

***The Babadook*, maternal gothic, and the ‘woman’s horror film’**

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Like many Australian films, *The Babadook* (Jennifer Kent, 2014) initially fared far better overseas than it did at home. Arguably, this can be attributed to several factors that apply to Australian cinema as a whole: risk-averse programming that favours US productions backed by big marketing budgets, the associated tendency for Australian films to be limited to short runs in independent cinemas, along with escalating cinema ticket prices and increasing competition from television in terms of the availability of ‘quality’ drama (see Dow 2014). Certainly, as Monica Tan (2014) points out, the film’s positioning as art-house in Australia and its modest marketing campaign mitigated against its exhibition in multiplexes and more mainstream outlets, unlike the more extensive campaign that supported its relatively widespread release in the UK, for example. That said, it seems that ‘Australians still want to see Australian stories’ (Dow 2014), even if those stories must succeed internationally before being embraced locally.

Identifying the film as an ‘Australian [success] story’ is not without irony however, given the director’s emphasis on creating a non-specific sense of place. In interview, Kent states: ‘I didn’t want it to be particularly Australian. I wanted to create a myth in a domestic setting. And even though it happened to be in some strange suburb in Australia somewhere, it could have been anywhere’ (Kent quoted in Lambie 2014). As Aoife M. Dempsey (2015) argues, the idea of creating a myth in a domestic setting undermines ‘the assertion that the film is placeless, given that myths are typically deeply culturally inscribed and inherited’ (131). Considered in this light, the film, and the figure of the Babadook in particular, is clearly available to being read in terms of a racialised schema of representation. Anthony Lane (2014), for instance, notes that the Babadook’s name ‘has a nice Australian tang; Aboriginal legend tells of a frog called the Tiddalik, with an insatiable thirst’. Christopher Sharrett (2015) focuses on the Babadook’s appearance, observing that as well as looking like the hypnotist, Caligari, from *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (Robert Wiene, 1933), or Lon Chaney from Tod Browning’s *London After Midnight* (1927), the Babadook ‘also looks like a black-faced minstrel’. As such, Sharrett suggests that ‘further study of the film might explore its racial dimension, and Australian white culture’s alternating valorization/demonization of the Aboriginal culture and population’. Dempsey’s review of the film develops this line of thought, highlighting both the

striking juxtaposition of an all-white cast of Australian middle-class characters with the sinister black Babadook, as well as the Aboriginal associations of the Babadook's name. 'The word Babadook itself', she writes, 'is evocative of Aboriginal etymology, similarly constructed using a combination of elongated vowels and hard g/k sounds' (131). For Dempsey, then, the Babadook and its possession of Amelia can be read as representing 'the Aboriginal, the Australian Other, the shadowy figure that haunts the white Australian consciousness as a result of collective cultural trauma, a legacy of colonialism' (132).

Nevertheless, the fact that Kent considers the film to be first and foremost 'a myth in a domestic setting' speaks both to its inflection by culturally specific discourses around race and ethnicity, and to the ways in which its 'horror' is informed by generic paradigms that foreground the domestic context and the woman's – and particularly the mother's – place in it. For the editors of a recent dossier by *Senses of Cinema* (2016), entitled 'Beyond *The Babadook*: Australian Women's filmmaking and the Dark Fantastic', the film's international success offers a way of understanding the history of Australian women's filmmaking within the domain of the 'dark fantastic' (understood as encompassing, but not limited to, the horror genre), as a kind of enclave, simultaneously working within and against a male dominated industry and a traditionally male-oriented genre. Careful not to elide the differences between artists and filmmakers as diverse as Tracey Moffat, Anne Turner, Rosemary Myers, and Ursula Dabrowsky, nor to essentialise some notion of Australian women's filmmaking, the editors suggest that, 'The dark fantastic has afforded a number of these filmmakers with a space to think through feminist and other ideological issues in ways both creative and urgent, in a range of different ways.' In this context, the national provides a way of highlighting 'the sense of community that underscores women's filmmaking as potentially a kind of activism in and of itself'.

The Babadook's depiction of a mother and son trapped in a nightmarish domestic setting, via a reimagining of the female gothic and its relationship to the horror genre and the woman's film, both submits to and exceeds a specifically national interpretation. While Dempsey *et al.* make a convincing case for reading the film's racial politics in terms that recall the gothic scenario itself (that is, as haunted by the traumatic legacy of a colonial past on the collective psyche), the gothic as a mode or sensibility could also be said to offer a 'sense of community' that transcends a single region or historical period, insofar as it is available for reconceptualisation across a range of socio-cultural contexts, while retaining an emphasis on the telling of women's stories.

Ellen Moers (1977) coined the term ‘Female Gothic’ to refer to a kind of literary fiction written by women for women, since the late eighteenth century. Subsequent scholarship has undermined any automatic correspondence between the author’s gender and a focus on ‘female’ issues (see Smith and Wallace 2004: 2), but this category continues to be understood as preoccupied with women’s experiences within patriarchal power structures. As the editors of the recent collection *Women and the Gothic* put it:

Gothic texts still frequently convey anxiety and anger about the lot of women. [...] While these vary in expression and representation across the centuries and across cultures, they are depressingly constant and suggest that women have been and still feel disadvantaged and disempowered (Horner and Zlosnik 2016: 1).

In other words, the gothic is best understood as an extensive category that traverses temporal and geographical conditions; its elasticity offers opportunities for reflecting and/or resisting ‘women’s lot’ across a diverse range of media and socio-cultural contexts. This collection alone, for instance, considers gothic texts ranging from canonical late-eighteenth century fiction to gothic video games and recent science-fiction films. Indeed, some of the earliest films were based on gothic fiction, and gothic tropes are visible in a variety of genres, spanning science-fiction, *noir*, thrillers and comedy (see Kaye 2012). Within film studies, feminist critics have explored the often contradictory fascinations offered to female spectators in particular by a kind of film that emerged in Hollywood cinema in the 1940s, variously labeled ‘the Freudian feminist melodrama’ (Elsaesser 1972) or ‘the paranoid woman’s film’ (Doane 1987). Films such as Hitchcock’s *Rebecca* (1940) and *Suspicion* (1941), and George Cukor’s *Gaslight* (1944), enact familiar gothic scenarios whereby a young female protagonist’s marriage to an apparently ambivalent older man is played out in an unsettling domestic environment, steeped in a mood of anxiety and uncertainty. As Helen Hanson (2007) argues, ‘neo-gothic’ films such as *Jagged Edge* (Richard Marquand, 1985), *Pacific Heights* (John Schlesinger, 1990), and *What Lies Beneath* (Robert Zemeckis, 2000), rework elements of these earlier films, in dialogue with feminist and post-feminist concerns (183), and gothic themes and motifs continue to inform popular fiction, television, and cinema. As Hanson puts it, ‘[the gothic] has repeatedly found new outlets, while its dominant mood is an anxious and fraught relationship to the past’ (174).

Arguably, *The Babadook*’s international success is due in no small part to the ways in which it recalibrates gothic and horror conventions, which have become part of a common cultural

vocabulary. In the process, the film reflects on the repositioning of the mother figure in recent iterations of horror and the female gothic in film. In particular, the gothic reworking of the ‘horror’ of the protagonist’s conflicted experience of motherhood explores what Molly Haskell (1987) identifies as the great unspoken of the ‘woman’s film’, namely, women’s guilt for their ‘inadmissible feelings’ about motherhood (170). Considering the film in this light draws on Sue Thornham’s (2013) reading of *We Need To Talk About Kevin* (Lynne Ramsay, 2011) in relation to both feminist counter-cinema and maternal melodrama, as a critique of the postfeminist model of over-invested motherhood currently idealised in popular culture, as discussed below. Similarly, I argue that the ways in which *The Babadook* restages existing generic conventions challenges deeply embedded social and cinematic expectations around the maternal relationship. In this, *The Babadook* engages with contemporary currents across a range of national and generic contexts; for example, what Sarah Arnold (2013) calls ‘Bad Mother gothic ghost stories’, such as *The Others* (Alejandro Amenábar, 2001), *The Dark* (John Fawcett, 2005), *Silent Hill* (Christophe Gans, 2006), and *The Orphanage* (J.A. Bayona, 2007) (92), or what Tammy Oler (2014) calls ‘the new crop of female-driven horror films’, including Kimberly Peirce’s *Carrie* (2013), Marina de Van’s *Dark Touch* (2013), and Stewart Thorndike’s *Lyle* (2014), which revisit and/or revise the role of the mother in the gothic and horror traditions.

The film tells the story of Amelia (Essie Davis), a widow who is still grief stricken seven years after the death of her husband, and her troubled young son, Samuel (Noah Wiseman). After reading a storybook called *Mister Babadook* together, strange things start to happen in their house. Events escalate and the Babadook, the monster of the storybook, appears and begins to terrorise Amelia, who in turn becomes increasingly violent towards Samuel. Finally, Amelia is able to confront the Babadook, and a kind of peace is restored. The film invites an association between the emergence of the Babadook and Amelia’s grief at the death of her husband and rage towards her son. As such, virtually all of the critics and reviewers of the film have read the Babadook as embodying the ‘return of the repressed’ — that is, as the uncanny manifestation of Amelia’s repressed emotions.

The film’s mingling of the psychological and the supernatural complicates any easy classification. Kent considers it a ‘crossover film’ (Kent quoted in Lambie 2014) and it has been variously described as ‘a chilling Freudian thriller’ (Bradshaw 2014), ‘a maternal horror film’ (Elfassy Bitoun 2016), and an example of ‘Australian Gothic’ (Krake 2015). Trying to identify the film solely with one of these categories is not particularly productive however, as

their delineation is more often based on popular perception and/or critical bias than on any clearly defined generic boundaries. For instance, through an analysis of film reviews published during the 1930s and 1940s, Mark Jancovich (2013) argues that the psychological thrillers he calls ‘Gothic (or paranoid) woman’s films’ were clearly understood as ‘women’s horror films’ at the time of their release. If Jancovich identifies the horror in women’s films, David Greven (2011) finds the woman’s film hidden in the horror genre. With Hitchcock’s *Psycho* (1960) and the concomitant transition from the clearly identifiable monster of classical horror to a focus on ‘the family and its attendant terrors’ (88), Greven argues that many modern horror films, such as *Carrie* (Brian de Palma, 1976) and the *Alien* films (1979-97), can be read as ‘concealed women’s films’, insofar as they place ‘female desire at the center of the narrative’ (36). Arnold, for her part, more precisely identifies the key point of intersection between horror and melodrama in representations of the mother. Since *Psycho* and the focus on family horror in Western cinema, she argues, the mother has become a prominent feature of horror cinema (37). The ‘Good Mother’ is defined by ‘self-sacrifice, selflessness and nurturance (37). The ‘Bad Mother’ is ‘a multifaceted and contradictory construct’, manifesting as either a rejection of the traditional expectation of self-sacrifice and devotion to her children, or its inverse, ‘the mother’s fanatical conformity to the institution of motherhood’ (68). According to Arnold, both models of motherhood are evident throughout the horror genre and the melodrama, although the level of complicity and/or resistance to these models within individual texts is a complex field of interrogation (26).

Thus, the boundaries between the melodrama, the ‘Gothic (or paranoid) woman’s film’, and the horror film are especially permeable, more like membranes if you will, permitting certain elements to pass through while restricting others, depending on the particular permutation of the film’s articulation, production, and reception. *The Babadook* reframes the maternal melodrama’s investment in ‘the spectacle of a mother owned by her children’ (Haskell: 169) in terms of the female gothic and, in so doing, foregrounds the issue of maternal subjectivity that inheres in both categories.

Although the cycle of Hollywood films from the 1940s frequently referred to as female gothic is quite diverse, most ‘involve a woman who feels threatened or tortured by a seemingly sadistic male authority figure, who is usually her husband’ (Jancovich: 21). As discussed below, *The Babadook* retains core elements of the female gothic, such as the heroine’s relationship to a stifling domestic space, and the weight of the past on the present. Its significant revision is to replace the young female protagonist’s suspicion of her husband with a mother’s suspicion of her son. This recasts the Oedipal scenario from the mother’s point of view and

resists the idealised image of motherhood that sustains the melodrama in its maternal mode. In addition, altering the perspective from that of a childless bride to that of a mother reconfigures the maternal function within the gothic framework. No longer the ‘spectral presence’ of gothic fiction (Kahane 1985: 336) with and against whom the young protagonist (i.e. the daughter) must identify in order to individuate, the mother becomes an active agent whose subjectivity is privileged within the diegesis. Privileging the mother’s perspective in this way permits what is typically concealed in both the maternal melodrama and the female gothic — namely, ambivalence around the maternal relationship and the Oedipal model in which it participates — to erupt violently in all its ‘horror’.

If self-sacrifice is the privileged theme of the woman’s film, in the maternal variant, the woman must sacrifice her own welfare for that of her children. When we first meet Amelia, just before Samuel’s seventh birthday, she is in precisely this position, having to sacrifice her own needs for those of her son. Samuel is troubled, suffering from nightmares and seeing monsters. He is demanding, seeking constant attention and reassurance and, apart from working in a care home for elderly people, Amelia’s life revolves around looking after him. While the maternal melodrama typically struggles with reconciling the woman’s maternal and sexual identities — the good mother (such as Stella of King Vidor’s paradigmatic *Stella Dallas* (1937)) will reject romantic relationships for the sake of her child — it seems that Amelia has had literally to sacrifice her husband Oskar (Benjamin Winspear) for her son, as Oskar was killed in a car accident while driving Amelia to the hospital to give birth to Samuel. Despite her loneliness, Amelia is so exhausted caring for others, and for Samuel in particular, that she seems oblivious to her colleague’s (Daniel Henshall) gentle overtures. Thus, Samuel seems to have supplanted the father’s place in his mother’s life, with all the Oedipal associations that implies, as discussed below. Rather than surrender herself to this situation, however, Amelia’s repressed grief and anger at the loss of her husband is the source of her ‘monstrous’ rage and resentment towards Samuel. Thus, the tradition of female self-abnegation within the maternal melodrama is undercut by the ‘horror’ it conceals from the outset, signalled via an intensification and inversion of gothic conventions.

As Margaret Anne Doody (1977) argues, ‘the “real world” for characters in a gothic novel is one of nightmare. There is no longer a common sense order against which the dream briefly flickers; rather, the world of rational order briefly flickers in and out of the dreamlike’ (529). *The Babadook* begins by bringing us straight into Amelia’s nightmare, and the distinction between what is ‘real’ and what is a (very) bad dream becomes difficult to discern. The first shot is of Amelia’s face in close-up, breathing as if in labour, illuminated by the

intermittent flash of a bright, white light. Suddenly, broken glass sprays across her cheek and she is thrown from side to side in slow motion. A child's voice calling 'Mum!, Mum!' is barely audible over discordant sounds like muffled roars and metal scraping. A point-of-view shot from Amelia's perspective shows us a man slumped in what we now realise is a driving seat. What sounds like the rush of an oncoming car in slow motion gets louder as the child's voice grows more insistent. Amelia turns her head sharply and a bright, white light explodes on the screen. Samuel's voice, increasing in volume, brings Amelia (and us) back to her current context: lonely, widowed, grieving, and caring for an emotionally damaged little boy in the dark, foreboding house typical of the gothic scenario. Soon after, a series of close shots shows parts of a sleeping Samuel, his leg flung over his mother, his hand kneading her neck, the abrasive sound of his grinding teeth heightened on the soundtrack. Amelia's sense of physical and emotional entrapment is palpable. She disentangles herself from him and a symmetrically composed overhead shot shows them lying on opposite sides of the bed, Amelia's back to her son, the distance she has put between them foreshadowing her increasingly violent desire to escape her child as the film progresses.

It is clear that Amelia is struggling not only with other people's reactions to Samuel, but also with her own ambivalence towards her son. She suspects him of persecuting her (by defacing a photograph of herself and Oskar, or putting shards of glass in her soup), and the gothic suspicion at the heart of the maternal melodrama shatters its veneer of maternal devotion. As events escalate and her suspicion shifts from Samuel to the possibility of an unknown stalker, Amelia's ambivalence towards Samuel remains and gains force, transforming from suspicion to a 'monstrous' rage towards her child. The film goes on to embrace the full 'horror' of this taboo, which, as Haskell argues, is repressed in mainstream maternal melodrama. Kent is explicit in her desire to foreground this issue, which she believes is under-represented, both cinematically and socio-culturally. She states:

Apart from *We Need To Talk About Kevin*, I can't easily think of other examples [that address maternal ambivalence] and it's the great unspoken thing. We're all, as women, educated and conditioned to think that motherhood is an easy thing that just happens. But it's not always the case (Kent quoted in McInnes 2014).

Referencing *We Need To Talk About Kevin* links *The Babadook* to the maternal melodrama and to its inverse — films that unpick the pervasive idealisation of maternal self-sacrifice in popular culture — interrogating the mother's role in female gothic and horror films in the

process.

Thornham situates Ramsay's film within the twin histories of feminist counter-cinema and maternal melodrama and reads it as a critique of 'new momism', the idealisation of motherhood that gathered momentum in the 1990s as part of a backlash against the gains of second-wave feminism. The key difference between 'new momism' and the representations of domesticated femininity that dominated 1950s American culture is that the woman's subservience to her husband now is replaced by subservience to her child. Importantly, however, this emphasis on intensive mothering is framed as the woman's liberated choice (3). As such, Thornham argues that 'new momism' is the postfeminist version of overinvested mothering that Haskell maintains conceals the hatred lurking beneath the surface of classical women's films:

Children are an obsession in American movies ... The sacrifice of and for children — two sides of the same coin — is a disease passing for a national virtue ... Both of these transactions represent beautifully masked wish fulfillments, suggesting that the myth of obsession — the love lavished, the attention paid to children ... — is compensation for women's guilt, for the deep inadmissible feelings of not wanting children, or not wanting them unreservedly, in the first place (Haskell: 168-70; quoted in Thornham: 3, with ellipses).

According to Thornham, 'such hatred is also the subject of [...] *We Need to Talk about Kevin*' (3). Eva (Tilda Swinton) struggles to love her son Kevin (Rocky Duer; Japser Newell; Ezra Miller) and to relinquish control of her body and her life in the ways that are expected of her, first as a pregnant woman and then as a mother. Her relationship with her son is fraught from infancy and as he grows older his disturbing behaviour becomes increasingly violent, culminating in his murder of his father and sister, and massacre of his fellow high-school students.

Thornham identifies Kevin, 'with his violence, mockery of parental authority and unreadable self-possession', as the obvious 'successor to both the monstrous children of 1970s horror and, in an ironic gesture, to the wise innocents that succeeded them' (7). She traces Vivian Sobchack's (2015) history of the male child in horror and family melodrama since the 1970s in terms of his role in shoring up patriarchal power structures against the pressures exerted by second-wave feminism. According to Sobchack, the political and socio-cultural upheavals of the 1970s produced, in popular horror films such as *The Exorcist* (William Friedkin, 1973) and *The Omen* (Richard Donner, 1976), portrayals of children as 'uncivilized, hostile, and powerful Others' who threatened the family and social institutions (Sobchack: 178; Thornham: 6). By the end of the decade, the impact of feminism is such that the role of the child within this scenario has shifted significantly. The previously destructive power of the

horror-film child transforms into a kind of special insight, and the child of the family melodrama becomes both markedly precocious and particularly vulnerable to the threat posed by the cold, selfish (i.e. feminist) mother, as illustrated by the 1979 hit, *Kramer vs. Kramer* (Robert Benton). As Thornham emphasises, it is now the (male) child who ‘has the power to authorize the family, [...] who denies or legitimates the particular family’s existence as a viable structure’ (Sobchack: 183; quoted in Thornham: 6).

Thornham argues that the shift from second-wave feminism to postfeminism has altered the terms of reference once again. While motherhood is now framed as a choice, the woman must choose to devote herself to the child entirely if the child is to thrive. An essential aspect of *We Need to Talk About Kevin*’s critique of this model, therefore, is its emphasis on the mother’s, rather than the child’s, subjectivity (6). Similarly, Arnold suggests that ‘the [horror] genre is increasingly being used to explore maternal desires and conflicts rather than infantile ones’ (70). ‘Gothic melodramas’ such as *The Others* increase our access to the ‘Bad Mother’s’ perspective and question her subordination within patriarchal power structures, articulated within an oppressive domestic space (107).

Notably, an emphasis on the mother’s, rather than the child’s, perspective is central to the reimagining of the female gothic with which *We Need to Talk About Kevin* and *The Babadook* can be aligned. Mothers, albeit in disguised or displaced form, have haunted the gothic tradition since its inception. Claire Kahane (1985) identifies the young female protagonist’s problematic identification with ‘the spectral presence of a dead-undead mother’ – ‘the ongoing battle with a mirror image that is both self and other’ – as central to the gothic scenario as initiated by Anne Radcliffe in the 1790s (336; 337). Similarly, ‘Modern Gothics’, according to Tania Modleski (1982), ‘help women to deal with their ambivalent attitudes towards their mothers as well as their “masochistic identification” with them’ (69). For Moers, on the other hand, Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818) is a ‘distinctly [...] woman’s mythmaking on the subject of birth,’ insofar as it displaces ‘the [maternal] drama of guilt, dread, and flight surrounding birth and its consequences’ onto the figure of the male scientist (93).

Scholars have identified analogous impulses in female gothic films. Modleski (1988), for instance, argues that Hitchcock’s *Rebecca* enacts ‘the long discredited Electra complex’ (i.e. the daughter’s rivalry with an oppressive mother figure) (34). Andrew Scahill (2015) identifies an alternate strand of ‘maternal gothic’, typified by Polanski’s *Rosemary’s Baby* (1968), which ‘centers on the prenatal stage and the horror of an independent alien organism growing inside of the female body’ (9). Arguably, recent iterations of the female gothic in film

such *We Need to Talk About Kevin* and *The Babadook* move beyond limiting the maternal function to a metaphorical space, or a horror of the pregnant female body as a site of monstrous invasion. Instead, the figure of the mother and her ambivalent experience of motherhood becomes the focal point of the narrative and the vehicle for an exploration of questions of female identity and agency.

As discussed, Thornham argues that *We Need to Talk About Kevin* confronts difficult issues around motherhood and maternal ambivalence within the context of a popular culture that is, arguably, over-invested in images of idealised mothering. While Thornham reads the film refracted through the maternal melodrama and feminist counter-cinema, Ginette Carpenter (2016) suggests that the film's interrogation of twenty-first century gender roles and the cultural surveillance of maternity is 'channelled through the conventions of the Gothic'. She states that:

[its] generic instabilities, use of excess, overlapping of past and present and depictions of uncanny and abject monstrosity combine with the visual tropes of the horror film to create unsettling depictions of feminine embodiment, pregnancy, birth and mothering' (47).

As Carpenter points out, the source novel's unreliable narration is restricted to Eva's point of view in the film; 'this is', she notes, 'very deliberately the mother's tale' (53). Similarly, for Kent, aligning the spectator with Amelia's perspective was vital to the film's organisation. She says:

Even when she goes to some really dark places, I still tried to keep it within her point of view as much as possible, so that people would not sit back with their arms folded and judge her, but they'd actually travel through that experience with her (Kent quoted in Sélavy 2014).

In other words, to borrow Thornham's description of Eva in *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, in *The Babadook*, 'it is [Amelia's] fractured subjectivity, hate, and sense of guilt that we inhabit' (27). Privileging Amelia's 'fractured subjectivity' allows us to witness the 'horror' of a mother's hatred of her own (male) child break through the mask of maternal self-sacrifice, while avoiding her vilification.

From the close-ups of Amelia's shocked and frightened face during what is revealed to

be the car crash that killed her husband, through close-ups revealing her increasing panic as the Babadook makes its presence felt in her home, to close-ups of her radically transformed face as she tries to strangle her son, tight framings of Amelia's face chart her psychic dissolution. These tight framings are alternated with long shots of Amelia that create a sense of her being cut adrift from her surroundings and from 'normal life'. For example, when Amelia visits a shopping mall instead of rushing home to care for Samuel, we see her sitting alone on a sofa eating ice cream, surrounded by empty space, as people pass in front of her. The lack of ambient noise on the soundtrack, replaced by non-diegetic music, increases our sense of her isolation. As Amelia unravels, the sense of time, too, becomes more disordered, drawn out or compressed around Amelia's intensified experience. As discussed, time is extended in slow motion in the opening nightmare scene. Later in the film, by contrast, when Amelia finds the *Mister Babadook* storybook on her doorstep after she had torn it up and burnt it, accelerated footage speeds up her walk back into the house, as if the horror of its return concentrates her experience of time.

Like *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, which, in Thornham's words, 'replays the Oedipal story — the son's usurpation and murder of the father, the disturbingly sexual overtones in the relationship between son and mother, [...] from the mother's perspective' (23), *The Babadook* stages the Oedipal overtones of Samuel's relationship with his mother from Amelia's point of view. According to Bradshaw (2014):

Kent shows that as Samuel gets older, he starts to intuit ever more clearly his father's absence and his own quasi-conjugal relationship with his mother. He is always clambering over her and heedlessly touching her in ways he doesn't understand.

From Amelia's perspective, however, their physical intimacy is shown to be deeply intrusive. These Oedipal overtones are unmissable in the scene where Samuel disturbs his mother masturbating, a scene that ironically recalls the maternal melodrama's insistence that the good mother surrender her sexual identity for the sake of her child.

Thus, the son replaces the husband in this gothic retelling of the maternal melodrama, where 'the woman's place is in the home' is not a refuge, but a prison. The heroine's relationship to the dark, oppressive house is of course a defining aspect of the gothic scenario. The house maps the female protagonist's fears and anxieties; her relationship to its forbidden spaces arguably literalises her own relationship to those aspects of herself that are similarly hidden from consciousness. As Steven Jacobs (2007) puts it:

In Gothic romance films, the forbidden room is a metaphor for the repressed experience. The heroine attempts to disclose and visualize the secrets and mysteries, just like the psychoanalyst opens up the mysterious depths of the soul. Opening up the forbidden room is [...] the cathartic moment in the story (39).

Amelia's relationship to the house and, particularly (as is the convention if not the cliché), to the basement, dramatises her relationship to those aspects of herself and her history that she cannot articulate. Her most violent confrontations — with Samuel, with her dead husband, and with the Babadook — take place there, and ultimately the basement becomes 'home' to the uncanny manifestation of those fears and anxieties that she must confront in order to save herself and Samuel.

If the house, and particularly the basement, constitutes a spatialisation of Amelia's fears and anxieties in particular, as in the gothic tradition, it also has a specific relationship to time. The basement is where Amelia stores her memories of Oskar, in the form of his clothes and belongings, and thus it speaks to what John Fletcher (1995) calls 'the Gothic realm of a past preserved and suspended and awaiting reanimation' (355). When the Babadook emerges from the basement, he does so, as many critics have noted, as an uncanny embodiment of the arrangement of Oskar's clothes that Amelia keeps there (see Barker 2014). Thus, the basement is a place where time is suspended in space, a frozen past that Amelia must incorporate into her personal narrative if she is to 'move on'.

As such, the psychic mapping of the house in *The Babadook* corresponds closely to that of its gothic predecessors. Privileging Amelia's 'fractured subjectivity' within this oppressive space aligns us with her as she transitions from what we might call the gothic victim of a maternal nightmare to what Arnold describes as the 'Bad Mother' in her guise as the 'monster or the villain' (68). As Amelia's mask of maternal self-sacrifice begins to slip she becomes wildly abusive and violent, and the conventions of the horror genre provide a vocabulary capable of articulating the 'real' feelings beneath Amelia's façade. Like Sobchack's model as outlined above, Amelia's ambivalence towards her son seems to turn her into a 'monster', while Samuel plays a pivotal role in the family's survival, preparing weapons to defend himself and his mother well in advance of the Babadook's first appearance to Amelia. It is Samuel who assures Amelia, 'I just want you to be happy', when she articulates her murderous feelings towards him, and Samuel who intuits her possession as repression and tells her, '[y]ou have to get it out'. Thus, while Samuel begins the film suggesting the possibility of the monstrous or

possessed child of 1970s horror cinema (screaming fits, seeing things, an apparent propensity for violence, and so on, (see Wood 2012)), he corresponds more closely to the subsequent iteration of the child as ‘wise innocent’ the more Amelia turns into a ‘monster’.

In spite of this, as discussed, the film privileges Amelia’s, rather than Samuel’s, perspective and does not resolve by aligning Samuel with a viable father figure and eliminating or punishing Amelia. As such, the film refuses to condemn the mother and endorse the son, as is the case in the films Sobchack discusses. Instead, the film focuses on Amelia’s ultimate acknowledgement and integration of her own ‘monstrous’ feelings about motherhood, allowing us to sympathise with her as an exhausted, grieving widow struggling with the demands of motherhood, as well as with Samuel as a vulnerable little boy. This process is facilitated by having Amelia inhabit in turn the role of mother-as-gothic-victim, mother-as-monster, and, finally, mother-as-saviour. In this, Amelia complicates the typical gothic protagonist, described by Moers as ‘simultaneously persecuted victim and courageous heroine’ (124). Allowing the ‘monstrous’ aspect of her maternal ambivalence to manifest itself, via the hyperbolic conventions of the horror film, means that Amelia is not limited to the role of essentially ‘good’ victim and/or heroine; her ‘badness’ is an intrinsic, if hitherto unacknowledged, aspect of herself. In so doing, the film subverts the dichotomous representation of the mother as either good or bad that, as Arnold argues, has tended to sustain earlier iterations of both the maternal melodrama and the horror genre.

Hazel Cills (2016) notes that usually, when a child is in danger in the horror film, it is incumbent upon the child’s family, and specifically the mother, to save the child. Whether it is against a supernatural force (like Diane Freeling in *Poltergeist* (Tobe Hooper, 1982)), or against a demonic husband (like Wendy Torrance in *The Shining* (Stanley Kubrick, 1980)), the mother’s role is as protector. As Cills puts it, ‘[j]ust as slashers have their sainted final girls, home invasion and possession films have their final mothers’. The key difference, as Cills sees it, between a film like *The Exorcist* and *The Babadook*, both films featuring hard-working single mothers with children threatened by evil forces, ‘is that in the latter film, Amelia is the one who becomes possessed’. Thus, Amelia’s possession seems to turn her into the ‘Bad Mother’, who must be eliminated in order for the child to survive. However, as Cills argues, while the horror genre is heavily populated by evil mothers (Mrs Bates in *Psycho*, Margaret White in *Carrie*, Mrs Voorhees in *Friday the 13th* (Sean S. Cunningham, 1980), and so on), ‘what makes Amelia compelling is how she literally embodies both roles — the unstable villain and the resilient child-saver’.

In fact, Amelia could be said to assume three roles over the course of the film: gothic victim, ‘Bad Mother’, and ‘final mother’, in Cills’s terms. Ultimately, Amelia’s fury is turned upon its proper object — the Babadook — and she confronts it, screaming, ‘*[i]f you touch my son again I’ll fucking kill you!*’ The Babadook falls to the ground, light and insubstantial. When she touches it, it roars at her but she withstands its rage, her terrified face in tight close-up, lit once again by a bright, white light. Visually, this recalls the opening nightmare scene; as Amelia can now confront this horror, the Babadook retreats to its generic home — the basement. Amelia reconciles with her son and with herself as a mother by recognising the ‘horror’ of her unexpressed grief and rage towards her child. In this sense, the Babadook practically begs to be read as ‘the return of the repressed’, the Freudian scenario (which Wood (2012) argues is central to the horror genre) whereby material that has been ‘sunk into’ the id manifests in conscious formations, often in greatly distorted or disguised form.

The possibility that Amelia may be the author of *The Babadook* storybook — and thus the origin of the Babadook itself — is suggested by the fact that Amelia says she used to write ‘kids’ stuff’ in a conversation with her sister and her sister’s friends. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (1996) elaborates on the idea of the monster as originating in the self in his thesis that ‘the fear of the monster is also a kind of desire’ (16). In other words, the figure of the monster permits forbidden fantasies of aggression and domination to be safely expressed in a clearly defined, liminal space. As Cohen argues, ‘[w]hen contained by geographic, generic, or epistemic marginalization, the monster can function as an alter ego, as an alluring projection of (an Other) self’ (17). In this case, shifting generic registers from gothic terror (where, as Moers puts it, ‘fantasy dominates over reality’ (123)), to the conventions of classical horror (whereby the threat posed emanates from an externalised, recognisable monster), allows the Babadook, understood as the projection of Amelia’s ‘Other’ self, to take shape, as it were, and become an acknowledged part of Amelia’s and Samuel’s shared reality.

Cohen suggests that the answer to the question ‘[d]o monsters really exist?’ can only be ‘[s]urely they must, for if they did not, how could we?’ (20). In other words, monsters exist insofar as their creation constitutes a vital component of how we map our social and psychic universe and, however much we might try to exclude them, their inevitable return brings with it a fuller knowledge of our selves. Similarly, the return of the Babadook as the ‘monstrous’ manifestation of Amelia’s repressed feelings about motherhood brings with it the opportunity to reconsider the maternal role in ways that can accommodate ambivalence.

According to Thornham, the ending of *We Need to Talk About Kevin* ‘points us beyond the twin fantasies of postfeminist maternal masochism and unproblematic feminist agency’

(27). *The Babadook* similarly avoids a simple reversal or straightforward endorsement of maternal sacrifice. In finally resisting the Babadook and saving her son, Amelia appears to conform to the 'Good Mother' model of both horror film and maternal melodrama, but this is undermined by the *mise-en-scène*. The bare tree outside their house has flowered, but its green leaves and pink flowers seem hyper-real, saturated. While the final scene takes place in the garden, we arrive there by coming up through the earth, accompanied by a distant, roaring sound. Spatially and temporally disorientating, it feels like we have returned to the earlier horror, until we emerge in the garden, in daylight, to witness a happier scene between mother and son. This scene is nonetheless infused with an uncanny quality that undermines any easy reading of the mother-child relationship as fully resolved in terms of the reconciliation of the 'Good Mother' with her 'wise innocent' son.

The Babadook has not been eliminated, but is still with them, if somewhat subdued. According to Cohen, '[m]onsters are our children' (20). Amelia's recovery implies a recognition of this as, ultimately, she assumes a quasi-maternal role towards the Babadook itself, giving it a home (in the basement), soothing it during its (epic) tantrums, and feeding it (worms). At one level then, the Babadook can be read as the monstrous progeny of the 'Bad Mother', as convention would have it. Yet, unlike the 'gothic melodramas' discussed by Arnold, all of which 'either exclude or are about the exclusion of the Bad Mother' (112), the resolution of *The Babadook* does not depend upon the exclusion of the mother or of the monster. Instead, the impulse is towards integration; Amelia's acknowledgement and acceptance of the Babadook is integral to her revised relationship not only to her son, but also to herself as a mother. This is facilitated by a process of generic assimilation, whereby the victimised protagonist of the female gothic, (whose male child assumes the role of persecutor hitherto occupied by her husband), transforms into the horror mother in both her 'Good' and 'Bad' modes and, finally, reconciles with those aspects of herself that are more typically concealed and/or reviled in mainstream cinema. *The Babadook*'s international success may thus at least in part be accounted for by the ways in which it revisits and revises the representation of the mother figure in the closely related categories of female gothic, maternal melodrama, and the horror film and, in so doing, reflects on current cinematic and socio-cultural expectations of the maternal role.

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