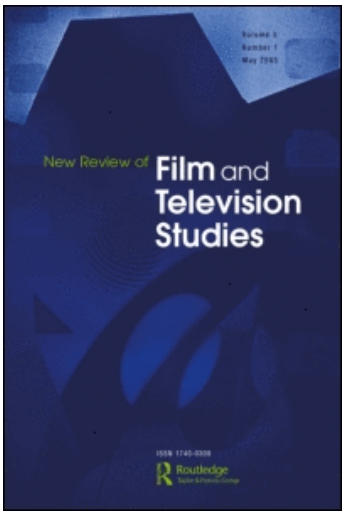

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

'From grade B thrillers to deluxe chillers': prestige horror, female audiences, and allegories of spectatorship in *The Spiral Staircase* (1946)

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This paper examines the prestige 'shocker' *The Spiral Staircase* (1946), suggesting that it challenges the perception of the decline in quality in the horror genre in the 1940s, as well as assumptions in scholarship that the genre has historically been addressed to a male audience. Whilst the film is usually discussed as a woman's film, on release it was centred as part of a distinct shift in the horror genre from 'grade B thrillers to deluxe chillers'. The reclassification of films like *The Spiral Staircase* as woman's films could be seen as an attempt to make text fit established theory – the film is addressed to a female audience and thus cannot be a horror film. Through an analysis of textual and extra-textual discourses, including reception and publicity materials, this paper will challenge the pervasive theories that suggest female pleasure or identification is unattainable in horror spectatorship. Whilst the theory is that women refuse to look at horror, averting their eyes or turning away, in 1946 *The Spiral Staircase* asked a predominantly female audience to take a closer look and question the very act of looking at the cinema screen.

Keywords: *The Spiral Staircase*; Hollywood; horror; woman's film; female audiences; spectatorship; reception

The dominant perception of 1940s horror is embodied in the iconic poster image for *Frankenstein Meets the Wolf Man* (1943), in which Universal's classic monster franchises strangle each other atop an unspecified European hillside. This is an apt metaphor for *that* studio's then project of wringing the last revenue out of its coterie of creatures, but is far from representative of this period as a whole. The critical focus on the decreasing quality and increasing monster count of Universal's output (from the innovation of *The Wolf Man* [1941] to the said werewolf's third reincarnation in as many years alongside all his cohorts in *House of Dracula* [1945]) ignores a wider Hollywood trend that saw horror become comparatively highbrow.[1] In 1944 the *New York Times* hailed the arrival of a 'new horror cycle' that was 'dressed in full Class "A" paraphernalia,

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including million dollar budgets and big-name casts' (Stanley 1944, 4). It highlighted the release of films such as *Gaslight* (1944), *Phantom Lady* (1944), and *The Uninvited* (1944) as indicators of this trend, continuing that many more were in production. One such film was *The Spiral Staircase* (1946). Although this film is typically identified as a 'woman's film' in contemporary scholarship, on its release *The Spiral Staircase* was centred as epitomic of this shift from 'grade B thrillers to deluxe chillers' (Rosenfield 1946, 10).

This paper will argue that *The Spiral Staircase* challenges both the perception of the decline in quality in the horror genre in the 1940s, and usual assumptions about female horror spectatorship in the classical period. Like the aforementioned films in Stanley's 'new horror cycle', *The Spiral Staircase* is usually ignored in scholarship on 1940s horror. As suggested, it is mostly discussed in terms of the all-encompassing demarcation of the woman's film, and usually specifically as an extension of the literary female Gothic (Doane 1987, 1994; Walsh 1984). If released today, however, *The Spiral Staircase* would likely be discussed in terms of a serial killer or slasher film, with its female protagonist Helen Capel representing what Carol Clover refers to as the cycle's 'final girl'. However, Clover (1987, 1992) assumes that the audience for slasher films is predominantly male, with the final girl allowing these male spectators to vicariously experience the victimisation of the female hero, whilst simultaneously reaffirming myths of male superiority by stressing victimhood as ultimately female. This idea that the horror genre is addressed to a male audience has become an almost common-sense assumption in scholarship, whilst recognition of *any* potential female pleasure derived from horror spectatorship is certainly assumed to be a contemporary phenomenon (Neale 1980; Williams 1984; Modleski 1986; Creed 1993).

The redefinition of films like *The Spiral Staircase* as woman's films could be seen as an attempt to make text fit established theory – the film is addressed to a female audience and thus cannot be a horror film as horror films are addressed to a male audience. Diane Waldman makes a clear distinction between the male address of 'horror' and female address of the 'Gothic romance films of the 1940s'. She suggests:

> the central feature of the Gothics is ambiguity [. . .] This it shares with other filmic and literary genres, for example, the horror film and the fantastic. Yet in the Gothic, this hesitation is experienced by a character (and presumably a spectator) who is female. (1984, 31)

Obviously generic labels are open to contestation and historical rewriting. Steve Neale (1993) has demonstrated the disparity between the trade's understanding of the term 'melodrama' in the 1940s and 1950s (used predominantly to designate 'masculine' action genres) and its use in later academic criticism as an alternate label for the 1940s and 1950s woman's film. However, the intention of this paper is not to return *The Spiral Staircase* to its 'rightful' genre, rather it is an attempt to resituate the film into its historical context in order to investigate this perceived contradiction between the horror genre and female spectatorship. The paper will

attempt to construct what Janet Staiger identifies as a historical materialist analysis; one that 'acknowledges modes of address and exhibition, but also establishes the identities and interpretative strategies and tactics *brought by spectators to the cinema*' (2000, 23).

Having situated the film within its specific production context, the first two sections of the paper will analyse extra-textual discourses drawn from contemporary American newspapers, trade papers, and most extensively, promotional material such as posters and pressbooks, in order to negotiate this perceived divergence of horror, prestige production values, and female audiences. Summarily, drawing on this contextual and intertextual material, the paper will attempt to negotiate some of the feminist psychoanalytic approaches typically brought to the film itself. Through this multi-focused approach the paper will hopefully analyse the interaction between the theoretical spectator and the historical subject of marketing and filmic address.

'This is a shocker plain and simple': the paradox of prestige horror

David O. Selznick originally developed *The Spiral Staircase* as a vehicle for Ingrid Bergman, but after she dropped out he sold the project to RKO-Radio Pictures in order to finance his over-budget and over-schedule *Duel in the Sun* (1946). RKO was seemingly confident to bankroll a prestige horror picture, having turned good profits on the films produced by Val Lewton's horror unit. *Cat People* (1942) and *I Walked with a Zombie* (1943), which also infused female Gothic and horror themes and stylistics, were particularly successful at the box office.[2] With producer Dore Shary and much of the cast already attached, including recent Selznick discovery Dorothy McGuire who was loaned out as part of the deal, the film managed to retain much of the trademark gloss and high production values of a Selznick production. This was seemingly a key factor in critics' difficulty in positioning the film.

After Fritz Lang passed on the project Robert Siodmak, who was already on loan from Universal and working on another RKO project, was called in to direct at the eleventh hour. The German émigré was not involved in the pre-production meetings on the film, but his trademark expressionist style is apparent on screen – perhaps the reason for the film's regular inclusion in film noir scholarship despite its Victorian setting (Borde and Chaumeton 1955; Ottoson 1981; Silver and Ward 1992; Langford 2005). He directed a number of thrillers and crime dramas that have come to be considered by many critics as classic noirs, including the stylistically archetypal *Phantom Lady*, which was promoted in its pressbook as 'a mystery story from the woman's point of view, a formula that has never before been translated for the screen' (Universal 1944). This is a claim that directors such as Alfred Hitchcock might have challenged, but testament to Hollywood's realisation of a market for female versions of perceived 'male genres'. In fact, Universal inaugurated former Hitchcock protégée Joan Harrison as 'Hollywood's only full-fledged woman producer' for the *Phantom Lady* project, in order

to combine her experience with the 'master of horror' with 'feminine psychology' (Berch 1943, 3).

Although Robert Siodmak's name is now synonymous with the later classic 'noirs' he directed, such as *The Killers* (1946), *The Dark Mirror* (1946), and *Criss Cross* (1949), he had previous experience in horror, directing Universal's *Son of Dracula* (1943). Like *Phantom Lady*, this Dracula sequel was differentiated from pre-war generic products due to a proposed female occupation of what were exclusively male roles prior to the war. Its pressbook suggested 'There are two feminine leads – Louise Allbritton and Evelyn Ankers – in Universal's "Son of Dracula", a horror drama which once would have been considered exclusively a male province' (Universal 1943). Whilst *Son of Dracula* is the only film up to this point that Siodmak had directed in Hollywood that would be included in horror rather than film noir scholarship, *Time* magazine suggested that he was 'rapidly becoming Hollywood's top horror man' in their *Spiral Staircase* review (Anon. 1946b, 90), thus suggesting the more encompassing nature of the term 'horror' in 1940s criticism.[3]

It is understandable however that the *Time* critic should have made this link in relation to *The Spiral Staircase*. The film's narrative is highly comparable to more modern examples of the genre such as *Halloween* (1978), with the central female protagonist representing Clover's 'final girl'. The narrative time of *The Spiral Staircase* is just five hours set almost entirely in the dark and oppressive environment of the Warren family's Gothic mansion. The protagonist is a young servant, Helen (Dorothy McGuire), long ago made mute due to the childhood trauma of seeing her parents perish in a fire. She is employed to serve a widowed invalid, Lady Warren (Ethel Barrymore), who has two sons – a ne'er-do-well Steve (Gordon Oliver) and the apparently gentlemanly Professor Warren (George Brent). The two brothers are involved in a love triangle with the Professor's secretary Blanche (Rhonda Fleming). Following the murder of the three local girls who 'suffered from afflictions', Helen is warned that she might be the next victim. Helen realises that the killer is in the house when she discovers the murdered Blanche. She summarily comes to the 'realisation' that Steve is the killer, and locks him in the cellar, only to discover that the murderer is actually the other brother, Professor Warren. He corners her on the stairs in order to fulfil his psychotic plan to 'eradicate imperfection', but Lady Warren shoots him dead in the nick of time, the gunshot finally triggering Helen's ability to scream. The music soars as Helen, having regained her voice, is able to telephone for help on the emergency number Dr Parry (Kent Smith), her suitor, has given her.

The script was adapted from Ethel Lina White's as then unreleased novel *Some Must Watch* (1933), but screenwriter Mel Dinelli made the significant changes of location from the Welsh–English border in the 1930s to New England in 1906, and the female protagonist's 'affliction' from lameness to muteness. In his book on the *Gaslight Melodrama* Guy Barefoot (2001, 125) suggests that this temporal alteration was in keeping with a general interest in all manner of 'Victoriana' in the war and post-war years, one that simultaneously provided

a form of escapism and a displaced working through of contemporary concerns. This contradiction will be analysed in more detail later in the paper.

The Spiral Staircase was released on 6 February 1946 to fairly impressive media reception and seemingly considerable audience interest; the *Washington Post* review enthused, 'with lines forming as early as 10 am, and capacity attendance the order of the day, the "Spiral Staircase" yesterday refused to let its audience down' (Bell 1946, 5).[4] Almost all reviews explicitly positioned the film as horror, suggesting that its superior use of the genre's established tropes differentiated it from the pack. The *New York Times* review begins somewhat dismissively by suggesting that *The Spiral Staircase* 'is a shocker plain and simple, and whatever pretensions it has to psychological drama may be considered merely as a concession to a currently popular fancy'. However, the reviewer goes on to note that 'the only thing that really matters is that Mr. Siodmak has used the rumbling and cracking of thunder, the flickering of candlelight, the creaking door and gusts of wind from out of nowhere to startling advantage' (T.M.P. 1946, 35). The *Oakland Tribune* concurred that the 'success' of this 'very swanky shocker' lay in Siodmak's skilful use of 'all the clichés of melodrama [. . .] even, so help me, a wine cellar that passes nicely for a modern catacomb' (Soanes 1946, 19). The *Austin America* agreed that 'Siodmak cleaned out the horror department when he started shooting *The Spiral Staircase* [. . .] they have spared nothing to give you goose bumps on your goose bumps with this one' (Townsley 1946, 12). The film was praised precisely for its masterful exploitation of standard horror tropes to produce a device that would 'scare the daylights out of most of its audience' (T.M.P. 1946, 35).

Newspaper and trade journals alike enthused over the quality of acting, direction, and production, often seemingly disproportionately to their generic expectations. RKO chose to foreground these contradictory responses that highlighted the juxtaposition of B movie themes and prestige production, selecting even more bifurcated review quotes for their advert in *Variety*. They selected the *Hollywood Reporter*'s assessment that the film will 'take its place alongside anything in the blood curdler field' whilst 'sparkling with class from every angle' and *Box-Office*'s dual-recommendation that it is 'a chiller that will have spectators on the edge of their seats and at the same time remain within the bounds of plausible theatre' (Anon. 1946a, 14). Studio marketing was seemingly eager to reinforce the ambiguous positioning between prestige and shocker that this film held, in the hope of appealing to the widest audience possible. The pressbook for *The Spiral Staircase* marketed it as a 'foremost mystery drama' suspenseful enough to 'please the most discriminating mystery fans' but, in concurrence with the film's reception, one which boasted a 'triple star casts' including Oscar winner and 'first lady of the theatre' Ethel Barrymore (RKO Radio 1946).[5]

Although the reviews and pressbook articles universally highlight the performances of the female stars and the centrality of their characters, the film is never discussed as a woman's film. As contemporary critics such as Mary Ann Doane have suggested, the collective term was used for 'male critic's derogatory

dismissal' of certain texts, a point seemingly not lost on either studios or critics of the day (Doane 1994, 284). In a 1944 column entitled 'Shall We Join the Ladies', renowned *New York Times* critic Bosley Crowther complained that the term 'woman's picture' had been 'badly and recklessly used' as a term of debasement. Citing examples of female-centred texts as diverse as *Mrs. Parkington* (1944), *Laura* (1944), and *Our Hearts Were Young and Gay* (1944), Crowther stated that 'any picture that handles the subject of women well is universally accepted. And, when it doesn't, it's a "woman's picture"' (1944, X1). Thus like horror, the term woman's picture was seemingly avoided as a demarcation for such films. Instead, the press material attracted women by implication and association, rather than signposting their releases as woman's films and potentially putting off both men and women through perceived negative terminology. With this in mind the following section will look at how the studio marketing attempted to specifically address post-war women. Whilst much of the promotional discourse resorts to traditional assumptions about gender and taste, it also celebrates the breakthrough of women into new 'daring' roles on screen, in the auditorium, and beyond.

'Search for a local heroine': gendered appeals

The pressbook for *The Spiral Staircase* explicitly targets women through media promotions, commercial tie-ins, and exploitation stunts. The pressbook suggests staging a competition to find a 'local heroine' who will act as a hostess throughout the performance, and encourages exhibitors to hold a special advance screening for women only, to obtain a 'cross section of feminine reaction' from 'department store girls, office girls, factory girls, debutantes and housewives'. There is arguably some attempt therefore to address women's increasingly diverse roles in work and leisure, partially resultant of the war. The publicity section also stresses the film's 'advance accolades' and advertising in popular women's magazines such as *Cosmopolitan*, *Women's Home Companion*, and *Redbook* to potential exhibitors, thus indicating the perception of the importance of female audiences.

The exploitation section suggests arranging 'yesteryear and beyond' tie-ins with local department stores, women's dress shops, haberdashers, and interior decorators, contrasting clothing and household items from 1906 and 1946. The stress is on technological progress rather than nostalgia for Victoriana, but the tie-in evokes a sense of historical continuity between women's domestic lives then and now rather than a major reinterpretation of gender roles. The pressbook also offers exhibitors stills of Dorothy McGuire from the film, to be placed in the windows of shops that sell wedding gowns and silverware; these proposed tie-ins certainly speak to traditional notions of women's domestic desires. This commitment to female-oriented commodity tie-ins was combined with discourses that lauded the female star's 'natural beauty'.

According to *The Spiral Staircase* publicity material Dorothy McGuire 'has an intangible attractiveness that [. . .] sets her apart from the generally accepted Hollywood type. A new kind of glamour, subtle, intelligent, eternal.' This mirrors

the wartime articles on film stars in *Good Housekeeping*, as discussed by Susan Ohmer, which emphasised the 'ordinariness' of stars. They suggested that true glamour was 'a quality of character, of talent, and of something so elusive that it might even be called *soul*' (Ohmer 1990, 61) rather than the unattainable accoutrements and lifestyle that set them apart for their fans. This was part of a wider discursive encouragement of adaptation to the economic and practical necessities of the wartime look, which emphasised mobility and comfort over overt sexuality and glamour. Mary Brewster, The Office of War Information's 'expert on womanpower', informed 300 designers at a 1943 fashion conference, 'ruffles have no place in wartime' (Anon. 1943). Hollywood responded to these government restrictions on fabric usage by toning down its own lavish costuming for the duration of the war. As Edith Head, chief designer at Paramount, suggested 'luxury costumes are not only old fashioned, they're unpatriotic and in bad taste' (Doherty 1993, 159).[6]

However, rather than an escape from traditional feminine roles and discursive constructions of female attractiveness, these descriptions of the new type of leading lady fall into another form of essentialism, etherealising a mystical feminine essence that the eradication of all the pleats and ruffles in the world cannot efface. These articles therefore are in keeping with the hegemonic project that encouraged women, for the good of the war effort, to forgo some of the commodities previously discursively reinforced as central to female beauty, whilst promoting the need to uphold the 'eternal' values of femininity. Anti-feminist critics such as sociologists Ferdinand Lundberg and Marynia Farnham highlighted these essentialist ideals as that which had been lost and needed to be 'rediscovered' now the war was over (Lundberg and Farnham 1947).[7] The mainstream media also joined the backlash against 'changes' in American women, holding them up to examples of female subservience allegedly experienced by soldiers in Europe. A March 1946 article in the *New York Times* suggested that whilst

> French girls seemed to be there for the sole purpose of being pleasant to the men, [. . .] being nice is almost a lost art amongst American women. They elbow their way through crowds, swipe your seat at bars and bump and push their way around regardless. (Dallaire 1946, 8)

Admittedly, a male former *Stars and Stripes* reporter wrote this extraordinarily misogynistic polemic. However his argument, and specifically the discourse of the 'proper' disciplining of the female body, was replicated by women writers in publications aimed specifically at a female readership.

In *Harper's* magazine Anne Leighton commiserated that 'many American war veterans are [. . .] coming home to what used to be a pleasantly pliable and even appealingly incompetent little woman and finding a quietly masterful creature recognizing no limitations to her own endurance' (Rosen 1975, 204). These contradictory discourses highlight the irreconcilable either-or-condition that women faced after the war; they were encouraged simultaneously to stand out by using the latest beauty products, and quietly blend into the background.

From sociologists to servicemen, these attackers highlighted the beautification of both body and 'soul' as a necessity for gaining or maintaining a man as the war drew to a close. In a couple of *The Spiral Staircase* pressbook articles it does mention a romance angle (one in fact so sparse within the narrative that of all the reviews only *Variety* noticed it) calling the film a 'saga of romance and terror' and a 'mystical romance'. However, in a period renowned for film posters 'dominated by sensationalised relationships between men and women' (Haralovich 1984, 56), the romance angle is, perhaps surprisingly, all but absent from *The Spiral Staircase*'s campaign.

Instead the posters focus on the Gothic iconography of 'the image of woman-plus-habitation'. The film's secondary poster campaign condenses the narrative into the iconic image of a frightened young woman in front of a large house ravished by stormy weather. Joanna Russ suggests that this motif was uniformly exploited on the covers of the Gothic paperbacks that began to flourish in the 1950s, a typically critically denigrated genre of popular fiction, marketed specifically to a female audience (Doane 1987, 124–5). As these images suggest, in these texts the house typically becomes a site of dread in which the inside/outside dichotomy collapses; in the film the fear of open windows and unlocked doors is subverted when it is discovered that the murderer has been in the house all along. These overlapping spatial borders can be seen as analogous to the perception of wartime women's dual public and private roles, and their dread of returning to the isolation of 'domestic confinement' following the war. The poster therefore identifies the film's broad generic positioning, whilst potentially exploiting connotations that give the film a contemporary resonance to its target audience.

The tagline on the poster, consistently used in various forms throughout the advertising, is 'So Daring … Never before in Hollywood's brilliant motion picture history has anything like it ever been attempted.' This angle that stresses the 'daringness' of the production is extended on some posters to highlight Dorothy McGuire's performance in 'the role they said no star could play'. This is expanded upon in publicity articles and summarily reiterated in much of the review material with, for example, the *New York Times* flattering that 'few actresses would dare to undertake a role which permitted only six words of speech' (T.M.P. 1946, 35). The synopsis and suggested reviews in the pressbook link McGuire's daring portrayal to 'the obstinate courage of [the] heroine helpless in the face of death' that she plays. This is a position inferred by the posters' depiction of the investigating heroine isolated in visually impenetrable space. Finally the circuit is completed as the spectator is 'dared' to sit through the film's 'breathtaking' climax. The exploitation section suggests holding a shrieking contest in which 'local heroines' are invited on stage to imitate the 'climactic thrill' of Helen's scream to 'find out if the audience can stand the shock' when it comes. Therefore, the motif of 'daring' is exploited in the publicity as a sliding signifier that links the targeted spectator (seemingly largely conceived as female) to this unique cinematic experience by way of their direct involvement in the plight of the strong female character and the actress who

portrays her. The female protagonist is therefore explicitly aligned to the interpellated female spectator. The following section will argue that this marketing ploy has its direct parallel in the 'challenge' posed in the opening sequence of the film.

'Men like to see women cry. It makes them feel superior': allegories of spectatorship

The above line delivered by Steve Warren midway through *The Spiral Staircase* provides a telling comment on the myth of female spectatorship that the film is seemingly in dialogue with. At the outset of *The Spiral Staircase*, the film utilises a self-conscious narrative mechanism that immediately hooks the spectators into the female protagonist's perspective, whilst paradoxically alerting them to its overt theatricality. The film commences with a *mise-en-abyme* that shows an early film screening in a village hotel at which Helen, situated amongst an almost entirely female crowd, is excessively emotionally involved in a silent melodrama called *The Kiss*.[8] The camera pans up through the floorboards to reveal the 'realistic' scene of a young girl's murder, before the camera cross-cuts to a drowned girl being pulled from the water in the concluding shot of the melodramatic silent film. This scene, one that does not appear in White's novel, has the effect of linking contemporary (female) spectatorship of *The Spiral Staircase* to that of the protagonist Helen. However, paradoxically it also distinguishes Helen's naive and stereotypically overly involved spectatorship of *The Kiss* from that of her contemporary counterparts; ones who are 'daring' and cinematically knowing enough to literally 'take it up a level' and brave the horrors on offer in modern movie houses and beyond. The representation of the over-identified female spectator of 1906 encourages the cine-literate female spectator of 1946 to hold this image at arm's length, acknowledging her critical distance from this outdated patriarchal myth. In congruence with this reading the shooting script ultimately distinguishes the 'expectant' Helen from the older women in the audience through her subsequent 'excitement' at the horrors we have just witnessed. It notes: 'she, too, looks towards the ceiling. While hers is a frightened expression also, it is mingled with a look of excited curiosity' (Dinelli 1946, 2).

Mary Anne Doane classifies *The Spiral Staircase* as a 'paranoid woman's film' – a meta-generic offshoot from the 1940s woman's film that draws upon the conventions of the literary Gothic. She suggests that through their 'sustained investigation of the woman's relation to the gaze, the paranoid woman's film not only resides within the "genre" of the woman's film, but provides a metacommentary upon it' (Doane 1987, 125).[9] In the same way that the opening scene encourages the sophisticated 1940s spectator to both identify and differentiate herself from Helen, initially represented as 'herself a character drawn from a silent melodrama' (Rick Altman quoted in Barefoot 2001, 156), both film and promotional material paradoxically encourage and problematise this appropriation of an active, investigative gaze. The primary poster campaign's

almost 'high concept' image of an investigative Helen on the spiral staircase, prevalent both in pressbook and publications of the time, literalises the problems for female subjectivity presented both on screen and in the auditorium. Doane suggests that in paranoid woman's films 'the woman's exercise of an active, investigating gaze can only be simultaneous with her own victimisation' (1987, 136). Accordingly Helen's attempt to take control of the gaze in the main poster is forestalled; she stares not out of the poster, but into blind space within the poster image, missing the returning omniscient gaze of the spectator. The threat to Helen is constituted as that of being object rather than subject of knowledge (and correspondingly of discourse/speech).

In her seminal essay on the nature of 'the gaze' in cinema, Laura Mulvey states:

> Woman stands in patriarchal culture as signifier of the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his fantasies and obsessions through linguistic command, by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning. (1975, 7)

Drawing upon Freud and Lacan, Mulvey suggests that the use of the cinematic apparatus in classical Hollywood film reinforces the illusion of a unified male identity (and therefore patriarchal dominance) by positioning women as silent spectacles to be mastered through the look of the male star, and resultantly the spectator (who is automatically addressed as male). However, rather than a hidden mechanism that underlies the ideological functioning of the film, this paradigmatic theorisation of the male gaze is almost a direct plot summation of *The Spiral Staircase*. Professor Warren's murderous wielding of the gaze (blatantly represented in the extreme close-ups of his eye) manifests itself in his fantasised image of Helen with her mouth erased; he subsequently offers to give her 'the quiet' in death he believes she secretly wishes for. McGuire revealed in a later interview that the eye in close-up in fact belonged to director Robert Siodmak (Miller 2006).

This foregrounding of the ability of cinematic apparatus to 'distort' the image of woman is written explicitly into the shooting script. For the initial murder scene in the hotel, scriptwriter Dinelli calls for a 'distortion of the lens' such that:

> the girl we'd seen earlier seems twisted out of natural physical shape [. . .] the limp that we'd seen earlier, now seems exaggerated, grotesque; where it had seemed incidental before, it is now high-lighted by the distortion of the camera – until it becomes the predominant physical characteristic of the girl. (1946, 4)

Therefore, pre-empting *Peeping Tom* (1960), *The Spiral Staircase* consciously actualises the metaphor of the director's sadistic use of the male gaze, with its tyrannical desire to negate the perceived threat of the female body by taking this symbolic control in defining it. Through Helen's murder Professor Warren hopes to permanently fix her in a unitary and eternal conception of femininity outside the symbolic order of language. This is a key Gothic theme replicated in the idealised paintings of 'victims' and the locked rooms of past wives in other texts such as *Rebecca* (1940), *Laura* (1944), and *Secret Beyond the Door* (1948).

However, Helen's eventual 'access to subjectivity with all that it entails of an access to language' comes not in appropriating this self-violating gaze, but in (re)discovering her voice (Doane 1987, 145). Dale Bauer proposes that the 'feminist voice (rather than the male gaze) can construct and dismantle the exclusive community and patriarchal critical discourse' (1988, 2). Whilst the visual strives for the unification of the image, the verbal revels in the multiplicity of competing voices. As suggested earlier, the (female) spectator is initially differentiated from Helen due to the character's naive response to the cinematic apparatus. However, her achievement of both personal and historical maturity is encoded by her eventual mastery of new technology.[10] The music soars as Helen finally speaks into the telephone, the emblematic device for collapsing the boundaries between private and public spaces. Her liberating entry into the symbolic order of language, and therefore the development of a public and sexual self, is thus marked by her corresponding maturation into modernity. The problems of Helen's muteness, or lack of societal voice, are empathetically linked to the repressions of the patriarchal Victorian household in the text; Blanche reassures Helen that 'when you leave here you'll be cured'.

Some commentators of the day such as Anne Kavan bemoaned the escapist tendencies of the Victorian revival in literature and film, complaining 'only the most mature human beings can bear to look at our present reality in the face ... We run away, so to speak, into the past' (Kavan 1946, 63). However, like other paranoid woman's films, *The Spiral Staircase* paints a far from nostalgic picture of gender relations in the era. The symbolic use of this earlier moment of societal transformation appears to have provided a pervasive method for negotiating the underlying traumas of 'the present reality'. The production of the film comes at an equally significant moment of uncertainty and unease surrounding changes in gender roles and reorientation of the domestic realm, and thus this historical revisiting could have provided an apt metaphor for women in 1946. Whilst Dinelli's earlier script envisioned the film's final shot to be a pan out to an exterior façade at sunrise, Siodmak changed this ending such that the camera remained within the site of dislocation and dread of the Victorian house (Greco 1999, 84). This alteration arguably forestalls the film's 'happy ending', maintaining the sense of a provisional and uncertain future.

Despite their historically displaced settings, films like *The Spiral Staircase*, that centred the family home as the nexus of disorientation and potential dread, probably had a timely resonance with wartime and post-war women. In the introduction to his book explicating the findings of surveys conducted with Iowa families attempting to adjust to the 'stresses' of war separation and reunion, Reuben Hill suggests that the 'realisation that the family is designed for intimacy brings with it recognition of its reciprocal, the smothering sense of confinement. The latent counterpart of deep affection is known to be disgust and alienation' (1949, 6). The year 1946 simultaneously produced a record marriage rate (2.3 million) and record divorce rate (600,000), indicating the conflicted feelings regarding the return to 'normal' family and domestic life following the war

(Hartman 1982, 165).[11] Like the draughty Gothic mansion in *The Spiral Staircase*, many households saw the boundaries between inside and outside (the female sphere of the family and reproduction and the male sphere of production) significantly breached during the war. Whilst millions of women did retreat to their homes, encouraged and reinforced by powerful media appeals, many maintained their wartime roles in addition to their expected peacetime ones, both in the workforce and the home.[12]

According to Hill, after the war many women noted 'shifts in family authority, in attitudes toward children, and in what's properly "man's work" and "woman's work"' (1949, 313). Therefore, *The Spiral Staircase*'s replacement of a patriarchal tyrant with a more egalitarian 'modern-man' (Dr Parry) who encourages Helen (if not with a suspicious amount of aggression) to (re)gain her voice, could be seen as a timely reinforcement of the need to maintain egalitarian family relations. The staircase, where private and public worlds converge, provides a polyvalent metaphor for the potential liberations and limitations awaiting Helen's future self. Following the realisation of Dr Parry's desire, she grooms herself in the full-length mirror situated halfway up the staircase whilst miming speech. She is seemingly imagining a life beyond her role as silent servant in this violently patriarchal household. However, as Hill's research revealed much of this democratisation of the household was minimal if not illusory. Accordingly whilst the film provides a symbolic resolution to these concerns through the projection of an egalitarian household, this optimism is undermined. As Siodmak's decision on the film's final shot implies, Dr Parry is not the unambiguous 'site of wisdom and safety' that Doane suggests (1994, 292). Her telephone call to Dr Parry does not provide the visual liberation from the imposing Gothic mansion that the screenwriter had envisioned, but instead leaves Helen within the restricted confines of this savagely patriarchal domestic space.

Earlier Lady Warren 'warns' Helen that Parry seems 'a little like her husband. Good step, strong hand, *good eye*.' In White's novel Professor Warren's crimes are revealed to have been the result of witnessing his father, the late Lord Warren, murdering a young servant girl years earlier. Lord Warren is at least characterised in the film as a tyrant who psychologically contributed to the events, but it also intimates the novel's more explicit revelation of the continuation of a murderous bloodline. Lady Warren tells Helen 'there was a girl murdered here a long time ago [. . .] You were that girl Helen.' This initial murder is the 'phantom' in *The Spiral Staircase* – the untold family event that comes back to haunt it, and one that casts a serious shadow over the film's proposed romantic resolution. In early 1946, as celebrations greeting the end of the war gave way to the serious business of 're-conversion' (including the partial re-conversion to pre-war gender norms) this tentative romantic conclusion tainted by uncertainty seems somewhat apt. Lady Warren's comments hint that Helen should keep her own 'good eye' on Dr Parry, such that the phantom of domestic tyranny does not return. This note of caution perhaps keyed into the suspicions of many women in post-war America.

Conclusion

Janet Staiger suggests, 'the event as a whole – within its historical context and its historical consequences – must be considered before we make any kind of evaluative claim about whether the meanings are progressive or conservative' (2000, 55). The intention has not therefore been to focus on 'evaluative claims', rather it has been to identify specific filmic and extra-filmic discourses aimed at female spectators that differentiate this text from other generic utterances, or at least the usual perception of them in scholarship. Through the foregrounding of textual and extra-textual devices that directly addressed a cinematically literate 1940s female audience, this paper has hopefully moved beyond the image of the disengaged and impressionable female spectator – a stereotype that some scholarship falls into the trap of perpetuating. More than merely a site for vicarious male terror, the prestige horror production *The Spiral Staircase* directly interpellated post-war women, engaging with topical gender debates whilst 'daring' female spectators to transgress, or at least question, some of the persistent myths surrounding female spectatorship. This is certainly a more compelling prospect than the previously assumed audience dilemma of whether to root for *Frankenstein* or the *Wolf Man*.

Notes

1. In his *Illustrated History of the Horror Film* Carlos Clarens tells the usual meta-narrative of peak and decline in a section entitled 'Children of the Night: Hollywood, 1928–1947', in which the generic innovation of the 1930s gives way to the 'seedy bombast of the claw-and-fang epics' of the 1940s (1967, 111). See also: Prawer (1980), Twitchell (1985), Tudor (1989), and Skal (1993).
2. According to Fred Stanley of the *New York Times*, *Cat People* had taken $4 million at the box office by the end of 1943, and was a major factor in the previously near bankrupt RKO's incredible financial turnaround (Stanley 1943, X3). A number of Lewton regulars were employed on *The Spiral Staircase* including cinematographer Nicholas Musuraca, musical director Roy Webb, and art director Albert S. D'Agostino. This suggests that RKO were attempting to continue the style that Lewton had used on his successful cycle.
3. In 1946 Siegfried Kracauer cited *The Spiral Staircase* as an example of his thematic cycle the 'Hollywood terror film' alongside films as diverse as *Gaslight* (1944), *The Lost Weekend* (1945), and *The Stranger* (1946). Kracauer classifies the terror film as a secularisation of the horror genre, noting that 'the Frankenstein monsters of the past made us shudder at first sight, but the contemporary monster can live amongst us without being recognised' (1946, 132).
4. According to RKO's financial ledger, the $968,000 production grossed $3,950,000, making it RKO's third highest box office earner of the year (Jewel 1994).
5. Ethel Barrymore had an illustrious stage career before entering motion pictures relatively late in life. She had previously only starred in MGM's epic *Rasputin and the Empress* (1932) with her brothers Lionel and John Barrymore, and with Cary Grant in *None but the Lonely Heart* (1944) for which she won the supporting actress Oscar. She was also nominated for *The Spiral Staircase* but lost to Ann Baxter for *The Razors Edge* (1946).
6. However, the displacement of narratives to the turn of the century allowed films such as *Gaslight* and *The Spiral Staircase* to retain some of this glamour and spectacle without characters appearing unpatriotic. These temporally displaced representations

highlighted the expectation of an at least partial return to pre-war modes of femininity. In the *Gaslight* pressbook the hair cut Ingrid Bergman has in the film, dubbed 'Reveille', is said to be designed to 'wake up the women of America to the importance of being feminine'. It is characterised as 'a distinct departure from the tailored, mannish trends of the moment, the coiffure will prove just as at home in a defence plant as in a ballroom'. Although it is suggested that 'Reveille' blurs the distinction between perceived male and female realms, it is perhaps an ominous sign for women in 1944 that the MGM publicity department should promote a haircut designed for a London parlour in 1870 as the future for women's post-war fashion (MGM 1944).

7. The end of the war would see a barrage of conservative discourse attacking the collapse of stable gender binaries, perhaps in its most influential form in Lundberg and Farnham's populist 1947 book *Modern Women: The Lost Sex* which was paraphrased in numerous magazines. The authors bemoaned that 'the feminist succeeded, by ridicule, in driving underground old-time concepts of the "good" and the "bad" woman'. They advocated a government-backed programme, as had been utilised to encourage women into the workforce, to restore the prestige of the sexually ordained roles of mother and wife (Lundberg and Farnham 1947, 203).
8. This is actually Ulysses Davis' 1914 silent film *The Kiss* which is incongruent with *The Spiral Staircase's* 1906 setting; it seems to have been chosen for narrative rather than continuity purposes.
9. Like Waldman, Doane distinguishes the 'paranoid woman's film' from 'horror' through its privileging of romance and thus female address. She suggests, 'while the horror film, as Linda Williams points out, prompts the little girl (or grown woman) to cover her eyes, the sign of masculinity in the little boy, when confronted by the "love story," is the fact that he looks away' (Doane 1987, 96).
10. This metaphor of female spectatorship as an indicator of wider social changes to women's lives is suggested in the opening description of Helen in the script. It reads 'her eyes shine with an attractive expression of curiosity – not only for that which she sees on the screen – but for a curiosity in the expectancy of the future' (Dinelli 1946, 2).
11. Significantly, returning husbands and boyfriends would, as a 1944 National Conference on Family Relations report warned, have likely 'practiced deceit, treachery and killing – evil means to the good' during the war. Thus the inspired casting of George Brent against type (his typical 1940s roles were love interest and/or war-hero) was an ominous reminder of what lay behind the glorious return of loved ones (Walsh 1984, 73).
12. By 1946 the female labour force had declined from a wartime peak of 19,170,000 to 16,896,000. Most job loses were in manufacturing, particularly heavy industry (US Census Bureau 1952).

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