's Writing

*Kevin* also plays out Eva's affective response to her "loss" of selfhood through her desire for travel and waged work, which can be read through Western, postfeminist and neoliberal definitions of subjectivity. Indeed, Eva's loss of a sense of selfhood through the abject responsibilities of childcare in the domestic realm can also be read this way. As Stone argues, the mother's subservience to the child's care, having previously been seen as agents of their own lives, is key to the many mothers' feelings of subjective loss: 'The child is at least seen as a potential subject; the mother is seen merely as the background and nourishing soil of her child's subjectivity-to-be.'<sup>89</sup> Stone argues that the difficulties of reconciling maternity with a sense of autonomous selfhood is particular to white, middle-class mothers because these women have had privileged access to the modern position of autonomous subject in Western, capitalist societies.<sup>90</sup> In this section, I consider the trope of travel in the film, which Ramsay constructs as a spatial configuration in opposition to Eva's experiences in the domestic realm. As both the means of her professional work, and as a figuration of mobility and autonomy that draws on white, masculine, colonial and

<sup>89</sup> Stone, *Feminism, Psychoanalysis and Maternal Subjectivity*, p. 2.

<sup>90</sup> Stone, *Feminism, Psychoanalysis and Maternal Subjectivity*, p. 16.

capitalist discourses, travel offers Eva a complex space of subject-formation. In this section, I will firstly demonstrate how the “exotic” and “foreign” spaces of travel are figured as spaces of emotional and physical freedom and pleasure for Eva in contrast with the suburban domesticity and motherhood. I will then draw out the implications of this spatial configuration on the construction of Eva’s subjecthood. The film does this in two ways. The first is the significance of Eva as a travel writer, and the broader discourses on motherhood and authorship this incites. The second, and related to this, is the configuration of travel as a white, masculine, colonial and capitalist pursuit, in which the film complexly engages through Eva as a white, American, working mother.

Before I turn to these two conceptualisations of travel, I want to detail the ways in which *Kevin* emphasises Eva’s pleasurable attachment to travelling, both offering another instance of Ramsay foregrounding Eva’s cinematic subjectivity through an attention to her interiority, while simultaneously offering a counterpoint to Eva’s “loss” of narrativised mother-subjectivity through the “entrapment” of the suburban home. An early flashback to Eva’s pre-maternal life as she attends La Tomatina, the food fight festival in Buñol, Spain, is indicative of this. This scene renders Eva’s interiority legible by cutting between close-up shots of the tomatoes and Eva’s body submerged in them and mid-shots of Eva’s frenzied emotional response to this experience (Figure 25). Ramsay intensifies this representation through the noisy and chaotic soundscape, and by focusing on the close textured and sensual details of the bodies in the tomatoes. The brightly-lit redness of the tomatoes adds an abject, “exotic” and erotic sheen to the image, intensifying the representation of Eva’s subjective pleasure while also foreshadowing the abject horrors to come. Multiple shots, particularly of Eva’s face, are presented in slow-motion which, as Bolton suggests, can ‘create the impression of a psychological swoon’ as a film ‘pauses the narrative to enable us to be privy to what [the protagonist] is thinking and feeling’.<sup>91</sup> This offers a significant gendered reversal of the temporal slow-down usually accompanying women in narrative cinema who, as I mentioned earlier, are conceived as freezing the narrative in a moment of erotic contemplation.<sup>92</sup> Here, the overwhelming visual, aural and temporal representation result in a sensory and corporally-rendered evocation of a woman’s interiority.

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<sup>91</sup> Bolton reads this through Jane Campion’s *In the Cut* (2003), but it equally applicable here. Bolton, p. 77.

<sup>92</sup> Mulvey, ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’, p. 18.

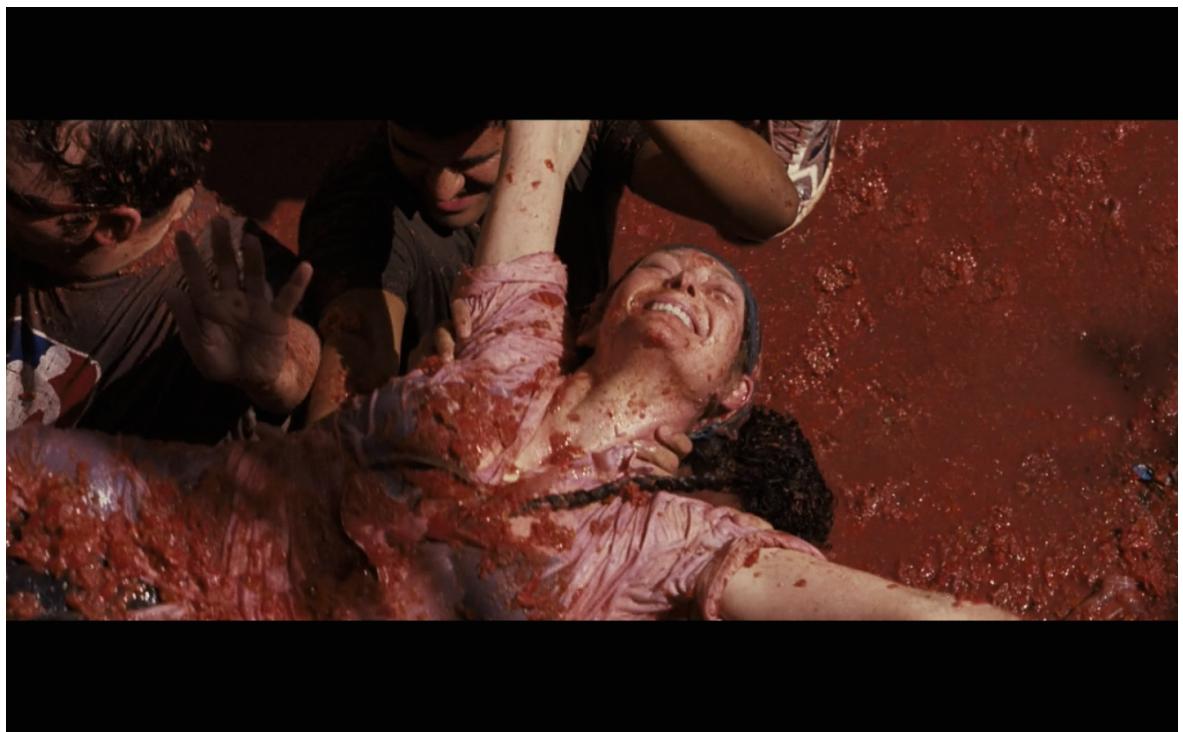


Figure 25: An over-head mid-shot of Eva with a pleasured look on her place

The intense pleasures offered by this visceral and sensuous experience sharply contrast with Eva's sterile containment in and emotionally ambivalent relationship to the home, even as the spectre of "foreign" abjection that was once pleasurable for Eva will eventually become invasive and threatening in the form of Kevin. The film sets up a complex relationship between motherhood and travel, mirroring the fraught discursive and lived experience of gendered travel.<sup>93</sup> The film suggests the independence and numerous "freedoms" offered by travel is in opposition to the physical, emotional and symbolic "confinement" of motherhood. At one point, an exasperated Eva tells crying baby Kevin, who will not feed: "Mommy was happy before little Kevin came along... Now Mommy wakes up every morning and wishes she was in France." That this flashback occurs when Eva is being harassed in her present-day home by trick or treaters – the memory seemingly being involuntarily triggered by this literal entrapment – further emphasises the symbolic

<sup>93</sup> As Janet Wolff argues, women are often excluded from the discursive and ideological construction as well as the actual operations of travel. See Janet Wolff, 'On the Road Again: Metaphors of Travel in Cultural Criticism', *Cultural Studies*, 7 (1992), pp. 224-239. Moreover, Deborah Paes de Barros argues that the figure of the mother traveller is so incongruous with dominant figurations of (masculinised, patriarchal) travel – 'how different Kerouac's narrative might have been if children were constantly present' – that when the mother does travel, she does so within an alternative maternal geography. Deborah Paes de Barros, *Fast Cars and Bad Girls: Nomadic Subjects and Women's Road Stories* (New York: Peter Lang, 2004), p. 93. However, it is pertinent to remember that Eva as a white, wealthy, American woman has privileges not afforded to many poor women of colour, especially women forced to travel such as refugees and asylum seekers.

“entrapment” of motherhood in this flashback. Motherhood and travel, whether for business or leisure, are clearly positioned in a fraught relationship.

Before I complicate this to consider the implications of travel as a means of professionalised work for Eva, I want to briefly think about the relationship between motherhood and (travel) authorship. Several modes of authorship are at play in *Kevin*, as a film about a woman travel writer (Eva), adapted by a women filmmaker (Lynne Ramsay) from a novel by a woman author (Lionel Shriver), where the novel is told through a series of letters written by the protagonist to Franklin. On the level of motherhood representation, the novel’s epistolary form offers a working through Eva’s emotional life, maternal and otherwise, which has previously been ignored or marginalised by Franklin and wider social and cultural discourses.<sup>94</sup> Following Emily Jeremiah, who argues that maternal writing ‘subverts the traditional notion of mother as an instinctual, purely corporeal being’ and, therefore, can be ‘understood as a key tool in the redefinition of maternity in which feminists are engaged’, Eva’s letters can be read as a self-conscious reclamation of the maternal voice lost through the experience of mothering.<sup>95</sup> This is complicated by the position of Shriver who, since the publication of *Kevin*, has been labelled “anti-mom” for being vocal about her decision not to have children, a label she both embraces and resists.<sup>96</sup> Shriver simultaneously identifies *Kevin* as an exploration of what discouraged her from having children, and notes her frustrations at the ways in which works by female authors are constantly read through the author’s biography.<sup>97</sup> I do not highlight the fact that Shriver does not have children in order to suggest that she produces an “inauthentic” representation of motherhood or that her novel cannot be a working through of a woman’s feelings towards motherhood (if these interviews suggest anything, it is that women cannot escape

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<sup>94</sup> Like the marginalised maternal experience and subjectivities represented in cinema from the maternal melodramas to contemporary family dramas, texts about the mother in both fiction and non-fiction texts ‘seldom hold fast to a maternal perspective’. Brenda O. Daly and Maureen T. Reddy, *Narrative Mothers: Theorizing Maternal Subjectivities* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1991), p. 2. Despite the proliferation in writing about maternal themes, identities and experience in the last few decades, as Elizabeth Podnieks and Andrea O'Reilly argue, the mother is still marginalised; matriarchal narratives still need to be unmasked and maternal roles and subjectivities still need to be redefined. Elizabeth Podnieks and Andrea O'Reilly, ‘Maternal Literatures in Text and Tradition: Daughter-Centric, Matrilineal, and Matrifocal Perspectives’, in *Textual Mothers/Maternal Texts: Motherhood in Contemporary Women's Literatures*, ed. by Elizabeth Podnieks and Andrea O'Reilly (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2010), pp. 1-30 (p. 5).

<sup>95</sup> Emily Jeremiah, ‘Troubling Practices: Mothering, Literature, and Ethics’, in *Mother Matters: Motherhood as Discourse and Practice*, ed. by Andrea O'Reilly (Toronto: ARM Press, 2004), pp. 231-241 (p. 231).

<sup>96</sup> Lionel Shriver, ‘No Kids Please, We’re Selfish’, *Guardian*, 17 September 2005

<<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2005/sep/17/society>> [accessed 5 August 2017].

<sup>97</sup> Lionel Shriver interviewed by *Mumsnet* users, *Mumsnet* <<https://www.mumsnet.com/qanda/lionel-shriver>> [accessed 5 August 2017].

the question of motherhood even if they do not have children).<sup>98</sup> Rather, this extra-textual discourse reveals how maternal authorship is still highly emotive – even controversial – and that women’s authorship is still dismissively read through the biographical.

In the film adaptation, Shriver/Eva’s gendered authorship is given potency as Ramsay directs the film.<sup>99</sup> This is not the first film where Ramsay’s female authorship has been considered significant in relationship to motherhood and travel. In Ramsay’s adaptation of Alan Warner’s *Morvern Callar* (2002), Ramsay rewrites Warner’s narrative which returns a pregnant Morvern home, an ending that Ramsay claims was ‘really naff’ suggesting ‘you grew up by getting pregnant’, and instead sets her off on a journey with an uncertain destination.<sup>100</sup> Cobb argues that, rather than ‘reinserting [Morvern] in the symbolic order by returning “home” to her foster-mother’s village with a baby on the way’, Ramsay presents Morvern through the traditionally masculine roles of the “trickster” and the “wanderer”.<sup>101</sup> Echoing my reading of the *flâneuse* in *Prevenge*, Cobb argues: ‘Though we might argue that Western women at the turn of the millennium are no longer completely excluded from acquiring autonomy and mobility, it is still rare to see artistic/fictional representations of women who have such independence and freedom of movement...’<sup>102</sup> For Cobb, Ramsay’s authorship usurps the “ideal figure” of the male author – reflecting the narrative’s concern with Morvern’s appropriation of her boyfriend’s novel and his authorial identity – and re-authorises it through the figure of the woman.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> As Christine Battersby argues, the woman, even if she is childless, is situated as ‘a subject-position linked to a body that has perceived potentialities for birth’. Christine Battersby, *The Phenomenal Woman: Feminist Metaphysics and the Patterns of Identity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998), p. 16.

<sup>99</sup> When it became apparent that Shriver’s relationship to mothering was significant to her discursive authorship, I began researching whether Ramsay is a mother. Notoriously unreliable Wikipedia promised she had one child, but I found no evidence of this in the film’s para-textual materials or any of the short and informal biographies of Ramsay that litter the internet. As my research began to take on extreme lengths and I thought about attempting to get in touch with Ramsay herself, I began to wonder where the line between privacy and public information sat and whether, if this information wasn’t easily available, this really mattered. When does the biographical impinge on the discursive construction of authorship? Would I read the filmic images differently if I discovered that Ramsay was a mother? As a good post-modernist, I should say certainly not, but as feminist scholar wanting to be attentive to matrifocal narratives and numerous forms of gendered-maternal labours, I hesitate. In the end, one part of my answer was found in a profile about Ramsay in *The Observer* for her subsequent film, *You Were Never Really Here* (2017), which revealed that Ramsay has a daughter, along with the notable revelation that Tilda Swinton and John C. Reilly are godparents. Lynne Ramsay, interviewed by Miranda Sawyer, *Observer*, 25 February 2018 <[https://www.theguardian.com/film/2018/feb/25/lynne-ramsay-director-you-were-never-really-here-observer-interview?CMP=Share\\_iOSApp\\_Other](https://www.theguardian.com/film/2018/feb/25/lynne-ramsay-director-you-were-never-really-here-observer-interview?CMP=Share_iOSApp_Other)> [accessed 25 February 2019].

<sup>100</sup> Lynne Ramsay, interviewed by Geoff Andrews, *Guardian*, 28 October 2002 <<https://www.theguardian.com/film/2002/oct/28/features>> [accessed 3 August 2017].

<sup>101</sup> Cobb, *Adaptation, Authorship and Contemporary Women Filmmakers*, pp. 71-73.

<sup>102</sup> Cobb, *Adaptation, Authorship and Contemporary Women Filmmakers*, p. 71.

<sup>103</sup> Cobb, *Adaptation, Authorship and Contemporary Women Filmmakers*, p. 64. The narrative follows Morvern after her boyfriend dies by suicide, leaving Morvern instructions to publish his novel and money to

Ramsay's appropriated and agential authorship, then, reclaims the female body from its "containment" in white, patriarchal maternal domesticity, offering Morvern a tempered freedom as she takes up the masculine mode of exploration, discovery and travel. While *Morvern Callar* provides a direct assault on the male author, both through the narrative of the film itself and through Ramsay's alternative ending, *Kevin* offers a sustained working-through of women's authorship as it intersects with motherhood, with Eva embodying a realisation of the fate of Warner's Morvern. Eva-Shriver-Ramsay's authorship offers an important feminist counter to male representations of motherhood, enabling an exploration of new gendered spaces and a foregrounding of a previously marginalised mother subject.

That Eva is a *professionalised* travel writer, however, complicates the feminist modes of authorship at play here. The film makes some gestures to the difficulties of Eva's identity as both a mother and as a travel writer when Franklin objects to Eva going to Ecuador for two months. However, Eva's successful travel business, with her smart office contrasting with the comparatively dingy offices in her new workplace, suggests Eva continues to pursue and achieve professional success alongside motherhood – a crucial indication of the good, middle-class neoliberal mother, and a move away from the domesticated housewife as the ideal maternal subject position. Moreover, as Sylvie Gambaudo argues with reference to Shriver's novel, Eva's travel company, named 'A Wing and a Prayer', is anchored in an American patriarchal and colonialist concept of the "new frontier", where white men sought to discover, penetrate and inhabit a "new", "untouched" and "virginal" land: 'In her quest for professional and social achievement, Eva actively follows in her forefathers footsteps. Her company 'A Wing and a Prayer' is no more than the linguistic 'territorialisation' of an un-chartered territories that she then sells on to interested consumers for further colonisation.'<sup>104</sup> In the film, the name of Eva's company is changed to 'Escape To', which places an emphasis on travel as a form of liberation rather than exploration, but still constructs the colonial fantasy of foreign territories as a place for white, Western self-discovery, renewal and physical, emotional and spiritual awakening, and positions Eva's travel writing within the capitalist-colonialist construction of "exotic" lands tamed for white, Western consumption.<sup>105</sup>

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pay for his funeral. Morvern takes this to mean publish the novel under her name, which she does, and she then uses the money left to buy a holiday to Spain.

<sup>104</sup> Sylvie Gambaudo, 'We Need to Talk About Eva: The Demise of the Phallic Mother', *Janus Head*, 12.1 (2011), 155- 168 (pp. 159-160).

<sup>105</sup> This can be situated alongside a broader trend in which white women take up indigenous landscapes as spaces for self-renewal. Mayer identifies these films as *Eat, Pray, Love* (2010), *Tracks* (2013), *Wild* (2014), *Queen of the Desert* (2015). Mayer, *Political Animals*, p. 41. This has also been investigated in the British

*Kevin* offers a complex representation of the white, middle-class, Western woman-mother's subject position within this conception of travel and professionalism. For Thornham, Eva's travels is one of an imperial adventure taken by the "rational" Western subject: 'The affluent, ordered offices of Eva's travel company, with their posters offering fantasies of exotic indulgence, remind us that this adventure in mobility and choice is in fact an imperial one, whose success depends on the turning of embodied excess into a commodity which can be bought and experienced – always elsewhere – by the rational subject.'<sup>106</sup> While I do not dispute that the "liberation" and "freedom" through which Eva frames her professional life and travel adventures is determined by her privileged position as a white Western woman, I want to point to the ways in which the film complicates the "rationality" on which this subject position rests. Specifically, I argue that the film does this by mocking the notion of "choice" undertaken by the rational, Western subject, particularly in a postfeminist and neoliberal context. In an early scene, Eva makes the conscious decision – or choice – to become pregnant, with the moment of conception marked with Franklin asking, "are you sure about this?". "Choice" of course is a critical if contentious word in feminism's vocabulary, particularly in relation to women's reproductive rights.<sup>107</sup> Although, as Charlotte from *Sex and the City* (1998-2004) exclaims, "the women's movement is all about choice!", the postfeminist moment under which it is uttered recuperates this "choice" on which this liberation of women depends within its own agenda. As Gill argues:

One of the problems with this focus on autonomous choices is that it remains complicit with, rather than critical of, postfeminist and neoliberal discourses that see individuals as entrepreneurial actors who are rational, calculating and self-regulating. The neoliberal subject is required to bear full responsibility for their life biography no matter how severe the constraints upon their action.<sup>108</sup>

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context, where foreign lands are spread for female self-exploration, such as *Shirley Valentine* (1989). See Justine Ashby, 'Reassessing the Contemporary British Woman's Film'.

<sup>106</sup> Thornham, "A Hatred So Intense...", p. 14.

<sup>107</sup> See Sara Hayden and D. Lynn O'Brien Hallstein (eds.), *Contemplating Maternity in an Era of Choice: Exploration into Discourses of Reproduction*, (Plymouth: Lexington Books, 2010); Rickie Solinger, *Beggars and Choosers: How the Politics of Choice Shapes Adoption, Abortion, and Welfare in the United States* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2002).

<sup>108</sup> Rosalind Gill 'Critical Respect: The Difficulties and Dilemmas of Agency and 'Choice' for Feminism', *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 14.1 (2007), 69-80 (p. 74).

In the contemporary postfeminist moment, Douglas and Michaels argue that the decision to become a mother is the only meaningful “choice” a woman can make, thus undermining the very agency and rationality upon which this decision supposedly rests.<sup>109</sup> Eva’s “choice” to become a mother, like her “choice” to travel, is based on a Western postfeminist and neoliberal fantasy that promises autonomy and agency, even as it works to curtail them.

Therefore, even as the film confirms Eva’s privileges as an affluent, mobile, white Western woman, it also works to critique the ideology of “choice” upon which the rational postfeminist and neoliberal subject depends. The moment of Kevin’s conception is presented as part of Eva’s memory alongside flashbacks of Eva at La Tomatina and Eva and Franklin running through streets during the early, heady days of their relationship. Linking pregnancy and maternity to Eva’s “exotic” travels alludes to motherhood as the symbolic “new frontier”.<sup>110</sup> Eva lies on her bed as she recalls these memories, and the images of the past and present blend into one another. Red lighting overwhelms each frame, joining the past and present in a visual palette. The diegetic sound of sirens and Franklin’s voice in the flashbacks bleeds into the present scenes. Through images and sounds, this scene collapses time and space. This, I argue, mocks the postfeminist construction of an empowered female subject. In voiceover, Franklin hails Eva to return home asking, “When are you coming home? I miss you... I love you.” This is reinforced just before Kevin’s conception when Franklin says to Eva, “Promise me you’ll never go away again”. The film, then, frames Eva’s “choice” of motherhood as an interpellation into heteronormative femininity and a recuperation within domesticity. The irony, of course, is that motherhood has come to define present-day Eva to such an extent that she is now a social outcast; as I argued earlier, her home is her only safe space as she has been literally and metaphorically outcast from public spaces and iterations of acceptable motherhood. However, it also suggests an inevitable failure of postfeminism’s promises of motherhood. As Eva recalls these memories, Swinton’s performance of maternal ambivalence eschews postfeminist reassurances of the fulfilling and redemptive aspects of motherhood and femininity. The kernel of postfeminism’s failed promises becomes lodged into the past

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<sup>109</sup> Douglas and Michaels, p. 24. Kathleen Rowe Karyln concurs claiming postfeminist motherhood positions maternity as a liberated woman’s enlightened choice when it, in fact, replaces her subservience to a husband with subservience to the child. Kathleen Rowe Karyln, *Unruly Girls, Unrepentant Mothers* (Austin, University of Texas, 2011), p. 3.

<sup>110</sup> This parallels the novel where Gambaudo reads Eva’s travels as her first symbolic encounter with motherhood as she ‘constructs the lost maternal as unknown places where she ventures’. Gambaudo, p. 160.

scenes. Even the moments of romantic love and empowered “choices” (namely Kevin’s conception) are now marked with futility, mocking even the possibility of Eva as an empowered subject of postfeminism and neoliberalism.

*Kevin* presents a complex configuration of spatial exploration for Eva. For although “exotic”, “foreign” space is represented as spread for white, Western, capitalist consumption and dissemination, one through which Eva gets immense pleasure, Ramsay destabilises the “rational”, Western, postfeminist subject who takes up this spatial mobility. Indeed, I argue that this ambiguity returns at the end of the film when Eva appears to be spatially and temporally “stuck” as she remains caught between Kevin’s imprisonment and her life’s futurity. The endings of maternal texts take on intense feminist meanings as indicative either of the realisation of maternal agency, or the return to a state of maternal sacrifice, as Kaplan and Williams’ differing readings of the ending of *Stella Dallas* suggest.<sup>111</sup> Both the novel and film adaptation of *Kevin* take on similar feminist burdens. Gambaudo complains that the novel, which ends with Eva’s acceptance of motherhood and her preparation of Kevin’s bedroom in the event of his release from prison, sees Eva give up her authority to become the ‘quintessential self-effacing mother who patiently awaits the return of her prodigal son... “[W]oman” has to choose between motherhood and empowerment, as if the two could not co-exist’.<sup>112</sup> With Ramsay’s adaptation ending with Eva’s last visit to Kevin in prison before he moves to an adult facility, Thornham offers a more optimistic reading. She argues that Eva’s departure as she leaves Kevin in prison is ‘a movement outwards towards the future which, whilst it continues to insist on the inescapability of connection and responsibility for the maternal subject, nevertheless seems an affirmation of both subjectivity and agency’.<sup>113</sup>

The film’s ending presents a complex spatial and temporal configuration which offers a final confirmation of Eva’s difficult and ambiguous subject position. As I mentioned earlier, present-day Eva appears suspended in time – the maternal time of ‘impossible waiting which is the time the child’s futurity requires of her’ – as her temporality appears caught up with Kevin’s “doing time” in prison.<sup>114</sup> As Eva leaves the

<sup>111</sup> Whereas Kaplan argues that the ending of *Stella Dallas* satisfies patriarchal demands for the repression of the active and involved aspects of the mother’s role, Williams argues that the ending is ‘too multiply identified, too dialectical’ to encourage this response. The film, she argues, both puts the mother “in her place” as dictated by patriarchy and yet encourages empathy at the loss of her daughter. Williams, “Something Besides the Mother...”, p. 316.

<sup>112</sup> Gambaudo, pp. 167-168. See also Lionel Shriver, *We Need to Talk about Kevin* (London: Serpent’s Tail, 2005), p. 468.

<sup>113</sup> Thornham, “A Hatred So Intense...”, p. 24.

<sup>114</sup> Baraitser, ‘Time and Again’, p. 6.

prison, Washington Phillips' song 'Mother's Last Word to Her Son' plays over the scene. The following lyrics are heard: 'Now when I think of my mother dear/How often she did feel her cheer/My wondering mind was going astray/Was saying son "accept the way".' *Kevin's* soundtrack is, of course, hugely ironic. The recurring use of Buddy Holly's 'Everyday' with its upbeat melody and lyrics such as "love like this will surely come my way" is an obvious example. Phillips' song, rendering images of motherly love and advice, is no exception. Yet, the song's very irony destabilises the movement with which Eva enters the future. The song is framed through the male adventurer, with a mind that "goes astray", who goes off on his journey as necessitated and sanctified by the mother who tells him to "accept the way".<sup>115</sup> This recalls de Lauretis' argument of the Oedipally-motivated journey, which I outlined in my introduction, whereby the male hero-subject crosses and penetrates the feminised plot-space as motivated by the mother/wife/woman.<sup>116</sup> Phillips' song clearly substantiates this gendered construction. Through its ironic use, Ramsay confirms Eva's spatial and temporal ambiguity: her position is unstable; her future is unknown. As a mother and a woman, her subjectivity is always uneasy and always under threat. And, as Swinton's final performance of maternal ambivalence as she leaves the prison makes clear, the dominant iterations of maternal subjectivity as put forward by postfeminism and neoliberalism fail to offer a redemptive position through which maternal subjectivity can be constructed.

## Conclusion

Within its ambiguities, Ramsay confirms the complexities of women's subjectivities, and the difficulties of representing them within cinema. As I argue in this chapter, Ramsay constructs an effective and provocative cinematic rendering of a woman's internal emotional life. Through a formal construction of a woman's temporality and spatiality, and through the representation of a woman in various diegetic spaces as presented through this temporality and spatiality, Ramsay creates a cinematic language which allows us access to Eva's interiority. This offers a significant rendering of a woman, and a mother's, cinematic subjectivity. This argument is politically urgent given the depoliticised critical responses to the film. Writing in *Time* magazine, film critic and author Mary Pols argues: '[*Kevin*] is

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<sup>115</sup> The rest lyrics of the song support this as they say: "I never can forget the day/When my dear mother did sweetly say/You are leaving, my darling boy/You always have been your mother's joy."

<sup>116</sup> De Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't*, p. 119.

dominated by the aesthetic impulse. When a subject is something as elemental and visceral as motherhood, this seems the wrong choice. A movie *can* be too arty.<sup>117</sup> Similarly, film critic Jonathan Romney says of *Kevin*: ‘Ramsay, however, thinks not in concepts but in images. She doesn't make intellectual films, but ones that are close to music, taking visuals to the point of abstraction...’<sup>118</sup> Both Pols and Romney reproduce the sexist binary of men being associated with culture/intellect/knowledge and women being associated with nature/body/emotion by placing the “natural”, “instinctive” and “corporeal” assumptions of motherhood outside of the rational, the cerebral and the artistic. My argument vehemently opposes the claim that Ramsay’s style of filmmaking conforms to this binary. Precisely through these “arty images” Ramsay constructs a cinematic space not only where a woman’s interiority and subjectivity can be rendered, but where, through this very rendering, a mother can reflect on her sense of a “lost” subjectivity due to her maternal position. This doubled subjective achievement both eschews the “abstraction” of women on screen, and reveals the complexities and instabilities of women’s subjectivities across multiple representative and lived modalities.

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<sup>117</sup> Mary Pols, ‘*We Need to Talk About Kevin*: About a (Bad) Boy’, *Time*, 8 December 2011 <<http://entertainment.time.com/2011/12/08/about-a-bad-boy/>> [accessed 3 August 2017].

<sup>118</sup> Jonathan Romney, ‘Review: We Need to Talk About Kevin, Lynne Ramsay, 112 mins (15)’, *Independent*, 22 October 2011, <<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/films/reviews/we-need-to-talk-about-kevin-lynne-ramsay-112-mins-15-2374467.html>> [accessed 3 August 2017].



## CHAPTER FOUR

### The Mobile Subject: Spaces of Exteriority in *Fish Tank* (Andrea Arnold, 2009)

*Kevin* challenges dominant postfeminist and neoliberal figurations of female subjectivity through an attention to interiority. Andrea Arnold's *Fish Tank* (2009), meanwhile, challenges dominant postfeminist and neoliberal figurations of female subjectivity through an attention to exteriority. While *Kevin* focuses on the affective dimensions of a privileged middle-class white woman in the US, *Fish Tank* centres on the bodily mobility of a working-class girl, Mia (Katie Jarvis) from Essex. The geographical locale is crucial here. When asked in an interview whether Andrea Arnold chose the worst side of Essex to depict in her film, Arnold responded:

It has some sadness, because there used to be a lot of industry. But it has a really big sky and a wilderness. And that estate in particular is not bad. The whole world of film is very middle class. So when people see a film about people who have less than they do they find it grim. But that's how most of the world lives. I'd love it if next time they saw a girl like Mia they might think about her a little bit and give her a bit more room. If that's the most that could come out of the film I'd be happy.<sup>1</sup>

Arnold's response, bristling at the middle-class assumption that the Essex landscape is "grim", suggests the contradictory features of her film's setting: urban and rural, dilapidated and abundant, ordinary and extraordinary, joyful and depressing. Her response also alludes to assumptions about her film's protagonist. Critics label her as 'tricky', 'lairy', 'stroppy', 'angry', 'foul-mouthed' and 'violent'.<sup>2</sup> Arnold contests these lazy descriptors, asking that we reflect on her with more considered sympathy and offer her more "room" in which she can express herself.

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<sup>1</sup> Andrea Arnold, interviewed by Erica Abeel, *Huffington Post*, 18 March 2010, <[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/erica-abeel/fish-tanks-michael-fassbe\\_b\\_420255.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/erica-abeel/fish-tanks-michael-fassbe_b_420255.html)> [accessed 5 July 2018].

<sup>2</sup> See Peter Bradshaw, 'Fish Tank – Review', *Guardian*, 10 September 2009, <<https://www.theguardian.com/film/2009/sep/10/fish-tank-review>> [accessed 5 July 2018]; Roger Ebert, 'Fish Tank' [film review], *RogerEbert.com*, 3 February 2010 <<https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/fish-tank-2010>> [accessed 5 July 2018]; Christopher Tookey, 'More British Miserabilism which No Sane Moviegoer would Pay to Watch' [film review], *Daily Mail*, 10 September 2009 <<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/reviews/article-1212608/Fish-Tank-review-More-British-miserabilism-sane-moviegoer-pay-watch.html>> [accessed 5 July 2018].

I take up Arnold's call to consider the ways in which Mia is represented with an attention to space. That Mia is a working-class girl is significant. Girls in the twenty-first century, as Sarah Projansky argues 'are everywhere in our mediascapes'.<sup>3</sup> Representations of working-class girls in media culture, specifically, are fraught as they either appear in marginalised or peripheral representations, or emerge in 'popular ubiquitous disparaging, disdainful, anxious, and/or protectionist depictions that shore up a narrow version of acceptable girlhood'.<sup>4</sup> Christine Geraghty points to a key history of girls in British cinema in social realist film from the 1960s such as *A Taste of Honey* (1961) and *Girl with Green Eyes* (1964). Geraghty argues that these films reworked 'the social and moral issues which clustered round young women'.<sup>5</sup> Bolton considers a more recent history of girls in British cinema, arguing that these representations fall into three categories: schoolgirls in uniform, young ladies of heritage films, and sexual provocateurs.<sup>6</sup> Bolton does, however, point to boundary-pushing genre movies, including *Morvern Callar* and *The Disappearance of Alice Creed* (2009), which rework gender stereotypes and reimagine conventional tropes of girlhood in British cinema.<sup>7</sup> It is through Bolton's latter argument that I position and analyse Arnold's *Fish Tank*.

In this chapter, I consider how Arnold centres Mia's subjectivity with an attention to mobility. By mobility, I mean both the ways in which Mia is "on the move", whether through her dancing or her wanderings around the estate, rural and edgeland spaces of Essex, and the ways in which the film appeals to themes such as escape, liberation and transcendence. "Mobility" also alludes to upward social mobility. Critics argue that upward mobility is a key facet of meritocracy – a problematic contemporary ideology which, contrary to its promise, functions to obscure and extend economic and social

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<sup>3</sup> Sarah Projansky, *Spectacular Girls: Media Fascination and Celebrity Culture* (New York/London: New York University Press, 2014), p. 5.

<sup>4</sup> Projansky, p. 1. Projansky notes that this is also true for girls who are 'large, differently able, queer, of color...make "bad" or "dangerous" choices; feel depressed; or even just act silly'. Projansky, p. 1. For a broader examination of representations of girlhood on screen, see for example Frances Gateward and Murray Pomerance (eds), *Sugar, Spice and Everything Nice: Cinemas of Girlhood* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2002); Fiona Handyside and Kate Taylor-Jones (eds.), *International Cinema and the Girl: Local Issues, Transnational Contexts* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016); Sarah Hentges, *Pictures of Girlhood: Modern Female Adolescence on Film* (Jefferson: MacFarland, 2006); Sarah Hill, *Young Women and Contemporary Cinema: Gender and Postfeminism in British Film* (London: I. B. Tauris, Forthcoming); Gaylyn Studlar, *Precocious Charms: Stars Performing Girlhood in Classical Hollywood Cinema* [ebook] (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press, 2013).

<sup>5</sup> Christine Geraghty, 'Women and Sixties British Cinema: The Development of the "Darling Girl"', in *The British Cinema Book*, ed. by Robert Murphy (London: British Film Institute, 2009), pp. 154-163 (p.154).

<sup>6</sup> Lucy Bolton, 'A Phenomenology of Girlhood: Being Mia in *Fish Tank* (Andrea Arnold, 2009)', *International Cinema and the Girl*, pp. 75-84 (p. 76).

<sup>7</sup> Bolton, 'A Phenomenology of Girlhood', p. 76.

inequalities.<sup>8</sup> Meritocracy and upward social mobility were key themes in the policy discourse of the New Labour government (1997-2010), during which time film was produced and released.<sup>9</sup> Examining the various spaces through which Mia moves – the housing estate, rural space, suburban space and edgeland spaces – I will argue that Arnold presents them at once as spaces of potential, becoming, creativity, transgression, solitude, autonomy and agency, just as they are spaces of limitation, dislocation, marginalisation, isolation, vulnerability and exposure for the working-class girl subject. Presenting Mia's mobility in twenty-first-century Britain as difficult and paradoxical, *Fish Tank* offers at once an arresting, insightful and hopeful depiction of a girl's subjectivity that is usually marginalised within this context, while also pointing to the limits of possibilities – even the disastrous consequences – for someone on the periphery of these social, political, geographical and cultural spaces.

### **The Working-Class Girl Subject**

I will firstly outline some of the key ways the girl subject has been theorised, gesturing to the denigration and marginalisation of the working-class girl in the contemporary postfeminist and neoliberal moment. The increased visibility of girls in public discourse has led to a growth in academic attention and the development of the field of Girlhood Studies.<sup>10</sup> Key critics in Girlhood Studies, such as Angela McRobbie, Mary Celeste Kearney and Projansky argue that, in the twenty-first century, girls are spectacular. Girls are highly visible – often literally luminous – in the contemporary moment. Like Mulvey's theory of women as spectacle, girls are imbued with a 'shimmering presence'.<sup>11</sup> However, scholars such as Kearney and Fiona Handyside stress the ways in which girls can resist, rework and take pleasure in sparkling images.<sup>12</sup> Girls are also interpellated through

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<sup>8</sup> See Littler, *Against Meritocracy*.

<sup>9</sup> Littler, *Against Meritocracy*, pp. 86-90.

<sup>10</sup> For an explanation of the development of the field of Girlhood Studies, and a recent overview of key issues in the field, see Victoria Cann, Sarah Godfrey, and Helen Warner, 'Contemporary Girls Studies: Reflections on the Inaugural International Girls Studies Association Conference', *Journal of Girlhood Studies*, 11.3 (2018), pp. vi-xxi.

<sup>11</sup> Angela McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change* [ebook] (London: Sage, 2009), p. 56; Mary Celeste Kearney, 'Sparkle: luminosity and post-girl power media', *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies*, (2015) 29.2, 263–273; Projansky.

<sup>12</sup> Kearney argues that we must attend to how girls feel about the visual phenomenon of sparkle. Kearney, p. 272. Similarly, Fiona Handyside demonstrates the productiveness of taking up luminosity, sparkle and light as categorises of analysis. Doing so within an examination of Sofia Coppola's work, Handyside (literally) illuminates the ways in which '[w]hile Coppola's films do not posit a feminist position of resistance, they are nevertheless attentive to the micro, molecular movements that characterise girls' complex negotiation of

spectacular discourses of public femininity as these luminosities mediate girls' subjectivities, identities and agency in significant ways. As McRobbie argues, it has become 'increasingly difficult to function as a female subject without subjecting oneself to those technologies of self that are constitutive of the spectacularly feminine'.<sup>13</sup> Postfeminist and neoliberal discourses stress subjectivities are produced through an ethos of autonomous individualism where these "rational" and "autonomous" agents are responsible for their own success and failure; subjects are called upon to regulate and reinvent the self and adapt to political and economic changes as the responsibilities of the state, communities and sociality recedes.<sup>14</sup> Girls are considered central postfeminist and neoliberal subjects as they are constructed as 'ideal rational actors who have succeeded in reinventing themselves, adapting to shifting global market forces as the new reflexivity winners in educational achievement and employment'.<sup>15</sup> Combined with postfeminism whereby, as McRobbie argues, feminism is apparently "taken it account", girls are doubly constructed as ideal flexible subjects: 'they are imagined as benefiting from feminist achievements and ideology, as well as from new conditions that favor their success by allowing them to be put into practice'.<sup>16</sup> With the rise of "girl power" as an indication and affirmation of young female agency, girls in the twenty-first century are 'expected/demanded [emphasis in the original] to be fully self-actualized neo-liberal subjects'.<sup>17</sup>

However, not all girls embody the "luminous", ideal subject position demanded by postfeminism and neoliberalism. For just as these conditions produce the "successful" girl subject, so too do they construct her "failing" counterpart. Like Dyer's designation of the white woman's glow, luminosity is attached to white middle-class girls.<sup>18</sup> Anita Harris distinguishes between the "can-do" girl and the "at-risk" girl. While the "can-do" girl is 'optimistic, self-inventing, and success-orientated', excelling in 'star careers, glamourous

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girlhood norms'. Fiona Handyside, *Sofia Coppola: A Cinema of Girlhood* (London/New York: I. B. Tauris, 2017), p. 79.

<sup>13</sup> McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism*, p. 56.

<sup>14</sup> See McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism*; Jessica Ringrose and Valerie Walkerdine, 'Regulating the Abject', *Feminist Media Studies*, 8.3 (2008), 227-246; Nikolas Rose, *Governing the Soul: Shaping the Private Self*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Free Association Books, 1999); Nikolas Rose, *Powers of Freedom: Reframing Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

<sup>15</sup> Marnina Gonick, Emma Renold, Jessica Ringrose and Lisa Weems, 'Rethinking Agency and Resistance: What Comes After Girl Power?', *Girlhood Studies*, 2.2 (2009), 1-9 (p. 2).

<sup>16</sup> Anita Harris, *Future Girls: Young Women in the Twenty-First Century* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 8. McRobbie, 'Postfeminism and Popular Culture'.

<sup>17</sup> Gonick, Renold, Ringrose and Weems, p. 2.

<sup>18</sup> Kearney, p. 263. See also Dyer, *White*.

consumer lifestyles, and delayed motherhood', the "at-risk" girl is considered a "failed" subject: 'At-risk youths are those who are seen to be rendered vulnerable by their circumstances – living in poverty, in unstable homes, in communities known for violence, drugs and crime, and so on.'<sup>19</sup> This dichotomy cuts across many identity categories, such as race, disability and, for the importance of this chapter, class. The "at-risk" is also spectacular, but where the "can-do" girl is spectacular in that she is fabulous, the "at-risk" girl is a spectacle in that she is scandalous.<sup>20</sup> The working-class "at-risk" girl is considered a site of anxiety and crisis for neoliberal subjectivity as she fails to properly discipline and reinvent herself within the appropriate and aspirational realm of (middle-class) subjectivity.<sup>21</sup> She is positioned differently within this subjectivity construction, even if class is often dismissed as a structural barrier for her.

*Fish Tank* explicitly centres the "at-risk" working-class girl.<sup>22</sup> Mia embodies a particularly "failing" and "revolting" subject position in Britain in the early twenty-first century: the "chav", 'the pejorative name for "the underclass" in Britain and in particular for a generation of young people disenfranchised by neoliberal economic and social policies'.<sup>23</sup> Tyler notes how the chav is mediated by social and cultural discourses as an intensely emotive figure of class disgust; it emerges as a figure expressing an underlying social crisis or anxiety, namely a heightened class antagonism in contemporary Britain where white upper and middle classes attempt to distinguish themselves from the white poor.<sup>24</sup> Subsequently, representations of chavs typically render them 'invisible, inaudible or... laughably incomprehensible'.<sup>25</sup> Arnold suggests the ways in which Mia is ambivalently positioned in postfeminist and neoliberal culture as a working-class girl and a chav. This is most apparent when Mia and her sister Tyler (Rebecca Griffiths) watch MTV television programmes such as *Cribs* (2000-) and *My Super Sweet 16* (2005-). In one

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<sup>19</sup> Harris, *Future Girls*, p. 24.

<sup>20</sup> Projansky, p. 5.

<sup>21</sup> Harris, *Future Girls*; Ringrose and Walkerdine; Beverly Skeggs, *Formations of Class and Gender* (London: Sage, 1997); Beverly Skeggs, 'The Making of Class and Gender through Visualizing Moral Subject Formation', *Sociology*, 39.5 (2005), 965-982.

<sup>22</sup> Sarah Hill notes how the discursive construction of the "at-risk" girl not only circulates around Mia but also around actor Katie Jarvis. The film's extra-cinematic and para-textual material note both Jarvis' lack of GCSEs, her "unlikely" background to become an actor and her having to miss the film's premiere in Cannes at she had recently given birth to a daughter at the age of 18. See Hill, 'Young Femininity in Contemporary British Cinema', pp. 91-92.

<sup>23</sup> Imogen Tyler, *Revolting Subjects: Social Abjection and Resistance in Neoliberal Britain* (London: Zed Books, 2013), p. 154.

<sup>24</sup> Tyler, 'Chav Mum, Chav Scum', p. 18. See also Owen Jones, *Chav: The Demonization of the Working Class*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (London: Verso, 2016).

<sup>25</sup> Tyler, 'Chav Mum, Chav Scum', p. 31.

scene, the girls watch the woman on *Cribs* take the audience on a tour of her home, showing off her “gorgeous girly room” and her large wardrobe that contain “lots of jeans” and her “Juicy tracksuit”. As Diane Negra argues, *Cribs* is indicative of the importance of wealth, luxury goods, aspirational living and expressive domesticity to postfeminism and the logic “New Economies”, a logic which continues to exacerbate the growing gap in income inequality, even as it attempts to hide this by normalising mainstream expectations of luxury living.<sup>26</sup> That the access to this “aspirational” lifestyle by the girls of *Fish Tank* and the woman on *Cribs* is so uneven and unequal is suggested overtly in their contrasting domestic residences, which I explore in more detail in the section below. However, it is also suggested in their divergent forms of consumption. Negra notes a consequence of postfeminist “New Economies” is also ‘a general diminishing of the traditional sartorial markers of personal status’.<sup>27</sup> Mia and the woman on *Cribs* both wear tracksuit bottoms but, where Mia’s cost £20, Juicy Couture tracksuit bottoms start from £120.<sup>28</sup> These tracksuits are embedded with class assumptions and implications. Juicy Couture in the pre-recession noughties was considered the leisurewear uniform of famous women such as Paris Hilton and Nichole Richie.<sup>29</sup> Although deemed “white trash”, Hilton and Richie come from extremely privileged and prestigious ancestry.<sup>30</sup> With wealthy women wearing expensive designer tracksuits, these items of clothing become transformed into a desirable, aspirational and luxurious consumer product. Mia’s tracksuit, by contrast, marks her as a “chav”. Tyler argues that an emphasis on the excessive consumption of consumer goods distinguishes the chav from previous accounts of the “underclass”.<sup>31</sup> Jessica Ringrose and Valerie Walkerdine point to the intensification of the feminine as a site of consumption under neoliberalism, alongside the emphasis on the “right” kind of consumer lifestyle as indicative of “appropriate” class identity.<sup>32</sup> Mia’s tracksuit separates her from the “appropriate” consumption needed to embody a successful postfeminist subjectivity. Indeed, this is further reiterated in a later moment when she watches *My Super Sweet 16*

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<sup>26</sup> Negra, pp. 125-151.

<sup>27</sup> Negra, p. 125.

<sup>28</sup> Mia’s mum complains about Mia’s tracksuit bottoms costing £20 when Mia wears them while wading into a dirty river, suggesting the significance of the price tag.

<sup>29</sup> Alex Ronan, ‘RIP, Juicy Tracksuits, Famewhore Uniform of the 2000s’, *The Cut*, 23 June 2014 <<https://www.thecut.com/2014/06/rip-juicy-tracksuits-famewhore-uniform-of-yore.html>> [accessed 5 July 2018].

<sup>30</sup> See Hannah Yelin, “‘White Trash’ Celebrity: Shame and Display”, *Women’s Magazines in Print and New Media*, ed. by Noliwe Rooks, Victoria Pass, Ayana Weekley (New York: Routledge, 2016), pp. 176-191.

<sup>31</sup> Tyler, ‘Chav Mum, Chav Scum’, p. 21.

<sup>32</sup> Ringrose and Walkerdine, p. 230.

with Tyler and her friend.<sup>33</sup> Again, Arnold contrasts the social and economic circumstances of the girls, with Tyler's consumption of cigarettes and alcohol suggesting her participation of the "inappropriate" consumption of the "at-risk" girl, in contrast with the "appropriate" consumption of the "can-do" girls with their extravagant lifestyles portrayed in the programme.<sup>34</sup> Yet, Arnold also intercuts this moment with close-up shots around Tyler's bedroom of a hamster cage, stickers on the bedframe and drawings of cats on the wall. These girls find moments of creative expression that belie their marginalisation – even erasure – in post-feminist neoliberal culture which necessitates (relative) wealth and social power to which Mia and Tyler, as working-class girls have only minimal access.<sup>35</sup>

In focusing on her young protagonist, Arnold is attentive to the various ways Mia is simultaneously interpellated and excluded from postfeminist and neoliberal forms of "successful" subjectivity. In the rest of the chapter, I remain attentive to Mia's position in this context, considering the ways in which it informs her various moments of "freedom" and "restriction" in the film. Moreover, Arnold also offers an alternative representation of the reviled chav and working-class girl subject by rendering the film intensely from Mia's perspective, particularly through an attention to her body: its movement, tactility and sensuousness. In the rest of the chapter, I will consider the various spaces in the film: the housing estate, rural spaces, suburban spaces and edgelands. Examining how Mia moves through and interacts with these spaces, I argue that Arnold at once gestures to the ways in which these spaces enable an enactment of subjective expression for Mia, as much as limit or contain her due to her position as a working-class girl.

## The Housing Estate

I begin with the most ubiquitous and politicised space in the film: the housing estate. The housing estate is not unfamiliar territory for Arnold, who set her first film, *Red Road*

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<sup>33</sup> Negra observes that MTV's *My Super Sweet 16*, a reality television programme profiling lavish birthday celebrations of the super-rich, 'has raised the cultural profile of the Sweet 16 while also providing a forum for status envy and class resentment in an ever more economically-polarized culture'. Negra, p. 150. Hill identifies this as indicative of the contemporary moment's constant presence of "aspirational" media culture, and a programme which Tyler watches "ironically" as she recognises that these lifestyles are both desirable yet not achievable. Hill, 'Young Femininity in Contemporary British Cinema', p. 95.

<sup>34</sup> Harris, *Future Girls*, pp. 13-27.

<sup>35</sup> Joanne, Mia's mum, also has a "girly" room with pink walls decorated with beading and fairy lights. She also has a poster on her door with the words "Parental Advisory: Keep Out" on it, signalling her affinity with youthfulness and girlishness.

(2006), in a lurid and paranoid vision of a tower block in Glasgow. In *Fish Tank*, Arnold moves to the now demolished high-rises of the Mardyke Estate in Essex, where Mia lives with her mother, Joanne (Kierston Wareing) and sister, Tyler. Arnold's use of the high-rises follows many of the conventions of social realist cinema, such as filming on real locations, and linking character and place 'to show the effects of environmental factors on the development of character through depictions that emphasise the relationship between location and identity'.<sup>36</sup> The opening scene establishes Mia's relationship with the Essex landscape and the housing estate. As she finishes practicing her dancing in an abandoned flat, the camera focuses both on Mia's body in mid-shots and close-ups shots and the landscape beyond the housing estate. The camera reveals the road, trees, wind turbines and houses including surrounding high-rises in more detail as it pans around Mia (Figure 26). Moreover, the soundscape emphasises both Mia's heavy breathing and the external sounds outside the flat, such as people shouting, cars and other ambient noises. The opening scene introduces us to the importance of landscape and place, and to the relationship Mia has with it as particularly depicted through her body. Emphasising the physicality of Mia's body through the tight camera work and the noisy estate through the busy soundscape, Arnold visually and aurally aligns the audience with Mia's point-of-view, and orientates us within specific spatial parameters. This centring of a girl's perspective not only offers an explicit feminising of social realism – a genre, as I quoted in my introduction, that has largely been associated with men – it also roots the construction of Mia's cinematic subjectivity within her body.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Julia Hallam and Margaret Marshment, *Realism and Popular Cinema* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), p. 184. See also Samantha Lay *British Social Realism: From Documentary to Brit-Grit* (London: Wallflower, 2002), pp. 9-10. *Fish Tank* also conforms to social realist conventions as it is an independent production headed up by a now-established director and focuses on working-class characters played by non-professional or (then) unknown professional actors (Katie Jarvis and Michael Fassbender respectively).

<sup>37</sup> Brunsdon, 'Not Having it All'. Although the history of British social realism has largely been associated with male directors, critics have pointed to a growing number of women making social realist films since the turn of the century. See John Fitzgerald's chapter 'The New Realism: Girls on Top?' in *Studying British Cinema: 1999-2009* (Leighton Buzzard: Auteur, 2010), pp. 73-92.



Figure 26: A close-up shot of Mia, with the background in focus

This opening scene is also indicative of the contrasting ways in which Mia's representation in the housing estate has been considered with particular attention to her body's mobility. On the one hand, it has been read as a phenomenological representation of female subjectivity.<sup>38</sup> Ince argues that, with attention paid to the activity, effort and movement of the female body, as opposed to a fetishistic fragmentation of this body, the opening scene illustrates feminist phenomenological theory and embodied female subjectivity in practice; Mia's agency and intentionality is prominent in her dancing as it is in all her bodily actions.<sup>39</sup> Bodily mobility is emphasised as the means to constructing Mia's subjectivity and agency as a young woman. On the other hand, the film has been read as representing Mia's claustrophobia in the housing estate. As Lance Hanson argues, combined with the film's engagement with the typical social realist theme of aspirational paralysis, *Fish Tank* recalls the genre's sense of restriction with its deployment of claustrophobic domestic space.<sup>40</sup> Intensified by cinematographer Robbie Ryan's use of Academy ratio, which tightly frames the film's characters, Hanson argues Arnold creates a

<sup>38</sup> See Ince, pp. 51-54; Bolton, 'A Phenomenology of Girlhood'.

<sup>39</sup> Ince, p. 51.

<sup>40</sup> Lance Hanson, 'Edgelands Aesthetics: Exploring the Liminal in Andrea Arnold's *Fishtank* [sic] (2009), *Writing Visual Culture*, 6 (2015), 2-19 (p. 3).

sense of both claustrophobia and confinement.<sup>41</sup> The housing estate reflects and enacts Mia's social and bodily paralysis. I want to nuance both of these readings. Situating my analysis of Mia's mobility within its current political, social and cultural context, I want to suggest that *Fish Tank* presents the housing estate as both a place of limitation and a place of possibility for Mia as a working-class girl subject.

Firstly, I will outline the social, political and cultural discursive construction of housing estates to consider the ways in which this mediate Mia's mobility and subjectivity. The housing estate, as Emily Cuming argues, precipitates specific 'material, architectural and social considerations'.<sup>42</sup> The housing estate in contemporary Britain is loaded with negative connotations: poor property planning and management, inadequate facilities, stringent state policy, poverty, downward mobility and lack of cultural capital. Lynsey Hanley calls the phrase "housing estate" a psycho-social bruise: 'everyone winces when they hear it'.<sup>43</sup> The housing estate with the most negative reputation is the tower block:

Tower blocks, in the public mind, represent all that is worst about the welfare state: the failure to provide the kind of housing that most people regard as a prerequisite for a happy family life; lack of choice; dependence and isolation; bureaucracy prioritized over standards; individuals placed at the mercy of a faceless local authority that seems to maintain or leave to rot its housing on a whim. And concrete. Ugly concrete.<sup>44</sup>

Tower blocks are a visual reminder of the British class system, stubbornly and rigidly built into the landscape of the country.<sup>45</sup> Yet their physical prominence is contrasted with their invisibility in social, media, geographical and architectural discourses. Housing estates are

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<sup>41</sup> Hanson, 'Edgelands Aesthetics', p. 10. Arnold and Ryan also shot Arnold's 2016 feature, *American Honey*, in Academy ratio. An American road-movie, this boxier format offers not the usual sweeping wide-shot vistas of the landscape, but focuses more intensely on the protagonist, Star's (Sasha Lane) emotional as well as literal journey.

<sup>42</sup> Emily Cuming, 'Private Lives, Social Housing: Female Coming-of-Age Stories on the British Council Estate', *Contemporary Women's Writing*, 7.3 (2013), 328-345 (p. 329).

<sup>43</sup> Lynsey Hanley, *Estates: An Intimate History*, 2nd ed. (London: Granta, 2012), p. ix.

<sup>44</sup> Hanley, *Estates*, p. 98.

<sup>45</sup> Hanley, *Estates*, pp. 10-11. Matthew Taunton also observes that the housing estate is the most potent signifier of class divide, with the state-housed underclass on the one hand and the owner-occupiers or those in the private rental sector on the other. Matthew Taunton, *Fictions of the City: Class, Culture and Mass Housing in London and Paris* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 139. Owen Jones bitingly calls the housing estate the 'social dumping ground', dividing Britain between the middle-class and the 'working-class chav rump'. Jones, p. 35.

frequently ‘socially overlooked or neglected’.<sup>46</sup> They are often geographically marginalised, as their design and construction segregates them from other urban spaces. Indeed, Cuming argues they defy academic categorisations of the “metropolitan”, “urban”, “suburban” “slum” or even “borderland”.<sup>47</sup> Moreover, although housing estates are often the site of media attention and a pervasive part of the contemporary culture, they are often unexplored in both journalistic discourse.<sup>48</sup>

A significant amount of academic scholarship links the housing estate’s negative imagery with a pathologization of the working class. Tyler demonstrates how Thatcher’s Conservative government reconfigured decaying social housing as “barracks for the poor” in the public imaginary through “right-to-buy” policies. Those who could not afford to buy these houses were designated as an underclass of failed citizens.<sup>49</sup> Tyler traces this discursive construction through Blair and Brown’s Labour government, arguing that the council estate became a metonymic shorthand for this new class of problem people. The poverty associated with these places was imagined as a self-induced pathological condition where poverty was a choice and meritocracy would enable the “deserving” and hardworking.<sup>50</sup> As Littler argues, meritocracy validates upper-middle-class values as the norms to which we must aspire and renders working-class cultures as spaces which we must escape; all progressive movement is assumed to happen upwards and abject, “underclass” zones are to be fled from.<sup>51</sup> Lisa McKenzie demonstrates how this has continued through David Cameron’s coalition and Conservative governments from 2010-2016 and the austerity programme instigated by his administrations following the financial crash of 2008. McKenzie argues that inequality in the UK is increasing, as particularly exacerbated not only by austerity policy but also by discourses of symbolic violence such

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<sup>46</sup> Cuming, p. 330.

<sup>47</sup> Cuming, pp. 329-330. Hanley concurs. She is hesitant to designate the urban spaces of housing estates “suburban” as it sounds too middle-class, instead suggesting that most estates reside in “outer-urban” spaces. Hanley, p. 11. However, Ben Rogaly and Becky Taylor complicate this in their examination of estates in Norwich, arguing that ‘rather than being a bounded and isolated outpost of deprivation on the edge of a provincial city, the Norwich estates were intimately tied to the deep structural changes of the twentieth century’. Ben Rogaly and Becky Taylor, *Moving Histories of Class and Community: Identity, Place and Belonging in Contemporary England* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 3.

<sup>48</sup> For other histories and social, political and cultural considerations of the housing estate, see John Boughton, *Municipal Dreams: The Rise and Fall of Council Housing* (London: Verso, 2018); Lisa McKenzie, *Getting By: Estates, Class and Culture in Austerity Britain* (Bristol: Policy Press, 2015); Lisa McKenzie, ‘The Stigmatised and De-valued Working Class: The State of a Council Estate’, in *Class Inequality in Austerity Britain: Power, Difference and Suffering*, ed. by Will Atkinson, Steven Roberts and Mike Savage (Basingstoke: Routledge, 2013); Alison Ravetz, *Council Housing and Culture: The History of a Social Experiment* (New York: Routledge, 2001); Taunton.

<sup>49</sup> Tyler, *Revolting Subjects*, p. 160. See also Hanley, p. 10.

<sup>50</sup> Tyler, *Revolting Subjects*, p. 162.

<sup>51</sup> Littler, *Against Meritocracy*, p. 7.

as Cameron's rhetoric of "Broken Britain" and the media's obsession with "poverty porn" and "benefit scroungers".<sup>52</sup> Estates, then, not only suffer in the face of stringent funding cuts in the neoliberal economy, but the residents also bear the brunt of negative stereotypical imagery – violent, lazy, morally repugnant – and even take the blame for poverty and austerity itself.<sup>53</sup>

In British films, television programmes and newspapers, council estates are represented frequently in ways to emphasise the "problems" of contemporary society. As Hanley assesses: 'When estates feature in art and advertising, as they do with increasing regularity as a way of symbolising what's wrong, unequal or grimly "real" in British society, they're often chosen precisely for their horrid-ness, for their brutal dissimilarity to "normal", characterful, private housing.'<sup>54</sup> Hanley's text mixes autobiography and social history in an attempt to counter, or at least complicate, this negative imagery by writing about the 'shades of feeling' that accompany the experiences of living in a council estate.<sup>55</sup> Similarly, McKenzie combines personal histories of people living in estates (both McKenzie's and other residents of the St. Ann's estate in Nottingham) with the social, political and economic history of housing estates. Although McKenzie wants to recognise and highlight the deeply problematic government policies, legislations and discourses that surround working-class people in estates, she also wants to challenge negative understandings of them:

[T]he practices within poor neighbourhoods are immensely complicated, complex and rich, creating local value systems which are often misunderstood, demeaned and ignored by those "outside", thereby shaping those local value systems through their reactions to particular images and narratives. By examining the value systems that are alive in poor neighbourhoods, we can find out what is valued and important within.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> See McKenzie, *Getting By*, pp. 6-13. See also Atkinson, Roberts and Savage (eds.), *Class Inequality in Austerity Britain*; Tracey Jensen, 'Welfare Commonsense, Poverty Porn and Doxosophy', *Sociological Research Online*, 19.3 (2014), 1-7.

<sup>53</sup> As McKenzie observes, the austerity programme moves the cause of Britain "broken" finances post-2008 away from bankers to welfare claimants and public sector workers. McKenzie, *Getting By*, p. 10.

<sup>54</sup> Hanley, p. 183.

<sup>55</sup> Hanley, p. 20.

<sup>56</sup> McKenzie, *Getting By*, pp. 17-18.

McKenzie approaches her study of estates with nuance, compassion and understanding, the latter particularly bolstered by her personal experiences of estates. She suggests that by approaching a study of estates in this way, we can understand both what local practices and processes are working and what social, political and cultural needs are not being met.

Arnold similarly approached *Fish Tank* with a nuanced understanding of housing estates, partly motivated from having grown up on one.<sup>57</sup> While recognising that estates are brutal and difficult, she also argues that estates are full of vitality and beauty:

[The Mardyke Estate has] got a sadness to it... There used to be a lot of industry and it's all closed down. There's a lot of unemployment. There used to be a big Ford factory, and great huge car parks. All those car lots are empty now and the grass is growing up in the tarmac. But it's got a wilderness, and huge, great skies. It's a mixed thing.<sup>58</sup>

This is certainly conveyed in the film, especially in the static shots of the estates which punctuates the film's narrative. The estate's position within the natural environment is emphasised and beautifully lit, either by the soft sunshine or the night sky (Figure 27). Moreover, Arnold also admires the community that the estate fosters: 'I actually think estates are great places. They're full of people, they're full of life. I mean, that's how most people live. It's probably a better way to live than a lot of middle-class lives which are more isolated and more lonely and have less community.'<sup>59</sup> The film depicts the unique characteristics of the community. Early in the film, Mia stands on the balcony of the abandoned flat and watches people down below her. Through Mia's gaze, we see children playing and a group of young men walking with their dog. The sound design also helps to create a rich and textured surrounding environment as we hear multiple voices and sounds

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<sup>57</sup> Andrea Arnold, interviewed by Jonathan Crocker, *Rotten Tomatoes*, 9 September 2009 <<http://editorial.rottentomatoes.com/article/andrea-arnold-talks-fish-tank-rt-interview/>> [accessed 5 July 2018].

<sup>58</sup> Andrea Arnold, interviewed by Damon Smith, *Filmmaker*, 13 January 2010

<<https://filmmakermagazine.com/1403-andrea-arnold-fish-tank/#.Wz4RfNhKj-b>> [accessed 5 July 2018].

<sup>59</sup> Andrea Arnold, interviewed by Lisa Mullen, *Sight and Sound*, October 2009, 16-19 (p. 17).

coming from the people below, something Arnold created explicitly as ‘a celebration of the people living on that estate enjoying themselves’ and to ‘counteract a bleak picture’.<sup>60</sup>



Figure 27: The housing estate shot in sunshine

The housing estate, which mediates Mia’s representation, then, is one of both deprivation and vitality, of limits and possibilities. Arnold explicitly rejects responses to the film which call the estate “grim”.<sup>61</sup> She says: ‘The thing about the film industry is that it’s incredibly middle-class, isn’t it? All the people who look at it and study it and talk about it - write about it - are middle-class, so they always see films about the working class as being grim, because the people in the film don’t have what they have. I very much get the feeling that I’m seeing a different place.’<sup>62</sup> Yet, as Clive James Nwonka argues, representing the housing estate as beautiful risks depoliticising the image. Nwonka argues that *Fish Tank* is part of a broader trend within contemporary British social realist films which exhibit a more evasive attitude towards socio-political engagement than, for example Loachian social realism, which display a more radical ideological engagement

<sup>60</sup> Andrea Arnold, interviewed by Graham Fuller, *New York Times*, 14 January 2010  
<<https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/2010/01/17/movies/17fish.html>> [accessed 5 July 2018].

<sup>61</sup> Arnold repeatedly rallies against the film’s representation of the estates as “grim”. See also Arnold, interviewed by Abeel; Arnold, interviewed by Mullen; Arnold, interviewed by Smith; Andrea Arnold, interviewed by David Gritten, *Telegraph*, 28 August 2009

<<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/film/starsandstories/6093303/Andrea-Arnold-I-wish-cinema-could-be-braver.html>> [accessed 5 July 2018].

<sup>62</sup> Arnold, interviewed by Mullen.

with class conflict and inequality.<sup>63</sup> Nwonka is particularly critical of responses to the film, such as David Forrest's, which suggest that political realism can be located in semi-poetic narrative address.<sup>64</sup> Nwonka claims the film's generic and cultural verisimilitude obscures the social problems on which Arnold seeks to concentrate. However, as I have suggested, Arnold does so to challenge and counter the middle-class assumptions about housing estates – a political address in itself.

Nevertheless, it is crucial to account for the politics surrounding housing estates, particularly British government's systemic deprivation and neglect. A number of contemporary political crises have made these disastrous consequences plain. The Mardyke Estate, where *Fish Tank* was set and filmed, was replaced in 2014 with Orchard Village, a “regeneration project” (a loaded term I use advisedly). This has had many complaints from its residents due to the poor quality of the building, the estate management, the standards of repairs, the performance and costing of heating systems, the exposure to various hazards and the lack of fire safety and parking, among other issues.<sup>65</sup> Indeed, these complaints generated a debate in the House of Commons over the increasing deregulation of the housing association sector.<sup>66</sup> In addition, during the writing of this chapter, the inquiry into the Grenfell Tower fire (a fire in a block of public housing flats on 14 June 2017, which killed 72 people) took place. Every day, evidence and testimony pointed to the damning and ultimately fatal neglect of the residents in this publicly-owned housing estate by the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, the building's owner, and the Kensington and Chelsea Tenants Management Organisation, the landlord. As Tracy Shildrick argues, ‘the fire exposed many of worst aspects of contemporary neoliberal capitalism, not just in terms of inequality and social housing, but also in the ways that profits can be put before people's lives and well-being and how cuts to public services such as the police and fire services, made in the name of austerity, can have

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<sup>63</sup> Clive James Nwonka, ““You're what's wrong with me”: *Fish Tank*, *The Selfish Giant* and the Language of Contemporary British Social Realism”, *New Cinemas: Journal of Contemporary Film*, 12.3 (2014), 205-233 (p. 205).

<sup>64</sup> Nwonka, p. 210. See also David Forrest, *Social Realism: Art, Nationhood and Politics* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013).

<sup>65</sup> See John Harris, ‘Leaking Sewage and Rotten Floorboards: Life on a “Flagship” Housing Estate’, *Guardian*, 6 February 2017 <<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2017/feb/06/life-flagship-housing-estate-orchard-village-east-london>> [accessed 5 July 2018]; Colin Marrs, ‘Orchard Village: What Went Wrong with PRP's Flagship Housing Scheme?’, *Architect's Journal*, 15 February 2017 <<https://www.architectsjournal.co.uk/news/orchard-village-what-went-wrong-with-prps-flagship-housing-scheme/10017416.article>> [accessed 5 July 2018].

<sup>66</sup> HC Deb, 12 January 2017, vol. 619 <<https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2017-01-12/debates/17011264000002/CircleHousingAndOrchardVillage>> [accessed 5 July 2018].

deadly consequences'.<sup>67</sup> With such horrifying public (and increasingly privatised) neglect of social housing and its residents, it is difficult not to consider the politics imbued in the very structures of the housing depicted in *Fish Tank*.<sup>68</sup>

### **The Housing Estate: A Room of a Girl's Own?**

With my unease and hesitancy in mind, I want to consider some of the key ways in which the housing estate enables various modes of subjective expression for Mia. For one, the housing estate represents a space of expressive and performative girlhood. Space is important to girlhood, and the bedroom is a central space in this gendered construction.<sup>69</sup> Mia's bedroom offers a place of solace and respite away from the frequent fights she has with her mother, and the noises around the estate. The bedroom is brightly coloured and often brightly lit, contrasting with the estate's more muted colour palette within the film's *mise-en-scène*. The bedroom is also comparatively quiet to the rest of the estate. Moreover, Mia's bedroom offers small representations of girlishness. On our first introduction to Mia's bedroom, the camera provides several close-ups shots of Mia's things: a framed photo of her and her friend Keely, a miniature statue of the Eiffel Tower and a snow globe with a rabbit holding a heart-shaped sign that reads "Love You". These small representations of girlishness are contrasted with excessive, highly-performative representations of luxury girlhood on the MTV television programmes, as I mentioned earlier. Yet, although Mia's bedroom contrasts starkly with the excessive consumption and luxury lifestyle of the girls on MTV, her small items of girlishness point to her participation in wider mediations of postfeminist girlhood. Her bedroom suggests the

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<sup>67</sup> Tracy Shildrick, 'Lessons from Grenfell: Poverty Propaganda, Stigma and Class Power', *The Sociological Review Monographs*, 66.4 (2018), 783-798 (p. 787). John Boughton similarly argues that the conclusions we can draw from the Grenfell Tower fire are already apparent: 'It seems to indict a model of social housing management, seen here as distant to residents' interests and oblivious to the fire safety concerns they raised. It brings into question the system of commercially driven procurement and public-private partnership that has become near-ubiquitous in the social housing regeneration of recent years. And, more broadly, it challenges the cost-cutting, austerity agenda that has dominated public policy in the past forty years.' Boughton, p. 12.

<sup>68</sup> Indeed, *Fish Tank* is sometimes cited in articles about Orchard Village. See Harris, 'Leaking Sewage and Rotten Floorboards'. It was even mentioned in the motion made to the House of Commons debating the Village.

<sup>69</sup> Gonick, Renold, Ringrose and Weems argue: 'Gender difference and femininity are re-made through normative, socially constraining often contradictory (schizoid) spaces of family, the media, school and popular culture.' p. 6. See also Mary Celeste Kearney, 'Productive Spaces: Girl's Bedrooms as Sites of Cultural Production', *Journal of Children and Media*, 1.2 (2007), 126-141.

potential pleasures, fantasies and escapism it offers from the rest of the estate, even if these are precarious, temporary and largely unavailable to her.

A more sustained mode of subjective expression for Mia is her dancing. Mia uses an abandoned flat in the housing estate to practice. Dancing for Mia appears to enact a mode of personal expression, creative autonomy and (possible) means for gaining financial and social capital. Several scenes show Mia practicing her hip-hip dancing. The movements appear raw, unpolished and improvised. Arnold shoots these scenes either in a frontal mid-shot or a probing hand-held camera, enabling us to look at and feel the experience of dancing for Mia (Figure 28). The activity and effort of Mia's body is emphasised as the camera follows her fast movements and her heavy breathing is prominent in the sound mixing. As Bolton argues, through an immersive cinematic phenomenology of her space, time and movement, *Fish Tank* 'evokes the experience of what it is *to be* a modern girl in modern Britain, rather than presenting a more conventional story of what happens to her within her social and cultural context'.<sup>70</sup> Arnold's representation of Mia's dancing offers an evocation of Mia's bodily experiences: 'We are *with* Mia in time and space.'<sup>71</sup> Offering an expression of her selfhood, the abandoned flat in which Mia dances becomes what Mayer calls spaces of girl 'hood. Mayer claims that 'one of the most powerful feminist fantasies is writing the self in a room of one's own, even if that room is a forest and writing a dance'.<sup>72</sup> Mayer names this girl 'hood: 'The concept of girl 'hood names the continuum of environments through which women move and in which they act. Girls take up space, but also change it to serve themselves, and connect different places in unexpected ways.'<sup>73</sup> Arnold makes this explicit: 'For me, the dancing in the film is about [Mia] having something that's her own. She has to be quite defensive in her life and she seems to have nowhere she can be at home. Everywhere she's got her guard up. So this is a place where she can let that down a bit'.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Bolton, 'A Phenomenology of Girlhood', p. 76.

<sup>71</sup> Bolton, 'A Phenomenology of Girlhood', p. 77.

<sup>72</sup> Mayer, *Political Animals*, p. 133.

<sup>73</sup> Mayer, *Political Animals*, p. 133.

<sup>74</sup> Arnold, interviewed by Smith.



Figure 28: A frontal mid-shot of Mia dancing

Indeed, these spaces are important spaces of reflection as much as expression for Mia. This is demonstrated in one of the dancing scenes mid-way through the film where we see Mia practicing in her usual abandoned flat. The flat is in near-darkness, with the only light coming through the window from the dying sun at dusk. The camera is positioned behind Mia and so throws her into shadow (Figure 29). Unlike most of the other dancing scenes in the film, where Mia practices to loud hip-hop music which is audible to the audience in the diegetic soundtrack, this scene is almost silent. Mia listens to the music through headphones; the only significant sounds in this scene are her breathing and her feet moving across the floor. Her dancing is slow and balletic – a contrast to her previous raw and street-dance-inspired dancing earlier in the film – which Arnold further emphasises by presenting the scene in slow-motion. The combination of the lighting, sound and speed of the scene creates a sense of Mia in her own internal world; it is a moment where Mia is perhaps being reflective, but, as the headphones particularly emphasise, one to which we do not have full access.



Figure 29: A mid-shot of Mia dancing, thrown into shadow

Ince reads the multiple dance sequences in the film as conveying female bodily agency and intentionality.<sup>75</sup> Although, as I indicated earlier, Ince reads this through a phenomenological framework, I am troubled by this reading of “agency”. Ince suggests the dancing sequences turn into a ‘narrative dead end’ once Mia discovers that the dance audition she attends (presumably to seek employment and a way out of poverty) is for erotic dancers at a nightclub.<sup>76</sup> Ince suggests that the dance sequences then take on an increased aesthetic and formal importance. They ‘never objectify or glamorize Mia, or subject her to a male gaze’.<sup>77</sup> Rather they provide a subjective expression for her dancing. I am sympathetic to Ince’s reading of Arnold’s sensitive treatment of her protagonist, and the attempts to construct a female subjectivity based on bodily mobility. However, I argue that more consideration needs to be taken here as to the ways in which the spaces in which Mia dances mediates her agency, and to the exploitative and sexualised potential of dancing as embedded in the film’s aesthetics and narrative.

Although the housing estate at times offers Mia a liberating “room of her own” to be creative, introspective and independent, that this is limited and partial, and can leave her open to abuse and exploitation. Mia *is* exploited and sexualised by Connor (Michael

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<sup>75</sup> Ince, p. 53.

<sup>76</sup> Ince, p. 51.

<sup>77</sup> Ince, p. 51.

Fassbender). Both dancing and the housing estate take on a significant role in facilitating this. Connor initially appears in the film as an ambivalent figure. He is both stabilising and mysterious. He has a steady job with a regular paycheque (as a security guard no less), owns a car and a camcorder, and offers care, attention and encouragement to Joanne, Tyler and, particularly, Mia. Yet, he is also an “outsider” to the estate, something Arnold decided to emphasise by keeping Fassbender’s Irish accent, and takes mysterious phone calls throughout the film (he turns out to have a wife and child living in the suburbs of Essex).<sup>78</sup>

Connor also behaves in both a fatherly and sexual manner with Mia – carrying her to her bed and undressing her when she has fallen asleep elsewhere, giving her a “good hiding” for misbehaving, displaying an ease with his semi-clad body in front of her. He also oscillates between the looker and the looked-at in the film. Fassbender claims Arnold deliberately wanted Connor to be a ‘sexual character’.<sup>79</sup> Indeed, Bolton calls him the ‘sinewy phallus’.<sup>80</sup> Upon Mia and the audience’s introduction to Connor, he wears low-slung jeans and no top, emphasising his buff physique. During this introduction, Connor both interrupts Mia while she is dancing in front of a music video on the television, telling her “you dance like a black”, a clear indication of his gaze, and then is looked at very blatantly by Mia and the camera once he turns his back away from her/us.<sup>81</sup>

Later in the film, when they are alone in the flat’s living room at night, Connor watches Mia dance again. In fact, he requests she dances for him. Ince claims, in this scene: ‘There are no full-body shots of Mia that stand in for Connor’s gaze at her dancing, though: instead, close-ups on her face and upper body keep us close to the sensation of movement she is experiencing.’<sup>82</sup> There may be no full-body shots, but the film constructs a more complex edit of shots than Ince suggests by cutting between mid to close-up side shots of Mia’s body and face as she is dancing, mid-shots of Connor watching Mia dance,

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<sup>78</sup> Arnold, interviewed by Crocker.

<sup>79</sup> Michael Fassbender, interviewed by Erica Abeel, *Huffington Post*, 18 March 2010, <[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/erica-abeel/fish-tanks-michael-fassbe\\_b\\_420255.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/erica-abeel/fish-tanks-michael-fassbe_b_420255.html)> [accessed 5 July 2018].

<sup>80</sup> Bolton, ‘A Phenomenology of Girlhood’, p. 77.

<sup>81</sup> It is worth noting that, although Connor claims being told “you dance like a black” is a compliment, the sexual and racial politics at work is troubling. Not only do black women and girls, of course, have a history of being sexualised by white men through the stereotype of the Jezebel, but the mediation of black women and girls, particularly through contemporary popular music and media culture, is frequently cited by scholars as a fraught permutation of agency, appropriation, objectification and fetishisation. Before the release of the ground-breaking album, *Lemonade*, Beyoncé was a prime example of this. See Aisha Durham, “‘Check On It’ Beyoncé, Southern booty, and Black femininities in music video”, *Feminist Media Studies*, 12.1 (2012), 35-49; Kai Arne Hansen, ‘Empowered or Objectified? Personal Narrative and Audiovisual Aesthetics in Beyoncé’s Partition’, *Popular Music and Society*, 40.2 (2017), 164-180.

<sup>82</sup> Ince, pp. 52-53.

and frontal mid-shots of Mia dancing from Connor's point-of-view (Figures 30-32). Arnold constructs a slippery sexual dynamic of looks, permitting the audience an insight into Connor's gaze. In other words, Arnold manipulates the aesthetic and formal functions of the dance to demonstrate how easily Mia's dancing can move from being a mode of personal expression to a means in which she is objectified and sexualised. This is then compounded narratively when Connor initiates sex with Mia later in the scene which, given that she is underage, constitutes as a legal offence. Ince neglects to mention this, calling the sex act Connor's 'semi-drunken seduction'.<sup>83</sup> In fact, that their sexual relationship constitutes as statutory rape is often left out of academic work on the film. Stella Hockenhull simply refers to it as the couple's sexual act.<sup>84</sup> In his introduction to the *Journal of British Film and Television*'s special issue on Andrea Arnold, Michael Lawrence describes the film as about 'an adolescent girl's affair with her mother's boyfriend'.<sup>85</sup> His assessment is both strangely reductive of the film as a whole and neglects to mention the sexual offence, putting the sexual agency – and therefore blame – onto Mia. Yet Connor does ultimately commit a sexual crime.<sup>86</sup> This girl, then, is vulnerable and at risk of sexual exploitation and abuse; the constitutional rape and Mia's audition for what turns out to be a strip club undercuts the agency offered by dance.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Ince, p. 53.

<sup>84</sup> Hockenhull, p. 118.

<sup>85</sup> Michael Lawrence, 'Andrea Arnold: Introduction', *Journal of British Cinema and Television*, 13.1 (2016), 154-159 (p. 157).

<sup>86</sup> While I am mindful that childhood and national consent laws are socially constructed, and while I am also aware of being overly moralistic towards Mia's sexual autonomy, I nevertheless label Connor's behaviour as abuse as he knowingly breaks the law and exploits Mia's vulnerabilities.

<sup>87</sup> By linking the strip club to sexual exploitation, I do not position myself as a sex-negative feminist who does not support the work of women sex workers. Rather, I problematize the strip club here because Mia is 15 years old. Although there is no legal minimum age for working in a strip club in the UK, given that the legal age of sexual consent is 16 years old, and that it is illegal to produce pornography or pay or arrange for sexual services with someone under the age of 18, we could suggest a 15-year-old working at a strip club is, at the very least, a legal grey area. Indeed, the poster Mia picks up calls for female dancers who are over the age of 17. We might even wonder why Connor did not tell Mia that this is probably an audition for a strip club given that Mia shows him the poster later in the film. Again, although, at times his behaviour is fatherly (just moments before Mia shows him the poster, he puts a plaster on her injured foot), at other times, he offers her no protection and opens her up to exploitation. That Mia is naïve and vulnerable is eventually confirmed at the end of the film when she turns up at the audition, not realising what the audition is for, and leaves before dancing looking uncomfortable having realised what it is.



Figure 30: A mid-shot of Mia dancing



Figure 31: A mid-shot of Connor watching Mia dancing



Figure 32: A point-of-view shot of Mia dancing from Connor's perspective

Class and the housing estate play a significant role in facilitating this. As Cuming observes:

Mia's home in the film is portrayed as an all-too-open threshold that renders her and her sister vulnerable on several levels. This is made especially clear through *Fish Tank*'s treatment of sexuality, in respect to which both of the young girls are shown to be simultaneously naive and overexposed.<sup>88</sup>

Cuming argues that the film presents the housing estate as having a lack of boundaries, which is ironic given its position in a bounded, isolated landscape. Doors of the flat are left open, the girls are often left unsupervised, and their mum throws parties where numerous people, some of whom may be strangers, wander in and out of the flat. Indeed, Cuming points to the relationship between Mia and Connor as evidence of the 'blurring of boundaries of proximity, intimacy, and intrusion'.<sup>89</sup> Mia has no problem walking in on Connor changing, and even watches him and her mum have sex at one point. The housing estate is represented as precariously open, leaving Mia vulnerable and exposed. Therefore,

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<sup>88</sup> Cuming, p. 337.

<sup>89</sup> Cuming, p. 337.

although the housing estate can and does enact powerful and urgent representations of a girl's subjectivity, particularly through the mobility of her body and the intentionality of her dancing, the spaces in which she practices and performs these movement mediate and negotiate her agency and freedom. As a vulnerable, working-class girl, the mobility of her position is limited by the spaces in which she moves.

### **Rural Space**

Just as the housing estate has been read as a space of "freedom" through bodily mobility, so too have the rural spaces in the film. Mia's trip to the countryside with Connor, her mum and Tyler has frequently been read by critics as a moment of freedom and transcendence for Mia. Cuming argues that Connor serves as a spatial catalyst for Mia, offering her a new view of the world beyond the island-estate:

For among the chief attractions this outsider figure has to offer is his car and the literal mobility that it promises (this is of particular interest to Mia, who is forever seen piggy-backing on others in the film). In a memorable sequence, Connor takes the family out in the car for a drive – and the reactions of the girls and the mother make it clear that leaving the estate is in itself a rare event. The "day trip" scenes work effectively for the way in which they capture both the banality of the trip (a drive along a motorway lined with pylons, a drink in a car park) with moments of transcendent delight as Connor takes them to a river in the Essex countryside.<sup>90</sup>

Connor, then, offers Mia literal mobility as he owns a car, and an instructive affective relationship with the natural landscape as he introduces Mia to the pleasures of the countryside by encouraging her to wade into the water and go fishing with him.

Similarly, Hockenhull reads these two scenes – Connor and the family driving to the countryside and then exploring the countryside – as a fusing of the aural and visual for aesthetic affect. She argues that the music is prioritised as Mia's silhouette becomes blurred, merging with the background scenery while the car speeds along. The camera then cuts to an exterior shot of the landscape in sharp focus. The pastoral images and the sounds 'allow Mia a psychological escape, the music and image creating symbiosis through the

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<sup>90</sup> Cuming, p. 338.

aural and visual aesthetic.<sup>91</sup> Similarly, when Connor and Mia wade into the water, Hockenhull argues that Arnold is most interested in creating aesthetic affect. The shots are long and languorous. The camera's focus on the sunlight hitting the water highlights the water's texture and movement. The sumptuous beauty of the visual and aural aesthetic conveys Mia's transcendent pleasure in the rural landscape to the extent that, Hockenhull argues, 'the aesthetic affect offers a prelude to the couple's later sexual act'.<sup>92</sup>

Cuming and Hockenhull's analyses of this scene suggest that *Fish Tank*'s use of rural space continues the traditional representations of the countryside in British social realist cinema. Indeed, film critic Philip French compares this sequence to the 'idyllic' scenes of kestrel training in Ken Loach's *Kes* (1969).<sup>93</sup> Tracing the use of rural space in British cinema from the 1940s to the present, Andrew Higson argues that it is both a space where events take place and a space of spectacle and visual pleasure. Moreover, in contemporary realist dramas set in primarily urban environments, the country becomes a place of temporary refuge, particularly for the romantic couple, who seek to temporarily escape from the "real" conditions of their lives in the town or city.<sup>94</sup> However, I want to complicate Cuming and Hockenhull's readings of these scenes. For one, I suggest that Arnold punctuates them with darker imagery, undercutting the readings of these scenes as purely pleasurable and transcendent for Mia. For another, as I have already suggested, I challenge the critics' allusion or direct suggestion that Mia and Connor are a romantically entangled couple, destabilising the physical and emotional means of "escape" which Connor offers Mia.

When Connor is driving Mia and the family, Arnold does indeed create an affective merging of the aural and visual, as Hockenhull argues. However, in this scene, after a jump cut, the music abruptly stops. Connor asks the family what animal they would like to come back as if they were reincarnated. As Mia defiantly answers that she would want to come back as a white tiger, Connor states that he wants to be an eagle as "wouldn't you want to fly?". Mia responds, "no, then you get shot or something." The tone is light-hearted and jovial, but Mia's response suggests her cynicism to the "freedom" implied by flight, escape and mobility. This is further reiterated within a subplot in the film where Mia

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<sup>91</sup> Hockenhull, pp. 117-118.

<sup>92</sup> Hockenhull, p. 118.

<sup>93</sup> Philip French, 'Fish Tank [film review], *Observer*, 13 September 2009 <<https://www.theguardian.com/film/2009/sep/13/fish-tank-andrea-arnold-french>> [accessed 5 July 2018].

<sup>94</sup> Andrew Higson, 'A Green and Pleasant Land: Rural Space of British Cinema', *Representing the Rural: Space, Place and Identity in Films about the Land*, ed. by Catherine Fowler and Gillian Helfield (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2006), pp. 240 -258 (pp. 240-243).

unsuccessfully attempts to free a Traveller's horse. The tethered horse has some similarities with Mia such as the horse's grey coat matching Mia's grey tracksuit and their similar ages. The horse perhaps then functions as a metaphor for Mia's feelings of entrapment and isolation, with her attempts to free the horse an indication of her rally against her own psychological and social confinement. But, as Mayer argues, the horse also acts as a 'companion species and spirit animal' for Mia, particularly as the horse is a working horse: '[I]t is through identifying with the horse as a labouring body, signalling embodied agency and simultaneously oppression, that the characters find an equine affinity that also gives them a sense of self-worth'.<sup>95</sup> Animals in the film offer Mia complex moments of identification, which suggest both the potentials of freedom and escape, as they suggest the limits of them.

Mia's affinity with animals continues once they reach the river where Mia and Connor go fishing. The pace of the scene is slow and sensuous as Mia wades into the water, with close-up shots of her feet emphasising the tactile relationship between Mia and the grassy riverbank and the water. As she moves slowly through the water, the soundscape emphasises the sound of the water moving around her, lushly constructing the embodied experience of walking through the river. This is a tactile and sensuous moment but one, I argue, where the potential pleasure and transcendence is tempered by its existential fleetingness. Once Mia and Connor catch the fish, they move quickly out the water with Connor skewering it with a stick to kill the gasping fish once it is on dry land, and Mia cutting her foot as she wades out of the water. Joanne and Tyler both express disgust at the fish and Mia's feet, a visceral reminder of life's precarity. Later in the film, when they have returned to the flat and a day or two has passed, Mia finds the dog eating the fish on the kitchen floor. The fish has chunks of flesh missing as its rotting and decomposing flesh is being eaten up by the dog. Mia then looks out the kitchen window which reveals the wild and overgrown rural landscape. The contrast between the dead fish and the abundant landscape perhaps signals Mia's longing to return to the natural environment and the sensuous, tactile, pleasurable day she spent there (indeed, as she is in the kitchen, she can overhear a conversation between her mother and a social worker, where they discuss her "troubled" temperament as they attempt to move her into a new

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<sup>95</sup> Mayer, p. 39. Mayer also reads this depiction of horses in Arnold's adaptations of Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights* (2011) and in Clio Barnard's *The Selfish Giant* (2013).

school, suggesting the difficult realities of Mia's everyday life). Yet this pleasure was ephemeral, precarious and temporary.

The fish also recalls the film's title, which offers up multiple meanings. Kristin M. Jones suggests *Fish Tank* 'may refer to the council estate, not far from the sea and bordering on factories and a wasteland, or perhaps to the aqua room in which Mia drinks alone, dances, and surveys the street below.'<sup>96</sup> Earlier in the chapter, I suggested the ways in which the housing estate offers Mia limited and partial space of personal expression, creativity and autonomy. I complicate critical responses to the film's title which suggest it refers to the restriction, confinement and repression of the housing estate as David Jenkins does in his review for *Little White Lies*.<sup>97</sup> Rather, the title appears to suggest the vibrant if brutal ecosystem within this constricted space. As Jones argues, the title 'also suggests a realm in which large creatures can't help but devour the smaller ones... [Arnold] provides ample evidence for how easily minor transgressions—Joanne's cutting remarks, Connor's lies to Joanne and his selfish flirtation with Mia—can shade into more destructive ones'.<sup>98</sup> As I suggested earlier, the seemingly innocent relationship between Mia and Connor, which is compounded in this scene as one which is paternal and caring, switches to one that is abusive and destructive. After Mia cuts her foot, Connor bandages it up with a sock and then tells Mia to jump on his back for a piggyback ride. The camera cuts to a mid-shot of Mia and Connor, the camera primarily focusing on and zooming in on Mia's face as she gently rests her head on his back. Doing so in slow-motion, Arnold creates a particular rhythm and temporality which, Bolton argues, constructs Mia as an embodied character; it is a depiction of *this girl's* experience.<sup>99</sup> And, as Bolton argues, it is the significant moment which encapsulates Mia on the cusp between child and lover, a relationship which will become one of sexual abuse when Connor has sex with Mia who is still a minor.<sup>100</sup> This colours the scene's "romantic aesthetic", moving it away from generic conventions of rural space. The fish, skewered dead, represents the worst outcome for this brutal ecosystem.

## Suburban Space

<sup>96</sup> Kristin M. Jones, 'Fish Tank' [film review], *Film Comment*, 46.1 (2010), <<https://www.filmcomment.com/article/review-fish-tank-andrea-arnold/>> [accessed 5 July 2018].

<sup>97</sup> David Jenkins, 'Fish Tank' [film review], *Little White Lies*, 10 September 2009 <<http://lwlies.com/reviews/fish-tank/>> [accessed 5 July 2018].

<sup>98</sup> Jones, 'Fish Tank' [film review].

<sup>99</sup> Bolton, 'A Phenomenology of Girlhood', p. 78.

<sup>100</sup> Bolton, 'A Phenomenology of Girlhood', p. 80.

I have suggested the ways in which multiple spaces in the film offer up complex (bodily) configurations for Mia: as spaces of “freedom” and limitation; of sensuous pleasure and brutality; and of creative expression and curtailment. Before I move on to my final section about edgeland spaces, where I continue this reading, I want to suggest a space where Mia is categorically unwelcome. After Connor has sex with Mia, he leaves her and her family suddenly. Mia eventually tracks him down in Tilbury, Essex where she discovers that he lives in a relatively middle-class cul-de-sac with his wife and daughter. The film clearly positions this as a space where Mia does not belong. As Mia enters the cul-de-sac, Arnold sharply contrasts this suburban space with the noisy and chaotic housing estate. The cul-de-sac is quiet and still; traffic and people are minimal with the most prominent noise in the soundscape being birds tweeting. The only person Mia sees is a resident, who eyes her up suspiciously as she walks past.

Mia’s entrance into suburban space makes visible the ways in which the social world and its external spaces become inscribed onto bodies in classed ways.<sup>101</sup> Thinking specifically about the figure of the chav, we can see how physical space as constituted through class becomes corporeally inscribed, and informs the broader geographical mapping of bodies. Indeed, the very term “chav” is said to be an acronym for “Council Housed and Vermin”, suggesting the significance of the imbrication between the chav and this ideologically-charged space.<sup>102</sup> As Tyler argues, the housing estate is ‘inscribed upon the bodies of those who lived in these abjectified zones’ in ‘pervasive forms of territorial stigmatization, a revolting class discourse’.<sup>103</sup> Mia’s marginalisation – even exclusion – from “legitimate” national and social spatial configurations is mapped onto Mia’s body both through her material markers as a chav (tracksuit, gold jewellery, heavy make-up,

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<sup>101</sup> Pierre Bourdieu’s work has been influential here, particularly for Skeggs, who considers the ways in which white working-class women are positioned in, inscribed by and policed within metaphorical and physical social space. See Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (London: Routledge, 1984); Beverley Skeggs, *Class, Self, Culture*, (London: Routledge, 2004); Skeggs, *Formations of Class and Gender*.

<sup>102</sup> Jones, *Chav*, p. 8. The etymology of the term “chav” is unclear, but Keith Haywood and Majd Yar argue that all these etymological accounts suggest that the term chav ‘has always been connected with communities who have experienced social deprivation in one form or another’. Keith Haywood and Majid Yar, ‘The “Chav” Phenomenon: Consumption, Media and the Construction of a New Underclass’, *Crime, Media, Culture*, 2.1 (2006), 9–28 (p. 16). The figure of the chav, then, has always been connected to a geographical stratification, particularly the housing estate.

<sup>103</sup> Tyler, *Revolting Subjects*, p. 162. Mike Savage similarly argues that space and bodies collapse to construct members of the working class as “pathological”: ‘Bodies their appearance, their bearing and their adornment, are central to encoding the poor, and when those codes are joined up with images of particular kinds of living space, and especially with the term “council estate”, it... indicate[s] not only a despised “class position but also an underlying pathology”.’ Mike Savage, *Social Class in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (London: Pelican, 2015), p. 336.

tight ponytail) and through her “improper” entry into this suburban space, as the regulating gaze of the resident suggests. That Mia is unwelcome here is subtly if insidiously suggested by the next shot – a long-shot which shows Mia walking through the gap in the wall surrounding the cul-de-sac. Mia is dwarfed in the shot by the sky and the surrounding features, emphasising her remoteness in this space (Figure 33). The gap in the wall which provides the entryway has no gate on it, as if to suggest that this is an inclusive and welcome space for all. But, like the apparently meritocratic system advocated by the New Labour administration, the barrier remains; the physical and metaphorical invisible barrier continues to exclude and marginalise those at the bottom of the social ladder, as literalised by Mia’s unwelcome entry into this middle-class space.



Figure 33: A long-shot of Mia, dwarfed by the sky and surrounding architecture

The hostility Mia faces in this suburban space is literalised by Connor who refuses to let her cross the threshold into his house. After Connor drives her to the station so she can catch a train home (sending her back to her “proper” place), Mia returns and jumps over the garden fence – disobeying the spatial organisation of classed bodies via private property – before climbing into the house through an open window in the kitchen. The “interiors” of the house are markedly different to the housing estate: an enclosed and private garden, plush and modern furniture, expensive appliances and a muted, “tasteful” décor. Upon entering Connor’s living room, Mia discovers the camcorder that Connor lent

her to practice her dancing and finds a clip of a young girl singing recorded on it. As Mia watches the girl singing, she realises that this is, in fact, Connor's daughter, Keira. Watching Keira sing, the camera cuts between a close-up shot of Mia's face and a point-of-view shot of the clip on the camcorder while emphasising the sound of Mia's heavy breathing. As Mia's shock and disorientation heightens, the camera cuts between point-of-view shots of Mia discovering further evidence of Keira's existence – games, toys, children's costumes – and close-up shots of her panicked expression as she spins around looking at these objects. The camera is handheld, loose and probing, producing and representing Mia's disgusted emotional response.

For Sara Ahmed, feeling disgusted is not simply an inner state; it works on and transforms the surface of the body.<sup>104</sup> As an extension and reproduction of an embodied response, the camera transforms Mia's inner state of shock and repulsion into an affected physical expression. If, as Ahmed argues, disgust is an action or, more accurately, a reaction, to the contact we have with objects, informing and shaping our orientation towards and away from these objects, then disgust is a bodily movement crucially located in temporality and spatiality; our reaction is in constant flux as we move towards and away from the object of disgust.<sup>105</sup> Once Mia has fully realised Connor's secret, she tosses the camera away from her in horror and repulsion. However, Mia is not only the subject brought into contact with the disgusting object; she is also labelled the disgusting object itself. The chav, Tyler argues, is constituted through a disgust consensus which constantly "shores up" the borders of the white heteronormative family. Embodying 'historically familiar and contemporary anxieties about sexuality, reproduction and fertility and "racial mixing"', the figure of the chav becomes mobilised in ways that attribute superior forms of social capital to the subject positions and social groups they are implicitly or explicitly differentiated from.<sup>106</sup> Mia's intrusion into Connor's house compromises the "safe space" of heteronormativity and domesticity by breaking into the most charged signification of this set-up (although Connor has hardly been keeping it sanctified...). In culmination of this doubled disgust response, Mia urinates on the carpet; her position as both the disgusted and the "disgusting" collapses. As the camera visually focuses on Mia urinating on the floor, out-of-frame, the sound of Keira singing is still audible. The camera then cuts to a

<sup>104</sup> Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), p. 85.

<sup>105</sup> Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, p. 85.

<sup>106</sup> Tyler, 'Chav Mum, Chav Scum', p. 18. Ringrose and Walkerdine also read the working-class woman through a disgust consensus, arguing that she is a socially abject figure who must be regulated within postfeminist and neoliberal contexts. See Ringrose and Walkerdine, 'Regulating the Abject'.

shot of Connor's camcorder, lying on its side from being tossed away by Mia, where we hear both Keira's mother encouraging her to "smile for daddy" and Mia's heavy breathing and the sound of her urinating. Arnold's use of framing, editing and diegetic sound links the two girls together. As I have mentioned previously, the relationship between Mia and Connor is constructed as both parental and sexual. Here, however, Arnold's linking of the two girls sets them up as contrasting daughter figures: Keira as cute, angelic and legitimate; Mia as "aggressive" and illegitimate.<sup>107</sup> Mia's urination might be read as the ultimate "childish" act. However, it is also a symbol of her anger at Connor's deceptions, and a complaint about her being designated as disgusting. Such a visceral reaction to her unwelcome position in this domestic suburban space, Arnold suggests the serious ways in which classed bodies are policed, with both their physical and social mobilities severely curtailed.

## Edgelands

My discussion of the housing estate, countryside and suburbia may imply that the spaces of *Fish Tank* are distinct and bounded. On the contrary, Arnold emphasises that these spaces are part of a broader blurring between the urban and the rural. In fact, this is what attracted Arnold to the Mardyke Estate: 'I drove out from east London [to Essex] along the A13 and loved it straight away. The madness of the A13, the steaming factories and the open spaces, the wilderness, the empty car parks where Ford used to be.'<sup>108</sup> Arnold emphasises the unique urban-rural locality when shooting the housing estate (Figures 34-35), and sets many key scenes outside the estate within these spaces: A-roads, flyovers, Traveller's camps, retail parks, car scrapyards, scrublands. Marion Shoard coined the term "edgelands" to describe these urban-rural interfaces:

Britain's towns and cities do not usually sit cheek by jowl with its countryside, as we often casually assume. Between urban and rural stands a kind of landscape quite different from either.... It is characterised by rubbish tips and warehouses,

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<sup>107</sup> Keira is presented as shy and reticent in the video as she needs encouragement to sing. She wears "girly" clothes including a white dress and pink bag. It is not clear whether Connor is married to Keira's mother, and the fact that Connor began a new relationship with Mia's mother does not position their relationship in an ideal, monogamous, heteronormative partnership. However, unlike Mia, Keira is always framed within the context of having two loving parents and so, arguably, is a "legitimate" child.

<sup>108</sup> Artifical Eye, 'Fish Tank Press Book' (2009), p. 10.

superstores and derelict industrial plants, office parks and gypsy encampments, golf courses, allotments and fragmented, frequently scruffy farmland.<sup>109</sup>

These edgelands are heterogeneous, chaotic and unkempt. They are considered meaningless contours – ugly, undesirable and mundane – and fail to be formally acknowledged, whether geographically, socially or economically. Yet, Shoard argues, they offer immense value: as business parks and industrial premises where the town centres are too small to accommodate them; as spaces for that which has been expelled from “polite” environments such as Gypsy and Traveller camps, rubbish tips and telecommunication masts; as havens for wildlife which has been pushed out of agricultural land; and as subversive and lawless spaces for creative play.<sup>110</sup> Shoard offers a provocative call-to-arms, asking us to appreciate and value edgelands as spaces of functionality, interest, beauty and possibility.



Figure 34: The housing estate framed in rural imagery

<sup>109</sup> Marion Shoard, ‘Edgelands’, *Remaking Landscapes: The Changing Face of Britain*, ed. by Jennifer Jenkins (London: Profile Books, 2002), pp. 117-146 (p. 117). See also Paul Farley and Michael Symmons Roberts, *Edgelands: Journeys into England’s True Wilderness* (London: Vintage, 2012).

<sup>110</sup> Shoard, pp. 123-130.



Figure 35: The housing estate framed in urban imagery

As if in answer, Arnold presents these spaces as ones of potential escape and liberation for Mia, but also of limitation and stasis. Mia is shown frequently roaming round edgeland spaces, away from the hostilities of the housing estate and other urban areas. After Mia walks out of the estate following an angry altercation with some of the girls, she comes across a Traveller's camp sitting close to a flyover – an edgeland space she frequents several times in the film. When she meets these girls again in the internet shop and when she has her uncomfortable audition in the nightclub, she roams around an industrial park and the Traveller's camp respectively; her mobility in these edgeland spaces offers her some solace from these unwelcome urban areas. With little indication of where she is going, we might identify Mia as a *flâneuse* here (although her aimless walk suggests her impoverishment rather than the traditional bourgeois status of the *flâneur*, since she cannot afford public transport or more structured leisure activities). Indeed, that Mia cannot be a *flâneuse* on the estate is suggested both by Hanley's account of living on estates, and by the altercation on the estate, with Mia stopping to watch the girls dance resulting in her breaking one of their noses.<sup>111</sup> When Mia walks past the Traveller's camp, the framing of the shot emphasises the wire fencing behind her. The fencing functions both

<sup>111</sup> Hanley observes that 'you can't drift easily around many council estates – particularly the mass-produced blocks of the early 1960s, which rely on walkways and subways that direct pedestrians from home to shop and back as a funnel directs liquid into a bottle. They are too channelled, too labyrinthine, to make wandering an enjoyable experience. There's the risk of looking like an intruder, an outsider or, more likely, a wall. You can't be a *flâneur* of the estate, though you are welcome to try'. Hanley, p. 125.

to keep Mia out, as it does to symbolise Mia's isolation and confinement. The latter is further emphasised when Mia notices the tethered horse, with Arnold framing this through an over-the-shoulder shot of Mia looking at the horse through the fencing, suggesting and affirming Mia and the horse's affinity through their comparable physical shackles.

The edgeland spaces of the film are also, as Hanson argues, liminal spaces replete with images of movement and stasis.<sup>112</sup> The Traveller's camp, sitting on a semi-rural patch of wasteland beneath a motorway flyover suggests 'movement embodied in the ceaseless stream of traffic that passes across the frame, [and] stasis not only in the restricted movements of the horse but also in the presence of the caravan caught in a state of inertia'.<sup>113</sup> The fence surrounding the Traveller's camp, then, not only functions as a physical barrier in which to keep Mia out, but also as a complex, perhaps paradoxical, boundary around this mobile/static zone. When Mia lets herself in (trespasses?) through the gate to free the horse for a second time, one of the Travellers confronts her claiming "this is private property", referring to the land and/or the horse. Privately owned land and the fencing surrounding it seems at odds with the nomadic ethos of a Traveller. However, Tyler details how the 1857 Enclosure Act cemented into law the ban on Gypsies and Travellers camping on the remaining common land. Followed by numerous immobilising laws and policies, as a result, 'the nomadic, anti-proletarian, autonomous culture of Britain's Gypsies and Travellers has become increasingly precarious'.<sup>114</sup> Although Gypsies and Travellers have since begun to purchase their own land to settle on (and the majority of caravans are pitched on "authorised" council and private sites), 90 per cent of planning applications to live on land in caravans and mobile homes are turned down by local and parish councils, often under pressure, Tyler argues, from 'aggressively xenophobic campaigning by settled communities'.<sup>115</sup> Whether the Travellers in *Fish Tank* have purchased this land or not, this space remains precariously occupied by the Travellers and

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<sup>112</sup> Hanson, 'Edgelands Aesthetics', p. 11.

<sup>113</sup> Hanson, 'Edgelands Aesthetics', p. 11.

<sup>114</sup> Tyler, *Revolting Subjects*, p. 132.

<sup>115</sup> Tyler, *Revolting Subjects*, p. 132. John Grayson points out that, despite the contemporary political rhetoric around the "problem" of Gypsies and Travellers, this "problem" is remarkably modest: 'We have to remember that Gypsy and Traveller families with a travelling way of life have probably just 3,729 caravans on "unauthorized" sites in the whole of England, with a further 13,708 caravans on council and private sites. And [from the Equality and Human Rights Commission report 'Gypsies and Travellers: Simple Solutions for Living Together' in 2009] "It is estimated that the entire Gypsy and Traveller population could be legally accommodated if as little as one square mile of land were allocated for sites in England.'" John Grayson, 'Playing the Gypsy "Race Card"', *Institute For Race Relations*, 4 June 2010 <<http://www.irr.org.uk/news/playing-the-gypsy-race-card/>> [accessed 26 June 2018].

gestures to the ways in which “mobility” does not always mean autonomy and liberation.<sup>116</sup>

The ambiguity between movement and stasis is further emphasised in the juxtaposition between the rural (the horse) and modernity (the automobile), and evocations of freedom and limitation. The flyover, after all, is at the edge of the frame, suggesting it is just out of reach. In other images of edgeland spaces in the film, Arnold evokes the dual antagonism of mobility and stasis to suggest the fraught possibility of escape. As well as the Traveller’s camp, the car park, the A-road and the scrapyard are key spaces where Mia’s relationship with Billy develops, a relationship that will eventually provide her with the means to literally escape the housing estate in Essex. These spaces, full of images of automobiles, may provide a foreshadowing of this escape. At times, this seems positive. Mia and Billy playfully chase each other around the car park of an industrial park – one of the only times Mia displays pure joy in the film – representing this edgeland space as a place of play, imagination and excitement.<sup>117</sup> However, the pleasure is partly undercut as this moment also functions narratively to introduce Connor to Billy (Mia and Billy go to the industrial park where the car park is in order to borrow money from Connor), which then initiates jealousy in Connor (during sex, Connor asks Mia: “Bet it doesn’t’ feel like this with that boy of yours does it?... Is his cock this big?”). Likewise, when Mia and Billy go to the car scrapyard, themes of escape and mobility are evoked through the cars travelling along the road in the background and Billy finding the right piece for his car that will eventually provide the actual “escape” for Mia later in the film. But the scene also suggests Mia’s unease both explicitly when she tells Billy “I don’t like this”, and implicitly when she sees a violent crack in one of the car’s windscreen, a crack that uncannily mirrors the bullet hole in the horse’s trailer revealed later in the film after she was put down (Figures 36-37).

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<sup>116</sup> Tyler demonstrates what is at stake in the occupation of edgeland spaces by Gypsies and Traveller’s with the example of the notorious Dale Farm eviction in 2011. Basildon Borough Council contended that half of the Travellers had contravened planning laws by establishing caravans, chalets and mobile-home dwellings on land designated as a green belt but which, for many decades, had actually been a scrapyard. The farm lies near the ‘A127 Enterprise Corridor’ in Essex (less than 20 miles from where *Fish Tank* was set), which Shoard identifies as a key example of an edgeland in her treatise of the subject. Shoard, p. 119. Within the context of state racism and social abjection, the Traveller’s “right” to this land is minimal; the occupation and subsequent eviction of Traveller’s on the site occurred precisely *because* they live on an ambiguously designated border zone to which they have little entitlement. Tyler, *Revolting Subjects*, p. 127.

<sup>117</sup> Shoard, p. 130.

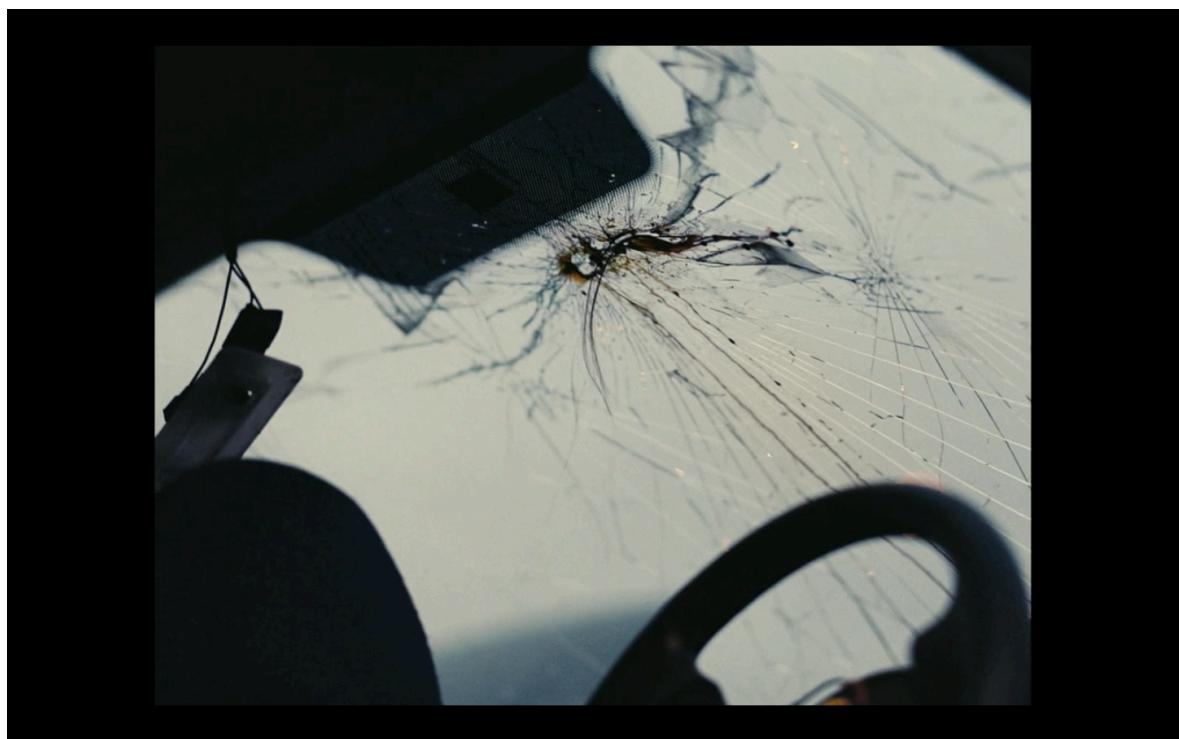


Figure 36: A close-up shot of a crack in a windscreens



Figure 37: A mid-shot of the bullet hole in the Traveller's horse trailer

The conflicting representation of edgeland spaces as, on the one hand, evoking possibility, transformation and escape, and, on the other hand, limitation, unease and stasis is crystallised in the final scene when Mia eventually leaves the housing estate in Essex.

Given the propensity of themes of escape and mobility in *Fish Tank*, Mia's final literal escape from the housing estate could be read as hopeful – even joyous. Indeed, before Mia leaves, the film offers her a small resolution with her mum as they dance in the living room, with their mirrored moves offering a suggestion of connection.<sup>118</sup> However, the film suggests Mia's leaving is more ambivalent than this. After driving off, Mia looks at Tyler waving behind the car before turning around to face forward. The camera, positioned behind Mia, can no longer see her face or the road in front of her; the journey and her emotional response to it is unknown. As Cuming argues, this is a resolution found in literal mobility rather than social mobility: 'Seizing hold of the "mobility" part of the upward mobility story, without any sense that she is on the ascent, Mia's rejection of the spatial parameters of the estate is the only defiance she has left to offer.'<sup>119</sup> After all, Mia leaves for Cardiff, which has the third highest concentration of deprivation in Wales, and with Wales having the highest rate of poverty in the UK.<sup>120</sup> Furthermore, as Tyler argues, the conditions for a liveable life involve being able to lay down roots, to feel safe, to create a family and home, to belong to a community and to have a sense of a better future: 'What many disenfranchised people seek is not *flight* but *anchorage*'.<sup>121</sup> Indeed, that Arnold is critical in the notion of upward social mobility is suggested by the film's final image, which returns to the estate. Through a high-angle shot, the camera pans over the estate, focusing on a heart-shaped balloon as it floats into the sky (Figure 38). We appear to be taking on an anonymous and omniscient gaze, with our familiar subjective view via Mia having left moments before. However, this is not the omniscient shots of British social realism, where the middle-class filmmaker (and middle-class audience) turn the images of working-class spaces into a surface image to be gazed at in fascination.<sup>122</sup> Rather, this is a

<sup>118</sup> Ince reads this scene as offering 'a revelatory glimpse of embodied, existential female subjectivity that profoundly suggests its non-individual structure. The Williams family is broken beyond repair, but the synchronized embodied movement of Joanne and her daughters expresses a resistant, enduring ethical bond between women in which no man is involved.' Ince, p. 54.

<sup>119</sup> Cuming, p. 338.

<sup>120</sup> 'Deprivation in Cardiff: An Overview', *Cardiff Partnership* <<https://www.cardiffpartnership.co.uk/well-being-assessment/cardiff-today/deprivation-cardiff-overview/>> [accessed 5 July 2018]; Helen Barnard, 'Poverty in Wales 2018', *Joseph Rowntree Foundation* <<https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/poverty-wales-2018>> [accessed 5 July 2018].

<sup>121</sup> Tyler, *Revolting Subjects*, p. 12. Tyler concedes that the desire for anchorage is a form of Berlant's "cruel optimism". In other words, these are forms of attachment that feed, fuel and sustain people in the face of precarious and daily survival. However, Tyler argues that, no matter how cruel the optimism, 'we nevertheless continue to seek the protections of citizenship and government with regard to access to secure housing, medical care, welfare support and education, even while those very forms of shelter are being incrementally eroded and withdrawn both through processes of neoliberal stratification and individualistic demands of neoliberal subjectivity.' Tyler, *Revolting Subjects*, p. 12.

<sup>122</sup> Andrew Higson argues that the unmarked, omniscient shot of "Our Town from That Hill" is a classic shot in British social realist films that stresses a scope of vision and (near) perfect vantage point of the spectator

shot *from the inside* where the specificity and beauty of the community and everyday life of the housing estate is foregrounded and celebrated. As hopeful and defiant as Mia's leaving might be, this "escape", when situated in the current political, social and economic climate, must be tempered; Mia may not be as mobile we hope – and we may well question what kinds of "mobility" we invested in in the first place.<sup>123</sup>



Figure 38: A panning shot from inside the estate as a balloon floats by

## Conclusion

Mia occupies complex and often conflicting spatial configurations. *Fish Tank* presents Mia in several different locales of the Essex environment – the rural, the urban, the suburban and the edgelands. These mediate her subjectivity as a working-class girl in contemporary Britain in complex ways; for just as they offer her spaces of subjective expression in the contemporary postfeminist and neoliberal landscape, so too do they exclude or marginalise her. Particularly through the various modes of mobility do we see this complexity. The

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and camera. In doing so, the shot both (re)asserts a difference between the working-class protagonists and the (often) middle-class filmmakers and audiences, while also disavowing it by turning the shot 'into a surface, a representation, an image which does not need to be penetrated, but which can be gazed at in fascination precisely as image.' Andrew Higson, 'Space, Place and Spectacle: Landscape and Townscape in the "Kitchen Sink" Film, *Dissolving Views: Rethinking British Cinema*, ed. by Andrew Higson (London: Cassell, 1996), pp. 133-156 (p. 156).

<sup>123</sup> Given that I have proven to be a stickler for the age of consent throughout this chapter, it is worth pointing out that Billy is 19. Although there is no physical suggestion of a romantic relationship in the film, it is worth bearing this in mind with reference to the "hopefulness" of the escape.

housing estate offers Mia an important space of her “own” to practice her dancing and to express her identity as a young woman. Yet, the housing estate also leaves Mia precarious and vulnerable, particularly to sexual abuse. Reading the contemporaneous political climate into the very architecture of the housing estate (austerity, neoliberalism and gentrification), the ways in which housing is intensely politicised via class, race and gender only becomes more apparent – and more urgent to re-examine, as the Grenfell Tower fire tragically proved. Other spaces in the film, such as rural and edgeland spaces, also offer Mia simultaneous conflicting configurations. Rural space presents an almost transcendent pleasure for Mia, but one which is limited, fleeting and troubled by the role of Connor. Likewise, edgeland spaces also offer Mia spaces of transgression, play and possibility, even as they are precarious and uneasy border zones for her and the other marginalised people. Indeed, the only space where she is firmly unwelcome is the suburban space as she is rejected from both familial and social configurations of the “proper” subject. Arnold’s intense focus on Mia’s mobility, both physical and social, demonstrates a sustained rendering of a working-class girls’ subjectivity, even if the spaces in which she moves as much limit her as offer her possibilities.



## Conclusion: To Infinity

This thesis analysed the representation of female subjectivity with an attention to space in four key contemporary women-authored British films. Drawing on feminist film theory, this thesis demonstrated that conceptualising and critically analysing representations of female subjectivity in cinema is an issue that has yet to be resolved. Moreover, tracing the development of female subjectivity in key works by feminist film theorists, this thesis identified feminist film theory's investment in spatiality as a key figuration of cinematic subjectivity. This aspect of feminist film theory has been critically overlooked and has been drawn together for the first time here. Beginning with psychoanalytic feminist film theory, this thesis demonstrated how this methodology proposes an "impossible" female subject because she has no access to phallocentric spatial frameworks. Beginning with Laura Mulvey's canonical essay, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', I revealed the spatial aspects of Mulvey's theory: namely that, in the psychoanalytic visual apparatus of cinema, man is confirmed as subject through his command of landscape and narrative. The image of woman, on the other hand, freezes the storyline and becomes something to be looked at; she commands neither space nor time. From this, I suggested, firstly, that this psychoanalytic visual cinematic apparatus shuts women out of the process of subject formation. Secondly, if, within this apparatus, the male subject commands space, women's opposing spatialized role becomes apparent; women collapse into the traditional discursive dichotomy of space, while men become aligned with time.

Following on from this, I traced developments of this psychoanalytic spatialized theory in work by Teresa de Lauretis, Mary Ann Doane, and Sue Thornham. I detailed how, for de Lauretis, narrative logic is bound up with Oedipal desire; the constitution of the male subject is bound up with his journey where he leaves home (and the womb/mother/woman) to actively move through, cross and transgress the spaces that transform him into a hero/man and then return him to the home/woman. For Thornham, then, narrative functions to produce the subject as male; we must rethink the spatial construction of cinema if we are to rethink gendered subjectivity in cinema. As I argued, the difficulty – and urgency – of doing this is confirmed through the work of Doane. Doane draws on the trope of the house to extrapolate the difficulty, even impossibility of imagining female subjectivity in cinema. For Doane, this is exemplified by the house in the 1940s paranoid woman's film, where the house becomes a site of terror and violence

which turns against the woman herself, reflecting and constructing the frustration of cinema's spectacular psychoanalytic framework. Contextualised with other theories of gender and space, particularly within the fields of geography and philosophy by scholars such as Luce Irigaray, Elizabeth Grosz and Gillian Rose, I demonstrated the extent to which psychoanalysis does not offer space from which the female subject can be constructed.

From my survey of feminist film theory and other theories of gender and space, I summarised five key problems. First, women's subjectivity is figured as difficult (even impossible) because she cannot occupy cinematic space within the totalising nature of the gaze. Second, within this construction she provides space for man and is reduced to an essentialist notion of her body. Third, she is abstracted as an ahistorical, universalised gendered subject who cannot be read through other categories of difference such as class, race or sexuality, or be contextualised within a social, cultural, historical or national framework. Fourth, she cannot move through space with a sense of temporality. Fifth, she has no sense of interiority or desire. To counter these problems, I turned to more recent feminist theory that suggest female subjectivity as spatially conceivable.

I drew on phenomenologists such as Vivian Sobchack, Kate Ince and Katharina Lindner, and theories of haptic cinema by critics such as Giuliana Bruno, Laura U. Marks and Jennifer M. Baker to account for a gendered body which is active, productive and mobile. This work enabled me to propose a spatial configuration where women are no longer reduced to an essentialist notion of her body as a provider and space for man; the female subject can "occupy" her own body. Moreover, no longer figured as providing space for the heterosexual male Oedipal narrative, the woman can be figure as mobile as she moves through space. She can also do so as a means and expression of her own interiority and desires. I combined this with Bruno and Lucy Bolton's theories of women's interiority and affectivity in cinema. This enabled me to account for women's emotional and affective life, dislodging us/them from Mulvey's frozen place of erotic contemplation, and enabling us to render legible women's desires and interiority. Finally, in order to counter women as ahistorical and universalised subjects, I drew on the work of Rosi Braidotti and Adrienne Rich to suggest space as a way to positon female subjects within a specific spatial and temporal context.

Accounting for the female subject as spatially "possible" is crucial because, as this thesis argues, women's filmmaking is a place which *does* represent women's subjectivity. Indeed, this thesis makes a critical intervention by demonstrating British women's

filmmaking as a key place where female subjectivity is represented and constructed through formulations of space. Since 2000, several key works have emerged made by women filmmakers in Britain that make significant interventions into representations of women on screen with an attention to space and place. Four of these films, in particular, deploy a specific spatialized aspect of female subjectivity and so are analysed here: the search for the literal and representative place for the marginalised subject in Amma Asante's *Belle*; the construction of an embodied representation of pregnant subjectivity, particularly as it is embedded in urban space, in Alice Lowe's *Prevenge*; the foregrounding of a mother's interiority through her emotional ambivalence around motherhood and her reflection on the loss of her distinct subject position in Lynne Ramsay's *We Need to Talk about Kevin*; and the examination of a working-class girl's bodily and social mobility in Andrea Arnold's *Fish Tank*. Through a detailed analysis of the film's protagonist in and through space, I demonstrate the different ways in which British women filmmakers represent female subjectivity.

In chapter one, 'The Marginalised Subject: Spaces of Genre in *Belle* (Amma Asante, 2014)', I considered how, in *Belle*, Asante attempts to find a literal and representative "place" for the marginalised subject: the woman of colour in British heritage and history. Focusing on certain spaces in the film (most notably the country house, but also the carriage and the courtroom), the film sheds light on the whiteness of the heritage genre, and the difficulties when attempting to centre a mixed-race woman within these generic-spatial parameters. Reading Dido and Asante's search for a "place" through issues pertaining to analogous middle-class white women – romance, marriage, inheritance – I considered how the film refracts these issues through the further intersection of race. Specifically, the country house is deployed both as a representative space of Dido's desires and interiority, but also a space where Asante can mount an intersectional feminist critique against Dido's marginalisation within specific and broad social, political, cultural, historical and national contexts. Bound up with Dido's legal search for subjecthood, the film foregrounds the search for and realisation of a woman of colour's subjectivity in a fraught generic and national context.

In chapter 2, 'The Embodied Subject: Spaces of Pregnancy in *Prevenge* (Alice Lowe, 2016)', I considered the embodied subjectivity of the pregnant woman in Lowe's *Prevenge*. Arguing that both philosopher and cinematic conceptualisations of pregnant women's subjectivity is fraught, I argue that *Prevenge* offers an alternative image of pregnant subjectivity. Rather than figuring pregnant women as space, or as a provider of

space for something else, Lowe foregrounds the experiences of pregnancy for the pregnant woman. Locating the pregnant woman in urban space, Lowe constructs the city as a strange and alienating space for Ruth. Moreover, Lowe deploys the urban figures of the serial killer and the *flâneuse* to represent these experiences further. This both presents a complex image of pregnant embodiment, one which is performative, “de-naturalised” and transgressive, and presents an intense insight into Ruth’s interior emotional life. Further heightened by Lowe’s actual pregnancy when writing and shooting the film, *Prevenge* offers a significant intervention into the conceptualisation and representation of pregnant embodiment in cinema.

In chapter 3, ‘The Affective Subject: Spaces of Interiority in *We Need to Talk about Kevin* (Lynne Ramsay, 2011)’, I considered how Ramsay presents the subjectivity of a mother in *Kevin* through an attention to affectivity and interiority. I examined both the formal aesthetic construction of cinematic space through Ramsay’s expressionistic *mise-en-scène*, framing, set design, cinematography and editing, and the ideological meaning imbued in the diegetic spaces of the film, such as the suburban home, the professional work place and travel spaces. I argued that Ramsay uses these to make legible Eva’s response to motherhood as one of ambivalence. Reading this through postfeminist and neoliberal mothering culture, where happiness is the dominant affective interpellation, this offers an alternative affective representation of motherhood. Using space to foreground Eva’s interiority, I argue that Ramsay enables both a reflection on the mother’s “receding” subject position in the contemporary moment and, paradoxically, a representative rendering of a mother’s subjectivity.

In my final chapter, ‘The Mobile Subject: Spaces of Exteriorty in *Fish Tank* (Andrea Arnold, 2009)’, I examined the mobile subject of Mia in Arnold’s *Fish Tank*. As both a working-class girl and “chav” in early twenty-first-century Britain, Mia is considered a “failed” and “revolting” subject; the spaces of the film such as the housing estate and the Essex landscape are considered “grim”, “dangerous” and “depressing”. However, I argue that Arnold presents a nuanced representation of Mia’s bodily and social mobility. Examining the way in which Mia moves through these spaces makes apparent the ways in which they offer modes of subjective expression, such as her girlish bedroom and her dancing in the estate, the sensuous and tactile experiences of the countryside, and the playful, transgressive and liberating possibilities of the edgelands. However, these spaces are also dangerous and hostile for the working-class girl; she is unwelcome in middle-class suburban spaces, and is made vulnerable by the failures of meritocratic

Britain. Offering a keen insight into the working-class girl's mobility (or lack thereof), Arnold categorically refutes Mia as a "failed" subject, instead foregrounding a representation of her subjectivity.

In each of my chapters, I demonstrated how the film exemplifies a specific spatialized mode of subjective representation. However, these films represent female subjectivity across and through these spatialized modes. Although *Kevin* most explicitly renders the affective subject, both *Belle* and *Prevenge* are also concerned with women's interiority, with Asante using the country house to focalise Dido's longing for romance, marriage and citizenship, and with Lowe using the figure of the *flâneuse* to represent Ruth's complex emotional response to pregnancy. Similarly, although *Belle* has most at stake in terms of searching for a women's "place", *Kevin* and *Fish Tank* also demonstrate a concern with this, as Eva is unwelcome and feels uneasy in conventional spaces of white, middle-class motherhood, and Mia's mobility is imbued with themes of liberation, escape and freedom – a search for a "better" place, even if the possibility of this is ambivalently rendered. Finally, while *Fish Tank* is centrally concerned with the mobility of the female subject, all of my films take up mobility as a means of subjective expression and as a means of possible escape from their current predicaments: Dido's rebellious transgressions in the country house, carriage and courtroom in order to gain legal subjecthood; Ruth's urban movements, which undermine the "passivity" of the pregnant body; and Eva's travels, which as much tie her to an exoticised and capitalist definition of self as undermine it. My chapters demonstrate some of the various uses of space and different subjectivities that come forward in British women's filmmaking.

My thesis limited its examination to these four filmic case studies in order to show in detail the specific ways in which these four aspects of spatialized subjectivity – marginality, embodiment, interiority and mobility – are conceptualised and represented by women filmmakers. However, these films can be situated within a burgeoning body of work by British women filmmakers which explore women's subjectivities within an attention to other spaces and places. My argument opens up more films for critical consideration. Gurinder Chadha's *Bhaji on the Beach* (1993) and Carol Morley's *The Falling* (2014), for example, both display an interest in collective female subjectivities in specific British spaces: the seaside in *Bhaji on the Beach* and the boarding school in *The Falling*. My project focused on individual protagonists, but these two films suggest the ways space can mediate the representation of multiple women's identities. Rachel Tunnard's *Adult Life Skills* (2016) re-appropriates the masculinised space of the shed for

the purposes of female creativity and self-expression. Clio Barnard's *Dark River* (2017) and Hope Dickinson Leach's *The Levelling* (2016) use farm space to explore women's difficult and dark family histories, and the grief and violence these women experience as a result of this. Joanna Hogg's *Exhibition* (2013) explicitly draws on the intimate physical and emotional connection between women and the domestic, and the shared history of women and houses as spectacles.<sup>1</sup> Shooting the film through static mid-shots to create tableaux, Hogg highlights the frame as an artificial construction; rather than enabling the spectator to have a fluid orientation in space as suggested by classical narrative film's mobile cameras and "seamless" editing, Hogg makes apparent the filmmaker's delineation between off- and on-screen space.<sup>2</sup> Hogg's filmmaking offers alternative points of departure for my exploration of women's subjectivities and space through her explicitly heightened construction of cinematic space for the spectator. These films gesture to the diverse avenues of further analysis when considering the ways British women filmmakers use space to represent female subjectivities.

For the sake of coherence, in this thesis I have not examined the female spectator in my examination of cinematic subjectivity. For Bruno, early cinema was crucial for women's self-exploration:

As a participant in the culture of travel, film increased the possibility for the female subject to map herself into the epistemology and erotics of mobility. Providing a greater assortment of women – more than just the ladies of "independent means and no domestic ties" with access to the leisure activity of a wandering gaze, cinema extended the possibility of (self-) exploration across class and ethnic boundaries. Facilitating the female subject's journey through the geography of modernity, it expanded the horizons of female pleasures, opening doors of power and knowledge.<sup>3</sup>

Cinema is important to women's lived experiences; the spaces of cinema – both the ones in front of and behind the screen – are critical to the ways in which women's subjectivities are "mapped", and the ways in which power and knowledge can be expanded. Although I

<sup>1</sup> See Rhodes, *Spectacle of Property*, p. 12.

<sup>2</sup> For a further discussion of this, see Ágnes Pethő, 'Between Absorption, Abstraction and Exhibition: Inflections of the Cinematic Tableau in the Films of Cornelius Porumboiu, Roy Andersson and Joanna Hogg', *Film and Media Studies*, 11 (2015), 39-76.

<sup>3</sup> Bruno, *Atlas of Emotion*, p. 82.

have not examined the role of the spectator in great depth in this thesis, I nevertheless remain mindful of my own position as a watcher and consumer of cinema and the effect of representation on my own sense of self. I explicitly advocate for the importance of representation – not only the kind of subjects that are being represented but the ways in which these subjectivities are constructed in this representation – to the aims of feminist cinema, and to the material and symbolic experiences of women’s lives.

As I opened with Carol Morley, I will also close with her. I began this thesis in the confines of Joyce Vincent’s bedsit in *Dreams of a Life*, with a discussion of the investigative female author who attempts to refigure the dead, lost and forgotten female subject. I end in the vast, infinite, intergalactic space of Morley’s latest film, *Out of Blue* (2018). Once again, the investigative female gaze is centralised, this time narrativised in the role of Detective Mike Hoolihan (Patricia Clarkson), who also attempts to uncover the cause of a woman’s death – Jennifer Rockwell (Mamie Gummer), an astrophysicist. The role of the investigator also extends to the film’s author – Morley herself – as the film completes her “dead women trilogy”: *Dreams of a Life*, *The Falling* and *Out of Blue*, three films that investigate the mysterious death of a woman.<sup>4</sup> *Out of Blue* confirms Morley as an active explorer of women’s stories, especially those that are missing, mysterious or marginalised; she further strengthens my argument that a growing number of women filmmakers in Britain are concerned with representing women’s subjectivities on screen.

Moreover, Morley investigates the female subject through an attention to space and place. In *Out of Blue*, rather than emphasising the vast, expansive landscapes of the film’s American setting, Morley was interested in closeness, ‘by this idea of everyone in their cars, and the sense that the audience would be in this space with Mike’s character’.<sup>5</sup> The specific location of New Orleans draws on the city’s traumatic history, which is reflected in Mike’s fragile state of mind to the extent that ‘Mike was the city’.<sup>6</sup> The film offers another example of a British female author challenging certain masculinised spaces (in this case the city), and using space to reflect the interiority of a female subject. However, the film also explores another space not journeyed through in this thesis – outer space – opening up new possibilities for women’s spatial exploration in cinema. As Morley

<sup>4</sup> *Out of Blue* is based on Martin Amis’ novel, *Night Train*, but the film radically departs from the source material in terms of characters, setting, dialogue and tone. Morley’s (female) authorship is all the more significant. See Carol Morley, interviewed by Danny Leigh, *Financial Times*, 15 March 2019

<<https://www.ft.com/content/32008e0a-4406-11e9-b83b-0c525dad548f>> [accessed 16 September 2019].

<sup>5</sup> Carol Morley, interviewed by Nikki Baughan, *British Film Institute* <<https://www.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/news-bfi/interviews/carol-morley-out-blue>> [accessed 16 September 2019].

<sup>6</sup> Morley, interviewed by Baughan.

explains, drawing on outer space enables an investigation into the detective as well as the victim: 'What fascinated me was that [Mike] had to look outside herself at the universe and learn about it but also learn to look inwards... She takes us into a journey of the self at the same time as getting to know the universe through the investigation of a scientist's death.'<sup>7</sup> *Out of Blue* presents glimpses of the cosmos through strange shimmering swirls of blue and red celestial bodies. An enigmatic, pulsating soundtrack overlays the images. Using red and blue lighting and a similarly mysterious soundscape in scenes back on Earth, Morley visually and aurally parallels these spaces, drawing links between our partial knowledge of the universe and the limited understandings of the female subjects offered up by the film. Through her use of outer space, Morley extends the gendered spatial parameters available to women representing female subjects on film. After all, astronomical space has primarily been available to men, both literally as another unknown territory to be penetrated and colonised, and symbolically as a cosmological conundrum through which male philosophers, astronomers and scientists have questioned our/their place in the universe and our/their selves. *Out of Blue*, by contrast, opens up the possibilities of taking up this vast, enigmatic space for female cinematic self-exploration: exponential, unending, infinite.

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<sup>7</sup> Carol Morley, interviewed by Nick James, *Sight and Sound*, April 2018, 41-42 (pp. 41-42).

## Filmography

*Adult Life Skills*, dir. by Rachel Tunnard (Lorton Distribution, 2016)

*Alien*, dir. by Ridley Scott (Twentieth Century Fox, 1979)

*Aliens*, dir. by James Cameron (Twentieth Century Fox, 1986)

*American Honey*, dir. by Andrea Arnold (Focus Features, 2016)

*Another Country*, dir. by Marek Kanievska (Virgin Films/Film4, 1984)

*The Arbor*, dir. by Clio Barnard (Wavelength Pictures, 2010)

*The Astronaut's Wife*, dir. by Rand Ravich (New Line Cinema, 1999)

*Blade Runner*, dir. by Ridley Scott (Warner Bros., 1982)

*Belle*, dir. by Amma Asante (Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2014)

*Bend it Like Beckham*, dir. by Gurinder Chadha (Helkon SK, 2002)

*Bhaji on the Beach*, dir. by Gurinder Chadha (Film4, 1994)

*The Book of Gabrielle*, dir. by Lisa Gornick (Piccadillo Pictures, 2016)

*Break my Fall*, dir. by Kanchi Wichmann (Peccadillo Pictures, 2011)

*Bride and Prejudice*, dir. by Gurinder Chadha (Pathé, 2004)

*Brick Lane*, dir. by Sarah Gavron (Optimum Releasing, 2007)

*The Brood*, dir. by David Cronenberg (Alpha Films, 1980)

*Chariots of Fire*, dir. by Hugh Hudson (Twentieth Century Fox, 1981)

*Cracks*, dir. by Jordan Scott (Optimum Releasing, 2009)

*Dark River*, dir. Clio Barnard (Arrow Films, 2017)

*Daughters of the Dust*, dir. by Julie Dash (Kino, 1991)

*A Deal with the Universe*, dir. by Jason Barker (Peccadillo Pictures, 2018)

*Demon Seed*, dir. by Donald Cammell (MGM, 1977)

*Do I Love You?*, dir. by Lisa Gornick (Millivres Multimedia, 2002)

*Dreams of a Life*, dir. by Carol Morley (Dogwoof Pictures, 2011)

*Exhibition*, dir. by Joanna Hogg (Kino Lorver, 2014)

*The Falling*, dir. by Carol Morley (Metrodome Distribution, 2014)

*Fear of Water*, dir. by Kate Lane (California Pictures, 2014)

*Fish Tank*, dir. by Andrea Arnold (Artificial Eye, 2009)

*Grace*, dir. by Paul Solet (Leomax Entertainment, 2009)

*Howards End*, dir. by James Ivory (Mayfair Entertainment, 1992)

*A Handful of Dust*, dir. by Charles Sturridge (Premier Releasing, 1988)  
*It's Alive*, dir. by Larry Cohen (Warner Bros., 1974)  
*It's Alive*, dir. by Josef Rusnak (Optimum Home Entertainment, 2008)  
*I Can't Think Straight*, dir. by Shamim Sarif (Entertainment Films, 2008)  
*Lady Macbeth*, dir. William Oldroyd (Altitude Film Entertainment, 2017)  
*The Levelling*, dir. Hope Dickinson Leach (Peccadillo Pictures, 2016)  
*Mansfield Park*, dir. by Patricia Rozema (Miramax, 1999)  
*Maurice*, dir. by James Ivory (Enterprise Pictures, 1987)  
*Monster*, dir. by Patty Jenkins (Media 8 Entertainment, 2003)  
*Morvern Callar*, dir. by Lynne Ramsay (Alliance Atlantis, 2002)  
*Nina's Heavenly Delights*, dir. by Pratibha Parmar (Regent Releasing, 2006)  
*Orlando*, dir. by Sally Potter (Artificial Eye, 1993)  
*Out of Blue*, dir. by Carol Morley (IFC Films, 2018)  
*A Passage to India*, dir. by David Lean (Columbia Pictures, 1984)  
*The Piano*, dir. Jane Campion (Miramax, 1993)  
*Prevenge*, dir. by Alice Lowe (Gennaker/Western Edge Pictures, 2016)  
*Red Road*, dir. by Andrea Arnold (Verve, 2006)  
*The Remains of the Day*, dir. by James Ivory (Columbia Pictures, 1993)  
*A Room with a View*, dir. by James Ivory (Curzon, 1985)  
*Rosemary's Baby*, dir. by Roman Polanski (Paramount Pictures, 1968)  
*Seahorse*, dir. by Jeanie Finlay (2019)  
*Second Coming*, dir. by Debbie Tucker Green (Film Movement, 2015)  
*Sense and Sensibility*, dir. by Ang Lee (Columbia TriStar, 1995)  
*Sightseers*, dir. by Ben Wheatley (StudioCanal, 2012)  
*Stella Dallas*, dir. by King Vidor (United Artists, 1937)  
*Suffragette*, dir. by Sarah Gavron (Focus Features, 2015)  
*Taxi Driver*, dir. Martin Scorsese (Columbia Pictures, 1976)  
*The Unborn*, dir. by Rodman Flender (Palisades Tartan, 1991)  
*The Unborn*, dir. by David S. Goyer (Rogue Pictures, 2009)  
*A United Kingdom*, dir. by Amma Asante (20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, 2016)  
*Unrelated*, dir. by Joanna Hogg (New Wave Films, 2007)  
*Viceroy's House*, dir. by Gurinder Chadha (*Pathé*, 2017)  
*We Need to Talk About Kevin*, dir. by Lynne Ramsay (Artificial Eye, 2011)  
*Where Angels Fear to Tread*, dir. by Charles Sturridge (Fine Line Features, 1991)

*Wuthering Heights*, dir. by Andrea Arnold (Artificial Eye, 2010)



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