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“To Look at Oneself and All the While See Nothing”: Haunting, Testimony and Mediated Memory in *I Am the Pretty Thing That Lives in the House*

“Olhar para si mesmo e o tempo todo não vê nada”: Memória Assombrada e Mediada em *Sou a Coisa Que Vive na Casa*

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Abstract

This article explores the topic of mediated memory as expressed in the film *I Am the Pretty Thing That Lives in the House* (2016), chiefly concerned with the challenge of communicating memory from a spectral position. As the film’s narrative is related to audiences through the testimony of the ghost of Lily Saylor, it seems crucial to establish how one might commune with ghosts (or phantoms). In the first section of the article, I compare the richly mined conception of *hauntology* as imparted by Jacques Derrida and the recently re-examined precursor to his thought in the psychoanalytic tradition, expressed by Nicolas Abraham and Mária Török. Following a comparative analysis, I take up both as methods for interpreting the film, considering how each might speak to various hauntological themes in the film which correspond with their accounts (temporal indeterminacy, the role of memory, testimony and the past, trauma and the nature of ghosts/phantoms). A secondary concern of the film,

explored through a feminist reading of the film, is the role of women and their confinement and silencing within the domestic. Finally, I consider the question of what is to be done with the specters in the film: should one follow Derrida's ethical injunction to make space for the spectral, or ought one exorcize the potentially malevolent influence of the spectral on our lives and break the recurring cycle of transgenerational trauma that it haunts us with?

Keywords

Mediation| testimony| hauntology| memory| *I Am the Pretty Thing That Lives in the House*

Resumo

Este artigo se explora o tópico de memória mediada e a percepção como este expressou no filme “Sou a Coisa Gata Que Vive na Casa [I Am the Pretty Thing That Lives in the House](2016)”, principalmente interessado com o desafio falando da saudade desde uma posição espectral. Como o narrativo do filme ficando relacionado com a audiência por meio do testemunho do fantasma da Lily Saylor (personagem no filme), parece crucial para estabelecer os meios por quem poderia estar em comunhão com estes fantasmas. Na primeira seção do artigo, a no extraído puramente que se chama de espectrologia (hauntology em inglês). Espectrologia é uma noção que foi nomeado por Jacques Derrida e recentemente examinado novamente da doutrina chamada de psicanalítica, expressado por Nicholas Abraham and Mária Török. Após a análise comparativa, acho duas formas para interpretando o filme, considerando qual dos métodos podem falar para os temas de espectrologia no filme que corresponde com as contas delas (indeterminação temporal, a função de memória e o passado, trauma também dos fantasmas). Afinal, temos a questão de que será com os espectros no filme: deve alguma coisa segue a injunção ética criada por Derrida para criar espaço para o espectral, ou também uma coisa para extrair a influência malevolente do espectral nas vidas nossas e quebrando o ciclo recorrente de trauma transgeracional que nos atormenta?

Palavras-chave

Mediunidade| testemunho| espectrologia | memória | *Sou a Coisa Gata Que Vive na Casa [I Am the Pretty Thing That Lives in the House]* (2016)

Introduction

The 2016 supernatural horror film *I Am the Pretty Thing That Lives in the House* (hereafter, for expediency, *I Am the Pretty Thing*) is a tale told by a ghost. Lily Saylor, recently deceased, calmly relates how she came to live and die within the home of celebrated horror novelist Iris Blum. Lilly had been hired as the elderly Blum's personal stay-at-home caretaker by the estate's lawyer Mr. Waxcap. As viewers, we observe the still-living Lily experience strange occurrences: mould unexpectedly growing in a specific part of the house, unexplained presences, apparent hallucinations, and Blum's repeatedly calling Lilly "Polly". Lilly discovers a copy of Blum's famous book *The Lady in the Walls*, which tells of the murder of a young newlywed named Polly. Slowly, Lily begins to realize that the murder might not have been fictional, but in fact a real event that took place within the house before Blum bought it. Though eager to uncover the secret of Polly's death, Lilly also becomes increasingly frightened by the implications of the supernatural events surrounding her. Throughout the film, Lilly is never quite able to grasp, fully, the situation in which she finds herself. Can the viewer, from their vantage point, deduce what is occurring?

Within this article, I take seriously (considering Lily's spectral testimony as a driving force of the film's narrative structure) a series of ethical and epistemic questions related to *I Am the Pretty Thing*. Chiefly, how does one commune with spectres and what truth may we glean from their position? Further, what ethical obligations do we owe to the memories and testimony of the spectre: are we to be open to their memories, traumatic recounting and truths (regardless of their alterity), or are we to (recognizing the potential dangers of trauma's repetition) obliged to exorcise them?

Two lenses are applied within the article to allow for a greater depth in interpretation: the use of *hauntology* as a tool for interrogating problems of presence and absence, temporality, and the testimony of the spectral, and the film's theme of *looking* and the denial of epistemic clarity — chiefly via the confinement that come from one's own improper or occluded sight. While the former account is used primarily to establish the theoretical purchase of various spectral themes within the film's plot, the latter sets the tone for later feminist discussions.

What unites these two accounts are the preceding questions of testimony and ethics, as the hauntological accounts of Jacques Derrida and psychoanalysts Nicolas Abraham and Mária Török provide two positions for analyzing the testimony of the spectres within the film and the ability of them (and the audience) to properly assess the testimony which is given through this act of looking-back to the past. Denied clarity in the accounts given by Polly and Lily, audiences rely on these hauntological frameworks in their own looking to determine the best practice for engaging with the testimony of the spectral.

The second portion of the paper will make explicit the traumas found within the Braintree House that Lily, Polly, and Iris occupy, a house whose psychic atmosphere is

inundated with manifestations of visual and heard, and unseen and unspoken traumas. These traumas are explicitly named: the history of murder and death in the house, various acts of betrayal (principally by men, but also Iris' betrayal of Polly), and the tragic entrapment of these women within the Braintree House.

Another concern of the article is the role of women and their entrapment within the Braintree House. Traumatic testimony, the gaze, aesthetic images of beauty and death and looking, and women's relation to the domestic inform much of the terror which underscores *I Am the Pretty Thing*, warranting a feminist commentary on Gothic horror and the film itself as inscribing a terrifying subjectivity onto women within the place of the unhomely haunted house. Further, the privileged ability of men to either entrap women within the Braintree House, or to come and go at their pleasure (rather than remain confined within) will be interrogated.

In sum, I submit that *I Am the Pretty Thing* might be read as a feminist critique of home and the horrors of the haunted house specific to the context of women. Further, the problem of testimonial justice requires one to adapt Derrida's position on listening to specters to ensure one properly 'hears' the spectral and honors their testimony — rather than committing *epistemic violence*¹ against women (Spivak 2005; Dotson 2011).

Hauntology: A Matter of Specters and Haunting

The concept of *hauntology*, a Derridean *portmanteau* of *haunting* and *ontology*, represents a primary entrance point for this article's analysis of *I Am the Pretty Thing*, offering the means to parse various ethereal, epistemic, and ethical matters which intersect within the film's narrative. Within this paper, I explore the film through two primary accounts of hauntology: that of Jacques Derrida, popularized through Derrida's *Spectres of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International* (1994), and its psychoanalytic precursor found in the work of Nicolas Abraham and Mária Török — chiefly the co-authored *The Wolfman's Magic Word: A Cryptonymy* and *The Shell and the Kernel*. Through these two conceptions of hauntology, I explore three pertinent themes within the film: presence and absence (through the theme of looking), time (Derrida's exploration of 'time out of joint' — with aid from the modified hauntology of Mark Fisher v. traumatic repetition in Abraham and Török), and testimony (contrasting Derrida's insistence on the ethics of listening to spectral testimony with Abraham and Török's suspicions regarding the veracity or credulity of such testimony).

Derrida's chief concern in *Spectres of Marx*, beyond the specter of communism (the

¹ For Spivak, epistemic violence refers broadly to ways in which persons or groups are disqualified as 'legitimate knowers' (often at the structural level) because of certain institutional practices or processes. In a colonial context, where the colonial power often sets the agenda for what practices, knowledges and ways of being are considered legitimate, resulting in various practices, knowledges and ways of being of colonized people being discounted as such. Dotson further posits that such structural practices often are enacted as a form of silencing, ensuring certain persons or groups are denied, by an inability to speak or give testimony, their very being.

continued insistence of Marxism despite its purported demise and the ‘end of history’ per Francis Fukuyama and liberal theory) which continues to haunt Europe following the collapse of the Soviet Union, is positing a challenge to philosophy’s metaphysical privileging of presence over absence — a discourse which bears considerably on the figure of the specter (Derrida 1994).

Derrida’s hauntology posits the present or explicit is constituted by absence (what haunts it) and, in this acknowledgement of the absent, some measure of indeterminacy. Ghosts are an apt figure for exploring this metaphysical issue: though we may rightly say they are dead in actuality, in a virtual sense their spectral nature is such that they act and haunt from beyond the grave, inhabiting spaces within the world of the living. Never fully present or completely absent, the ghost (in this state of indeterminacy) also conflates temporalities and potentialities in its figure. The ghost cannot be said to be fully *here* in the present, as the spectral insistence of a memory, but is not entirely *gone*, as it spectrally remains in the *here* (Derrida 1994).

But what do we owe the grave, or for that matter, to the future? For Derrida, the ghost presents an ethical question about a radical form of alterity via absence. Much of our ethical concerns often privilege the living, the present and the effable in philosophical discourse, but what of those to-be-born, those who have corporeally left the world of the living, or are absent from our contemporary political discourse. In thinking of our ethical duties to the absent, either to their lives, their deaths or memories, Derrida writes that “..without this responsibility and this respect for justice concerning those who are not there, what sense would there be to ask the question, ‘where?’ ‘where tomorrow?’ ‘whither?’”. Invoking the oppressed of the past and present whose conditions are ignored, a world marked by genocide (the Holocaust) and the absence of their futures or our willingness to listen to the testimony of the past which marks our present, Derrida suggests we are responsible for dignifying the absent and listening to it, lest it mean the foreclosure of any opportunity to right past wrongs or affirm futures to come (Derrida 1994).

What do we owe the ghosts of our world? Derrida’s ethics, reaching beyond the present and taking seriously the question of agency among those who are absent from our frequent modes of ethical deliberation, offers ghosts as a type of Levinasian Other, “a wholly irrecoverable intrusion in our world, which is not comprehensible within our available intellectual frameworks, but whose otherness we are responsible for preserving”. The ghost is not a secret to uncover, or a trauma to be banished from our lives, a thing to reduce to some form of clean meaning. Rather, it calls to us as an openness to new meaning beyond our present conceptions of ethical duty, “addressed directly to the living, by the voices of the past or the not yet formulated possibilities of the future” (Davis 2005).

Rather than the Derridean haunting of indeterminacy and the privileging of being, Abraham and Török’s hauntology points to a type of transgenerational communication of trauma: the phantom in their work is one often understood as a deceased ancestor or

forebearer whose presence (held and preserved within a living subject's Ego) aims to deny some shameful or traumatizing secret's being exposed. Abraham and Török posit that the phantom is understood as "not the content of repression Freud called a *familiar stranger*, but rather a *bizarre foreign body*." Put simply, rather than a trauma which exists solely within oneself, the phantom is the haunting of "the gap produced in us by the concealment of some part of a love object's life". It is not the presence or absence of the dead which haunts us, but rather some secreted away aspect or taboo of a loved one or ancestor which intrudes into our psychological life.

Unsurprisingly, with a narrative which involves secrets, hidden traumas of murder and betrayal built into the house, and the transgenerational transmission of trauma, such an account is pertinent to *I Am the Pretty Thing*. The past, in this account, is of primacy, as the return of repressed secrets, horrors and shame frequently impinge on the present, as audiences learn through the course of the narrative (Abraham & Török 1994; 2005).

Hauntology: Disjointed Temporalities and Haunting

Haunting, in the context of the ghost story, often occurs in the context of a site (a place, a home, a building) which has been marked by "broken time" (Fisher 2012) — echoing Derrida's frequent meditation on Hamlet's phrase "time is out of joint" (Derrida, 1994). Blum's house in *I Am the Pretty Thing* is apt example: it is the setting for the 'broken time' of the film's narrative (which contributes to various epistemic problems for the viewer), it is foreboding remote, and Gothic, and it is suffused with the virtual agency of spectres.

In this section, to build on Derrida's exploration of ghosts, I invoke the contemporary modification of Derrida's hauntology via the work of the late Mark Fisher (2012; 2014), who explores said hauntology through various films, television programs and music. Further, pertinent to Fisher's reappraisal of hauntology (which offers some measure of a bridge between Derrida and Abraham and Török's work), I also draw in Fredric Jameson's writings on postmodernism and his 'nostalgic mode'. Following this, I offer Abraham and Török's work on traumatic temporalities (invoking aspects of Freudian psychoanalysis — particularly the 'repetition compulsion') to make explicit the temporal repetition built into the concept of phantoms which informs *I Am the Pretty Thing*. Last, I return to Fisher as a figure who unites aspects of these two accounts of time, reflecting my assessment of the film's strong ties to both accounts of hauntology.²

If much of Derrida's invocation of the spectral in *Specters of Marx* aims to right

² Following Colin Davis (2005), I maintain a distinction between the conceptual terminologies of these two conceptions of hauntology: Derrida's 'ghost' and Abraham and Török's 'phantom'. In sections where I specifically invoke Derrida or Derridean hauntological methodology, I will refer to spectres as ghosts, and in those where I reference Abraham and Török, I will use phantom. Absent a direct discussion of either, or when both accounts are present, I will use 'specter', 'spectral' or 'spectrality' to denote spirits of the dead and considerations of them.

the wrongs of the past and preserve the future through the figure of the ghost, Fisher's (2012; 2014) work on hauntology pays close attention to the 'slow cancellation of the future' (a term drawn from the work of Franco 'Bifo' Berardi). Rather than the end of all direction of time, what Berardi means is the end of certain cultural expectations tied to a future potentiality (for example, in keeping with the purported death of Marxism, there would be no "founding of the new totality of communism" on the horizon), denied any psychological possibility (Berardi 2011).

For Fisher, this 'cancellation' brings with it, hauntologically, by compulsively repeating the ideas, trends, and cultural modes of the past — producing a strange conception of time out of joint. In presenting Jameson's notion of a 'nostalgic mode' in his essay "What is Hauntology", Fisher notes (in music, cinema, and the arts) the odd employment of anachronism alongside nostalgia (Fisher 2012). This nostalgic mode highlights the replication or insistence of cultural forms or techniques which belong to the past. Jameson uses the film *Body Heat* (1981) to illustrate this mode:

Technically, ... [*Body Heat's*] objects (its cares for instance) are 1980s products, but everyday things in the film conspires to blur that immediate contemporary reference and make it possible to receive this too as nostalgia work — as a narrative set in some indefinitely nostalgic past, an eternal 1930s, say, beyond history... (Jameson 2009)

This same nostalgic mode is at work in *I Am the Pretty Thing*. On one hand, the very untimeliness of the film itself is apparent to the viewer. Though the film is hypothetically close to contemporary (that is, set in the 2000's), the mixture of antiquated clothes worn by Lily and Mr. Waxcap, the old-fashioned vehicles, the aged objects in Blum's house (such as old telephones, televisions and an overall 1960s interior decor), the remoteness of the house, and the general American Gothic milieu all that time, in this story, is "out of joint". Like the Overlook Hotel of Stanley Kubrick's film *The Shining*, Lily's narrative overlays scenes which present the past (1863) but in so doing thereby also blur the boundaries between past and present.

The insistence on such settings and their disjointed temporality is not, for Jameson, coincidental. Rather, built into the very formal structure of the ghost story is the problem of historicism — embodied in the haunted house and proper to the medium of film. This problem of historicism, Fisher contends, is one marked by a "quality of (dis)possession", where the past "has a way of using us to repeat itself" in an effort to bring back a type of modernism in film or 'recover lost time' that "now belongs to the *no longer*" (Fisher 2012).

The haunted house, for all expressed purposes, is a type of anachronism to our contemporary world that insists on such desire to repeat. In his essay concerning *The Shining*, Jameson notes that what we might understand as anachronistic in ghost stories is their "peculiarly contingent and constitutive dependence of physical place and, in particular, on the material house as such" (Jameson 2009). Fisher, in an essay concerning his qualified Derridean hauntology, contextualizes this claim by placing it against a

general problem of historicity found in postmodernism — chiefly the “disappearance of space” alongside that of time, and the rise of ‘non-places’.³

In terms of time out of joint, the film commences with the understanding (via the mediation of Lily’s narration) that Lily is, in fact, a ghostly presence confined within the house. As such, she is imprisoned by her own ‘looking’ — her gaze fixed upon the moment of her death and events which preceded it and unable to see the futures which could be. At various points within the film, narrative shifts between the time Lily spends care-taking for Iris, the spectral incursion of her visions of the ghosts of the past, the intermittent and occasionally accelerated decay of the house itself, and the very deferral of Lily’s future in reference to her spectral imprisonment. Any notion of linear narration, it seems, is denied.

Recurrence is also a factor, whether one considers the frequent refrain of the Irving Berlin’s “You Keep Coming Back Like a Song”, with emphasis on the last stanzas: “From out of the past, where forgotten things belong. You keep coming back like a song” (Berlin, 1946). Berlin’s song, I suggest, is an apt choice. On one hand, it lyrically captures the spectral presence of trauma within the Braintree House (to be discussed in a separate section), always returning from the past to bear on the future. As Derrida writes in *Spectres of Marx*, “the specter is the future, it is always to come” — echoing both the song’s final sentiment and the general anxiety with which Lily always senses an impending event (Derrida, 1994). Further, it participates in the general nostalgic mode of the film, a refrain which (much like *The Shining*’s use of “Midnight, the Stars and You”) when paired with other signifiers of the past, proves to further unsettle the timeliness of the film.

Of Visors and Glass Panes: Derrida and Looking

What is it like to be bound in place by one’s sight, denied all clarity in past, present and future? In a spectral state between life and death, one may look back to the moments preceding one’s death, or to potential futures refused or unreachable and be offered no clear sense of either. Lily’s opening monologue in *I Am the Pretty Thing that Lives in the House*, juxtaposed with the scene’s visual appeals to blurring distortion, sets the epistemic tone for the film — the traumatic interruption of spectral perception and memory. Lily, in an appeal to Gothic literature’s narrative tropes of epistemic and temporal confusion, speaks from a disembodied perspective while viewers observe the pretty thing she was prior to her death. Even in death, Lily admits to seeing nothing of what is to come, and reflecting on her life, can make little sense of what has passed.

Within his discussion of spectrality, Derrida speaks of a perceptual issue of looking related to haunting — the inability to see that which looks *at us*, which he terms ‘the

³ ‘Non-places’ refer to a theoretical concept employed by Marc Augé, describing spaces like airports, shopping malls, or large chain stores — spaces which (Fisher writes) “resemble one another more than they resemble the particular spaces where they are located”. For Fisher, such sites are indicative of an “endemic spread of capitalist globalization”.

visor effect'. In *Spectres of Marx*, Derrida considers this notion by invoking Hamlet's ghostly vision of his father in William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*:

This thing meanwhile looks at us and sees us not see it even when it is there. A spectral asymmetry interrupts here all specularity...We will call this the *visor effect*: We do not see who looks at us. Even though in his ghost the King looks like himself..., that does not prevent him from looking without being seen ("Such was the very armour he had on"). (Derrida 1994)

While this visor worn by Hamlet's father provides a privileged vantage in some respects, we might rethink this problem within the scope of *I Am the Pretty Thing*.

First: if the spectral (Lily and Polly in the state of death and temporal indeterminacy) is capable of looking at another without being seen proper, what might this say about a case where the spectre looks at itself (albeit, in another form, the 'Pretty Thing' that was Lily in life). Lily, who the audience understands is a ghost before the film begins, admits that much of the recollection she can share with the audience is itself indeterminate — questions, confusions and unanswered mysteries abound.

How might the 'visor effect' be as the perceptual windows to which Lily refers, "smeared by rain" and impossible to gain a clean vantage of oneself in one's looking (*I Am the Pretty Thing That Lives in the House*, 2016). I suggest one might consider the visor (whether fixed upon an armored helmet, or as some other portal through which one's face is obscured) in reverse. Rather than considering the visor from the vantage of those who cannot see through it to perceive that which watches them (as if the narrative were purposively framed to deny us details of sight by the narrator, Lily), what gaps in sight or epistemic pitfalls lie in inhabiting the perception of one who wears such a visor, and cannot see their own condition properly? One could imagine that such a view would not be particularly clear either.

Such seems to be the case with *I Am the Pretty Thing*, where Lily and Polly, both ghosts, admit to a lack of spectral clairvoyance (clear seeing) regarding their life and death and the spaces in-between. While much of the film's plot is delivered through Lily's recollection of the moments proceeding her demise, providing some measure of clarity, it is also apparent that Lily is partially in the dark, and thus, so too are we. This asymmetry of vision (both narratively and aesthetically) serves to provide an *alternative* visor effect for viewers.

Much of the periphery of the film is unseen by audiences inhabiting the gaze of Lily, requiring them to make one of two choices: to accept the testimony of a ghost as it is related to them, or, to work (in the manner of an exorcism) to piece the details together and to make explicit what is haunting the Braintree House in order to expunge the traumas of the Braintree House — its history of murder, betrayal and the subordination and destruction of women.

The Seen and Unseeable: Establishing Trauma

The principle sign through which trauma in the film is communicated, both in dialogue visually, is that of decay or rot. As Lily toils in the Braintree House, she notes clear signs of decay around and within her. In various spots of the house, but most notably a wall in the main hall, black mould and rot begin to seep into the house's very structure (corresponding with the audience's first glimpse of Polly's spectral form and, as the audience learns, the place in the house where Polly's corpse was walled-in). Mould is found on the boxes holding well-hidden rough drafts of *The Lady in the Walls*, where Lily first begins to learn of Polly's unfortunate fate and Iris' failed relationship with Polly. Finally, in a particularly disturbing scene, Lily hallucinates her very body begin to decay, as her arms becomes engorged and saturated with mould spots.

But what is the trauma that this rot marks, and why does it infect house, manuscripts and bodily appendages in the Braintree house? The initial trauma which can be sensibly pointed to is the violent murder of Polly by her husband, one which has permeated literary bodies, the structure of the Braintree House and the very psyches of its inhabitants. The rot, in this sense, is a material example of the recurring return of a repressed traumatic event, taking root in the home, saturating texts which lie hidden within the house and contorting the very body of Lily.

Within the film, it is understood from its first scene that Lily is dead, merely looking back at the moments which led up to her demise. For all the audience knows, this is not the first time she has done so. As the audience sees Polly walking backwards at points in the film, and Iris mentions seeing such a phenomenon prior to Lily's arrival, we intuit some infernal cycle of haunting commences with each new occupant. But how does this relate to trauma?

Freud built on his conception of the *repetition compulsion* in his work *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) — particularly in "Remembering, Repeating and Working Through" (1914). In this article, Freud discusses the case of a patient who, despite having no recollection of behaviour and events which he has repressed, repeats them (Freud, 1953-73). Lily, by recollecting her past (despite its murkiness), seems nonetheless to be chained to a cycle of looking — chiefly at the events which precipitated her demise. This is in line with another kind of repetition compulsion that Freud discusses in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, in which dreams connected to certain traumatic neuroses return the patient to a traumatic event rather than presenting pleasant images from their past which would be healthier (1920). Yet, while Freud later suggested that one engages in such behaviour to attempt to exorcise the original trauma, Lily is altogether incapable of doing so, and instead is subsumed by it.

No doubt, for Polly, this is also the case — if we take seriously Lily's contention that spectral perception is one of constantly looking at one's own death. But what of Iris? Rather than a matter of repetition or personal trauma, Iris is in a state of despair over the loss of Polly and the failure to extract a satisfactory ending from her testimony.

Like Abraham and Török, Iris sees fit to make explicit, in her writing, the trauma which has marked the Braintree House, yet I claim this is not quite the whole story. The film suggests that Polly's departure from Iris was precipitated not simply by Iris' attempt to expose the trauma of the house, but to materially profit from it. Such a betrayal of confidence makes more sense than Iris' contention, that she left off the ending of her book in keeping with Polly's wishes. If Iris' account were true, why would Polly so suddenly depart from Blum's presence?

Iris, when speaking to Lily, cannot bring herself to speak truthfully about the way she and Polly ceased their communication. Iris appears remorseful but does not properly name the transgression by which their relationship was broken. I contend Iris' account of their relationship in the foreword to *The Lady in the Walls* is duplicitous: Iris is not being honest to her readers about her 'faithfulness' to Polly's wishes. When speaking to Lily, Iris asks if Polly missed her even a little bit. While this might read like a remorseful friend (or lover) speaking to the object of their affection, Iris' later reflection on the 'rotting' of pretty things suggests a lingering resentment towards Polly for her inability to give to Blum the ending which would satisfy her.

The Heard and Unspeakable: A Matter of Secrets and Betrayal

Absence and the unspeakable also traumatically haunt the Braintree House. Early in the film, we learn through a phone call that part of Lily's motivation to take on such a lonely labor in the isolated Braintree House is that she was previously romantically involved with a man. While this is audible, a curious aspect of this conversation is that the audience is unable to hear the silent person who occupies the other end of the wholly eerie and unbalanced conversation between them (a matter I will attend to in the next section).

Lily avoids certain topics (particularly the matter of her relationship with this man) and is altogether peculiar in her tone (seeming distant and solemn, in contrast to her previously inquisitive and playful self) and demeanour (seeking to end conversation on the matter by abruptly shifting discussion). Her behaviour suggests the topic of her fractured relationship is uncomfortable and unspeakable. Is there a secret, or perhaps terrible knowledge beyond supposed infidelity, which underlies this peculiar phone call? Certainly, given Lily's hurried transition from a discussion of failed love to more positive topic of domestic tasks suggests this is the case. Further, given the strained relationship between Polly and Iris, this would mark a thematic continuity

Placed alongside Polly's life and death, as told through *The Lady in the Walls*, Lily's trauma and its role in the narrative becomes less opaque. In scenes depicting Polly as a newlywed, she walks the floors of the Braintree House, which has been prepared as her new home. Polly wears a black ribbon as a blindfold, and we see her husband lingering behind. No words are exchanged between them, only a confused glance from Polly as she takes off the blindfold and witnesses the smouldering anger of her husband at the moment of her death. Her death, unseen and unheard by the audience of the film

beyond a scream, becomes a secret: we are not privileged to know the motive for her murder. Her narration in the novel, mediated through Iris' words and Lily's reading of the text, offers no clues in any regard to what precipitated this traumatic event within the house, only that Polly's life was cut tragically short by the hands of her husband.

Consider the theme of betrayal that echoes in both of their lives : For Lily, she is haunted by the loss of her potential husband, who (hinted at through the telephone conversation) committed an act which was unforgivable, and their engagement was cut short. This act, for Lily, was so damaging that she prefers not to even speak of it. For Polly, her husband's betrayal is far more sinister: blindfolded and left to walk the Braintree House, she cannot see her husband's intention is not to surprise his new bride with his handywork as the promise of a life together to come, but rather to lure her to the spot where he will murder her.

Here, we anticipate a response from Abraham and Török. While Iris' betrayal might very well fit the mould for unethical behaviour on Derrida's hauntological account, it isn't abundantly clear how Derrida would respond to the traumatic in this film, beyond the prescription that we listen to the testimony of Lily and Polly. But what if, given the specters' unwillingness to be forthcoming (if not its tendency to be outright duplicitous), we cannot trust the testimony of said phantom to be reliable? Or what if the specter is tied to a particularly malevolent space or set of intentions — as in *The Shining*? Derrida seems to have little to offer as a reply for these questions. Nor is it abundantly obvious how Derrida directly wishes to make space for the spectral either (how does one make 'space' for the 'spaceless'?).

Yet Abraham and Török would suggest, in this case, the continued cycle of trans-generational trauma spoken through the figures of Polly and Lilly are such that, to simply listen (rather than analyze) leaves one prey to the transmission which has befallen the Braintree House. The trauma within the house remains such that, not to interrogate and expel said trauma, may well ensure its recurrence in future occupants — with those phantoms (Polly and Lilly) who occupy the house forever prisoners of their own looking. Further, counter to testimonial justice and listening, Abraham and Török might suggest that the content of testimony in phantoms, by nature, is imbued with half-truths or lies, rendering the credulity of any testimony from Polly, Lily or Iris of some suspicion.

The Traumatic Entrapment and Silencing of Women

Much of this article's effort has been, thus far, to either express the hauntological themes and content of *I Am the Pretty Thing*, or to name the various traumatic occurrences during (or preceding) the film's narrative: chiefly, betrayal and murder. Yet, a further traumatic reality — one which colours all preceding concerns, requires discussion. In this section, I discuss the entrapment and silencing of women within the film as an underlying concern of the narrative, adapting the guiding question of the article. How can we communicate with those who are silenced or confined in their testimony?

The position of the Gothic home and the women within said space is a contested one. On one hand, the domestic space is frequently one of entrapment, where women are frequently bound in place and subject to all manner of psychological and physical violence, terror and horror. Yet, Andrew Hock Soon Ng's *Women and Domestic Space in Contemporary Gothic Narratives: The House as Subject* (2015) posits an alternative possibility found in the house — one where trauma has the potential to be worked through. Citing contemporary film and literary examples, Ng works diligently to suggest that there is a potential dialectic between women and the home which allows (for example, in the case of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*) its female occupants the chance to confront and work through their traumas — suggesting a productive relationship.

However, while Ng's thesis is a fascinating possibility, *I Am the Pretty Thing* does not fit this model of contemporary troubling of the domestic space which Ng posits. There is, I claim, no redemptive or productive arc within said film which allows for women, in confronting their trauma, the capacity to either see it properly or to name it explicitly — rendering their testimony (no matter how truncated) mute in the ears of the audience.

The matter of entrapment is, at first perhaps, difficult to see. Lily, in her discussions with Mr. Waxcap, notes that the Braintree House receives no visitors — for Iris or herself, save Mr. Waxcap. But what about Lily's capacity to leave the house, perhaps to fetch groceries or even get a brief respite from tending to Iris' every need? Though it seems plausible that Lily might indeed venture outside the house for errands, it is crucial to note that she is never depicted (following her arrival) to have ever ventured outside the Braintree House. Lily, in fact, seems (per her discussions with Mr. Waxcap) acutely aware that her presence in the house, for Iris' sake, is constantly required.

A gendered spatiality also defines the house — both in terms of its binding effects and the mobility of men through space. Mr. Waxcap, as noted prior, is the sole visitor (until the demise of Lily and Iris, when two male ambulance workers remove their bodies from the Braintree House). Men, it seems, are the only individuals capable of traversing the Braintree House and subsequently leaving it — neither Lily, Iris, nor Polly are ever depicted outside the bounds of the house. It seems, in *I Am the Pretty Thing*, that there is an acute awareness that not only trauma binds these women to the house, but it creates a physical as well as psychic barrier to exiting the house. Further, in the history of the house, Polly's inability to leave is predicated on domestic violence and murder — her body entombed within the very boards and walls of the house, never permitted to leave, even for a proper burial.

Last, in terms of tele-technological apparatuses (phones, televisions), no signals are ever capable of permeating the house or being transmitted outside of it. While Lily is depicted to be on the phone early in the movie, no voice is heard on the other end and, when it is yanked from her hands, we still hear no cries of 'Lily... Hello? What happened?'. The television in Lily's room, rather than providing any respite from the eerie silence of the house, sends back only static when operated. It seems the very structure

of the house itself denies any potential communication outside of it, though communication within between parties seems equally difficult.

I suggest that this inability for tele-technologies to function effectively, paired with the failure of communication within the house, the history of domestic violence, infidelity and murder, and the inability for women to leave the house, all reflect a narrative of domestic abuse and trauma shared by the women of the Braintree House. Held in place, unable to properly articulate or understand the violence or terror that befalls them (outside of the house, or to each other), and (for Polly and Lily) are forever doomed to repeat it, or (in Iris' case) mourn that they perpetuated it through their ignorance of the stakes. Given that (per Mr. Waxcap's discussion with Lily), future women will occupy the house as part of a writing grant, the prospects for future occupants is grim — what horrors lay in store for the next woman and her family depicted at the end of the film?

Further aesthetic subtext colours the film's narrative, offering subtle hints to the entrapment of women. Flowers curiously play a considerable role within the film: as symbolic names of characters which describe their conditions, and as metaphors for the containment of women within the home.

White lilies are often considered (in the context of weddings and funerals) to symbolize either purity or rebirth. Here, I deliberately choose white as the colour of lilies here, as we first meet Lily discussing how wearing the colour white (even in the midst of the death of clients) can assure them that she “cannot be touched” by illness or death — maintaining purity in the face of ailments. Yet, for Lily, it is abundantly clear that when she enters the house (and slowly cycles her white clothing out of her daily wardrobe and interacts with the traumatic signs of the Braintree House) that she can — in fact — be corrupted by its damaging effects.⁴ In terms of rebirth, tied to one's death, Lily's eternal return seems less a positive rebirth by which she receives greater insight into her own death and life, but instead a position of confinement within the house, subject to a progressively blurring condition denying any epistemic clarity.

Irises, comparatively, invoke faith, truth and trust, and respect. Iris, as has been previously discussed, is a character notable for her outward contention that she kept faith with Polly's wishes to omit the ending of *The Lady in the Walls* and purports to have remained faithful to her memory — even in Polly's absence. Yet, this account provided by Iris is called into question — the employment of irises within her name seems to (narratively) be done so as oxymoron — that Iris represents the oppositions of these characteristics (unfaithfulness, lies, broken trust, and disrespect).

Flowers, in general in the film, have an interesting metaphorical position. While flowers are grown outdoors, one might rightly say their beauty is tied to their life-cycle

⁴ One also wonders whether the insistence on purity might, in some way, relate to the unspoken trauma which Lily discusses on the telephone. But it is difficult to determine easily, and, in consideration of space, I will only raise it as a speculative question for future accounts of the film.

— blooming healthily outside and growing properly within the cycle of the seasons. However, when cut and brought into a house, placed within a jar to be the subject of the gaze of a house's occupants, one might rightly say these flowers are marked in their terminal nature. They have been cut off from growth, and as Iris intimates to Lily, pretty things will eventually rot. While Iris is bound to the second floor of the house and Lily navigates the interior of the house, neither can be said to properly be able to leave the house. They are, like the flowers who Lily converses with one afternoon and even gives names to, disinterred, robbed of their roots, and bound to a single place — waiting for their death.

But is there another way the women of this story are bound — not merely by space, but by the epistemic incapacity to fully articulate their truths and conditions? Here, I turn to silence as a secondary form of oppression experienced by the women of the Braintree House, drawing on the conceptual language of *epistemic violence* and Derrida's discussion of presence and absence as it relates to the ghost.

Spivak, in her exploration of epistemic violence, argues that what should change (rather than the individual, is the structural apparatus by which one makes-meaning or excludes the recognition of another (Spivak 2005). Here, one might read her in concert with Derrida's own comments on the spectral and testimony: we ought to change the way we commune with and listen to the ghost.

Being that Derrida's ghost effectively acts as a stand-in for various injustices in cultural and historical memory — concerned with the very foreclosure of any desire to listen to the 'absent' (those memories and people often left out, but paradoxically constituting what is 'present') — warranting we determine ways to avoid silencing the testimony of the ghost. It is both necessary to speak to and together with the ghost (Derrida 1994).

A challenge then, is the silencing behaviour which is perpetuated throughout the house. Iris, in taking up Polly's story, aims to frame it as one of her novels rather than listen to the content of Polly's mournful testimony. Derrida and Spivak, on this account, would certainly admonish the exploitative way Iris simply extracts the profitable content of Polly's tale and leaving the more frightening implications to the side — likely fomenting Polly's resentment toward Iris. As for Lily, her unwillingness to either read the entire testimony provided in *The Lady in the Walls* or communicate in faith with Polly's memory (often citing fear, rather than recognizing the similarities between herself and Polly as grounds for dialogue with the radically Other) ensures that the fate of Polly (to be bound in place via haunting) will be hers too.

Last, in a brief return to the gendered asymmetry of the house, it is notable that Mr. Waxcap, the sole speaking male character, neither listens actively to Lily's concerns or assessments of Iris' health (at the best of times, feigning interest), and severely undercuts the potential agency and health of Iris (assuming her to be entirely subsumed in dementia and close to death, rather than very much alive and partially aware of the events of the plot).

You Keep Coming Back Like A Song: Closing Considerations

In the closing minutes of the film, Lily and Iris' bodies are found in the Braintree House, audiences only moments earlier having witnessed the death of Lily at the bottom of the staircase near the front door. For much of the film, the audience has been guided by Lily, hoping to see better than her the nature of her death and the events which precipitated it. Now, in the wake of her death, audiences — through a dual hauntological and feminist appraisal of the film's various themes — are presented an ethical question. In communing with the spectral, how do we properly receive their testimony? Is there a means by which to parse these various accounts provided to produce some imperatives for engaging with and respecting or putting to rest the spectral in *I Am the Pretty Thing*? More succinctly: what testimonial justice do we owe to the dead?

Admittedly, a primary impulse of readers might be to take up Abraham and Török's imperative to confront, expose and expunge any traumatic elements from the Braintree House. On the surface level, it appears as though the trauma which exists deserves to be named and vanquished in order to return the house to some semblance of security for future occupants — lest the compulsion to repeat past trauma linger on.

However, I suggest, in keeping with Derrida, Doston and Spivak, there is an effort which precedes this call for the silencing of trauma within the Braintree House: the willingness to listen to the testimony of the spectral presences who haunt this space. If, in their absence or the gendered silencing and binding experienced by the women of the house, the specters of the Braintree House are rendered unable to properly articulate the mournful ways in which they remain, perhaps we (as audience) deserve to travel with them on various trips through their traumatic reliving of past violence and terror in order to better reckon with the deeper metaphysical question tied to Derrida's interest in ghosts: why do we not listen to the ghost? On one hand, it may very well be that the philosophical canon and various forms of testimony operate on the need for explicit presence in order to be considered (ethically or otherwise), but on the other, perhaps (like Lily) we cannot yet listen because we do not know how to — even if we understand the conditions of silencing and violence.

In sum, *I Am the Pretty Thing That Lives in the House* is a film which takes seriously the possibility of articulating spectral epistemology — in all its opacity — to suggest to audiences how we might better communicate with the spectral. To do so is to attempt to reorient how we consider the seemingly absent words, deeds and horrors which come with haunting — the remainder of traumas we cannot easily articulate (in their absence) and the spectral inability to speak of them to us (from a position lacking easy epistemic, temporal, or testimonial clarity). Though we may find it difficult to determine the content of what we hear or see, as actively listening and watching audience, we owe ghosts the ethical duty to hear what ails them, that we might be better listeners and actors.

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Filmography & other media

- Body Heat*. Dir. Richard H Kline, USA, Warner Bros. Pictures, 1981. 113 minutes.
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- The Shining*. Dir. Stanley Kubrick, USA, Hawk Films, Warner Bros. Pictures, 1980. 144 minutes.
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